Falling Is Like This

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Falling Is Like This

Laura Leigh Morris

Thesis submitted to the Eberly College
of Arts and Sciences at West Virginia University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Creative Writing

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ABSTRACT

Falling Is Like This

This collection of short stories examines people who live on the fringes of society, who either choose to live this life or have this decision forced upon them. Each story examines small moments in characters’ lives where they must make order of what the world has offered them.
Acknowledgments

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Falling Is Like This

Stories by Laura Leigh Morris
Introduction

In her introduction to *The Best American Short Stories: 2001*, Barbara Kingsolver writes, “The business of fiction is to probe the tender spots of an imperfect world, which is where I live, write, and read.” In the following stories, I’ve tried to do just that, to examine people and situations that are both foreign and familiar to everyone. We’ve all come to places in our lives we didn’t expect to inhabit, have questioned why we must carry the world on our shoulders, cursed the choices we’ve made or praised our personal decisions even when no one else did. *Falling Is Like This* explores these quandaries and examines how people fall into and out of what most would consider to be “normal” life, either through the choices they make or the ones that are forced upon them. Each story examines small moments in characters’ lives where they must make order of what the world has offered them, as we all must, to different degrees, every day of our lives.

When I began these stories, I did not set out to write a collection with one theme. My only goal was to learn to write a successful short story. Soon, I realized that all of the characters I’d created lived on the edge of an abyss, that place where they knew one step in either direction would change the course of their lives. In “Fathers,” Frank Bennett lives on the line between man and priest, while in “Live Humans,” Art must choose between a life that is not what he dreamed of and ceasing to live altogether. All of the characters in these stories must make decisions that will change the course of their lives, and each does so with as much grace and dignity as he can. All of them fall, and some of them are able to stand up and dust themselves off again.
As I write this introduction, I find it a difficult task to point to key authors who have shown me the road I wish to travel in my own writing. A voracious reader, I read at least one book per week and sometimes two. I can list authors who have taught me how not to write, others who depress me with brilliance I will never achieve, some who seem to have a natural understanding of the inner workings of a short story or novel, even ones whose work I read not because they are well written or even good but because the stories draw me in too much to let go. I read anything and everything I can get my hands on, from fiction to poetry to theory. I enjoy reading a history of American photography, a novel set in Nova Scotia, political criticism, and a book about a boy in wizard school -- all in succession. Currently, Susan Sontag’s *On Photography*, Eldridge Cleaver’s *Soul on Ice*, and Stephen King’s *On Writing* all sit on my kitchen table, each opened to a different page. And as far as I can tell, the only thread holding these three books together is that all the titles contain the word *on*.

What I can do here is choose a few authors and books that have given me a shove in the right direction or so wrapped me up in the stories they had to tell that I forgot about reality for hours or days on end. I regret that I can’t list -- or even remember -- all of them.

Recently, I reread Susan Perabo’s *Who I Was Supposed to Be*. As an undergraduate, I first read this collection of stories for a fiction workshop Perabo was visiting. During my first reading, I enjoyed the stories for how lively they were, how, at times, their humor reminded me of Lorrie Moore’s. Upon subsequent readings, what’s drawn me is more the way that all of the stories work together to form a thematic whole. In each story, the protagonist lives one life while imagining what his life should or could have been. Maybe it is from Perabo that I’ve taken the form of this collection, but I know that I’ve seen thematic groupings in other works. It’s just that her collection seems to do this so successfully that it sticks out from the rest.

John Irving’s entire collection of books has shown me the importance of authority within the narrator’s voice. I like to write stories that force readers to stretch their imagination a bit -- see “The Properties of Holy Grace” -- and Irving seems to have this technique down to an art. In
The World According to Garp, I never question that a woman would accidentally bite off most of her lover’s penis. The fact that Owen Meany knows the details of his own death did not make me throw away A Prayer for Owen Meany. In fact, even though my limits of belief are broken in the novel, I continued to read it because the narrative voice took me to a place where it didn’t matter that this couldn’t happen in my world, as long as I believed it within the world of this story.

J.K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, though not wonderfully written, does give me a sense of how to push plot forward -- something I find difficult. Her stories contain interesting characters who are placed in novel situations, where they must move forward to save their own lives. Though these are not the type of stories I want to write, I like to keep them in mind because every detail in each book pushes the story. Harry rarely stands around thinking for long, meandering without knowing what his next step is -- always, he and his friends are being pushed to act by the circumstance Rowling has placed them in. This, I would like to learn to do.

And Steinbeck, Updike, DeLillo, Salinger, Doctorow, Gaines, Didion -- these and others like them have taught me how beautiful a single sentence or short passage can be. To write like them would be divine. For now, I content myself by trying.

***

Falling Is Like This shows my progression both as a writer and reader. It is also a portrait of the theme that draws me repeatedly: the lives of those who exist on the fringes of society. They are not soccer moms or men who go into the office everyday to type away at keyboards from 9-5. These people live in a world that many inhabit, yet we don’t always think about them. Very few of them are freaks, but all of them are people with whom we coexist daily.
Controlled Fall

Agnes’s world had reduced itself to faint outlines, blurred movement, and large swathes of color, the loss both faster and more startling than she or her doctors had expected. First the problem was confined to books, then moved on to the television, until people and objects began to lose their sharp lines, and she had to differentiate by color alone.

She took a deep breath, aware that she was now entering a new phase with her disease, one where she would learn to live with it instead of pretending it was another small setback in a life full of them. Ignoring her coming blindness had so far given her a broken arm, twelve stitches on her leg, and numerous other injuries. Here, she was determined to face her future head on, to learn how to live again, however different this life might be from her old one. She stood in front of a house that was the same shade of tan as the Maine sand, which reminded how much she’d deteriorated, as she could only clearly make out the dark windows and red door. Inside, sand crunched under her shoes, and she smelled the dankness that had been left behind at the end of the warm season. “Hello?” she called and heard hurried footsteps.

“You’re early,” a voice said.

Agnes held her hand out and felt the woman’s rough palm slide into her own for a brisk shake. “I’m on time, I think.” The woman was a home healthcare nurse a neighbor had helped
her find in the *Portland Ledger*. The cheapest of an expensive lot, but she knew she should have someone in the house with her, preferably a nurse, as she refused to go to the hospital for anything and already knew that living without sight was a life prone to accidents.

“Well, whichever. I’m Marney.” She was bigger than Agnes, her shoulders broad against the dark walls, and smelled of Clorox and Pinesol. “I’ve been cleaning. It’s horrible how they left this place, like they ran out as soon as the weather turned without thinking to clean the fridge or the toilet. I’ve finished the bathroom and your bedroom. So don’t go in the kitchen yet. And don’t take your shoes off; the floors are covered in dirt.” She didn’t seem to breathe as she spoke but let the words tumble out of her mouth.

When she finally inhaled, Agnes said, “You’re a nurse, not my maid. I’ll take care of the house.”

“No,” Marney said, “I’m everything. I’m live-in help.” Then, as though realizing her self-proclaimed role, she pulled Agnes’ suitcase from her hand and put her hand around her bicep. “Here, I’ll show you the house.”

Agnes pulled her arm away. “I can walk. I’m not an invalid.” She heard the bitterness in her voice and felt a slight tension from Marney. Still, a nurse should know to offer her arm to be held and not to pull a person around.

“Okay,” Marney said, her cheerfulness now forced, “follow me.”

A lamp was lit in the corner of the living room, but the rest of the room was dark. “There’s no cable,” Marney said, “but I don’t think that matters. And the carpet’s stained. I don’t even want to know half of what’s been ground into it.”

Agnes listened to her rambling and tried unsuccessfully to make out the shapes of furniture. She smelled the subtle stink of upholstery that’s gotten wet and never properly dried out. She wanted to ask if there was an overhead light but decided not to. That was one thing
she’d learned. Luck had never been on her side, and it hadn’t taken her long to realize that sharing your weaknesses with people was like giving them permission to attack.

Keeping close to Marney, she moved from room to room, all of them too dark to make out the contents but each having its own peculiar scent, some better than others. The bathroom and her bedroom now smelled like bleach, but Marney’s room had a vague scent of mothballs. The kitchen was so bad she didn’t step far in -- rotten eggs and an underlying stench of trash that had been left in the bin too long.

“And this is my favorite,” Marney said before pulling open a set of doors off the living room that Agnes hadn’t seen. Three glass walls faced the ocean. She could see it, not the details, but the black water shoved against tan sand, a hazy line between the two. This was what she’d been waiting for, something big enough she’d be able to recognize it until darkness descended completely, and when that happened, she’d still be able to listen to its sounds, to smell the salt at high tide, the odor of fish and kelp at low. The air was cold, the outside seeping in, no heat here.

“It’s called a sun room, I think. Though we’re not likely to get too much sun this winter.”

Agnes moved toward the ocean, the wood floor solid through her shoes, the air salty. She wanted to push her nose against the glass, spread her hands flat on the cold surface. But halfway across the room, her foot caught on something she couldn’t see. Arms out, she tipped forward, tried to regain her balance, but she was falling. Like the occupational therapists had shown her, she went limp, let herself hit the floor with a dull thud.

Lying there, her cheek against hard wood, she heard Marney’s footsteps, felt her hands running down her back, checking her bones. “Agnes, Agnes,” she said again and again, her voice trembling too much for a nurse.

“I’m fine,” Agnes said and sat up. She squinted up toward Marney’s hulking frame and noticed in the sunlight that her hair was an unnatural orange. Agnes wondered if she thought it
looked good, or if she was trying to cover the gray. She guessed that it was the fashion, because
the woman didn’t seem to be old enough for gray hair. Her voice hadn’t taken on the roughness
that seemed to build as women age. Marney’s hands hovered just above her body, as though
ready to reach down and scoop her up.

“Did you break anything?” she asked. “Did you hit your head?”

“I’m okay. I tripped. Sixty is too young to be worrying about broken bones.” She
pushed herself off the ground and stood dusting herself off. Marney was still standing too close,
as though expecting her to fall again. Agnes started back across the room. “I’m a little tired. I
think I’ll take a nap.” Marney ran ahead to show her back to the bedroom.

Agnes didn’t intend to sleep. Instead, she memorized the layout of the house: bathroom
to her immediate left inside the door, her own room across from it shared a wall with Marney’s
room, the kitchen across from it. At the end of the hall, the living room and then the sun room.
No second floor, nothing too big. She’d asked for a small house, a place that would be easy to
move through. Though now she was afraid it was too small. There would be no getting away
from Marney’s constant chatter.

Her ankle was sore from the fall. She’d tried to regain her balance for too long, and it had
kept her a little stiff as she hit. Now, it throbbed, and she was afraid it might swell. The last
thing she wanted was to have the nurse worrying over that too. Her constant talking seemed to
come from nervous energy, and Agnes didn’t want to make her any jumpier than she already was.

In her head, she began a list of the things she would need: air fresheners, brighter light
bulbs, a phone with large buttons. There would be other things as time went on, but no white
cane with a red tip. She’d seen people moving down the street with them, their taps a code she
didn’t understand.
It was tiring, planning for a life without sight. How do you plan for the unknown? Do you make lists that you might not be able to read the next day? Or do you refuse to decide anything? She wasn’t used to having advance notice that something bad was going to happen. Though at the time she always thought it would be better to know beforehand, she was now realizing that no, it was easier when the unexpected happened without warning.

Always unlucky, Agnes felt herself qualified to make this assessment. First, her husband had died when she was pregnant, then her daughter was stillborn, and soon after that, the factory where she worked as a secretary closed down. Suddenly without a husband or baby, she found herself unemployed and alone, wondering why bad luck was heaping itself upon her. She thought everyone should have his fair share, but only later, when someone seemed to be damning her for claiming she’d had enough, after she’d gone through year after luckless year, did she realize that bad luck didn’t spread itself around. Like all the good things in life, some people got more than their fair share. It just so happened that Agnes was next in line, and she’d been directed to the teller who doled out bad instead of good.

Opening her eyes, her heart sank when she realized that all sight was gone. Not the dreadful blank she’d feared, but blackness. She wasn’t sure of the difference but knew there was one. And blankness was the scarier of the two. At least she had one thing going for her.

She slid her feet over to the right, ready to slip out of bed and get over the shock quickly, when her ankle slammed into the wall. She let out a yelp, which reminded her that she wasn’t in her own bed.

Then, footsteps rumbling down the hall. The house shook with them, and Agnes wondered if the real estate guy had given her a house that was about to fall down, knowing she couldn’t see how bad it was. “What happened?” Marney called outside the door before opening
it. Light streamed in, casting Marney in shadow, showing her hulking figure in silhouette.

“It’s dark out?” Agnes asked.

“And snowing. You slept a long time. It’s almost seven. You okay?”

“Fine,” Agnes said and looked at the light. Not blindness, only darkness. “Can you turn the light on?” She breathed deeply as the room came vaguely into view, dark splotches in a sickly, yellowish haze. Marney stood in the doorway, ready to help, to check, to make sure that Agnes was still in one piece. “I’m fine,” she said again. “I’ll be out in a minute.” She swung her feet over the left side of the bed and tried to stand, but pain shot up through her ankle. Marney was beside her before she had a chance to fall, her arms guiding Agnes back on the bed.

Then her hands moved down her right leg and gingerly touched the ankle. Agnes held back a yelp of pain but nodded when Marney asked, “Does it hurt that badly?” Then, “It’s swollen. You might have fractured something, or it could just be a sprain. Either way, we should get it x-rayed.”

“No x-rays,” Agnes said. “No hospitals. That’s what you’re here for. Wrap it up, and I’ll be fine.”

Marney’s hands paused on her ankle, and Agnes could sense her trying to decide whether she should push her point. Apparently she decided no, because she said, “Let me get a bandage and some ice.”

Through the wall, Agnes heard her rummaging in her own room. She closed her eyes and took a deep breath before trying to bend her ankle. It moved, but barely. Still, she was happy to know that her eyes hadn’t given up completely yet, something she worried about every night before falling asleep, that when she awoke, she’d be living in an unfamiliar place, the world she’d known gone. The last doctor she’d seen had told her not to try to guess the progression of her disease, that she may lose her sight slowly over years or that it might disappear in a second. She
would have no guarantees.

She reached up to straighten her bed hair, then remembered that she’d had it shorn off before coming to Maine. Not being able to see it, she never knew if it looked okay when she left the house. Half an inch long now, she could run her fingers through it and be fine. Of course, she knew it didn’t fit with her face, which was too long, too narrow for short hair. Even without seeing, she knew she looked washed out now that she didn’t color her hair anymore. That too had become a hazard, never knowing if half her forehead had been dyed too. Somehow, she’d managed to condense her routines before even coming here.

Marney came back and dropped her supplies on the bed, too much from the feel of it. “What did you bring?” Agnes asked.

“Everything,” Marney said, out of breath. “I didn’t want to forget anything.”

Agnes reached over and touched a first aid kit, a box of something that was probably band aids, a blood pressure cuff, a stethoscope. She started laughing, putting her hands over her face. “Oh dear,” she said and rocked backward. Marney had knelt in front of her, her hands already on the ankle but no longer moving. Agnes waved her hands in front of her face, tried to stop the laughter in her throat, wanted to tell Marney she wasn’t laughing at her. But she was. When Agnes felt the fingers slipping from her ankle, she forced the laughter back. She wished she could see Marney’s face to know if there was even a hint of a smile there. “I’m sorry,” she said, mirth still in her voice. “It’s just that you brought a whole damn pharmacy.”

Marney didn’t say anything, but her fingers began to wrap the bandage around her ankle. Agnes held her breath when she pulled it a little too tight before letting it go slack. “I like to be prepared,” Marney said, her voice quiet now. “It’s like taking a screwdriver into a room to tighten a bolt and then realizing that there are five other things waiting to be fixed. If you bring everything in the first time, you don’t have to worry about that.”
“What,” Agnes asked, “you expect me to fall apart? I’m going blind, that’s all. I might not be able to see you by the end of next month. But your stethoscope isn’t going to stop that.”

Marney sat still for a minute before saying, “You’re pretty much blind already, aren’t you?”

“Close enough. Too close, really.”

Marney set Agnes’ foot down carefully and stood. “All done. Let me get some ice.”

With her gone, Agnes slid back against the wall and closed her eyes. That was the thing really, that she could see but seemed like she couldn’t. She was blind already, at least in everyone else’s eyes. And what did it really matter that she could see colors? Without strong lighting and sharp contrast, she couldn’t even see that.

Then the ice was on her ankle, and Marney said, “I’ll bring dinner in on a tray.” Agnes nodded, too tired from their exchange to argue that she could make it to the table.

Marney carried her to the sun room. So far the swelling hadn’t gone down much, even with the ice. Agnes knew she wanted to take her to the hospital but said, “Look,” and wiggled her toes, even rotated the ankle a bit. Besides, it was easier to let someone else do everything, to let your life be dictated by someone else, to put the details into another’s hands.

The room smelled of windex and cold air, a tad salty. Her beach was mostly gone, Marney said, covered by almost a foot of snow. Still, through the glass, she could feel both the warm sun and cold air. She’d forgotten that most of the sea smells would be hidden in winter, waiting below the cold for May to return. But the chill touched her nose and lips, and that was fine. Bundled up to her chin in fleece, the rest of her body was warm.

“The snow will be gone by next week.” Marney stood in front of Agnes, outlined against the sky. “It’s the ocean. Go farther inland, and it stays. Here, the salt air does something to it.”
She tottered from foot to foot, like a small child, jittery about something. “Sit,” Agnes said.

“There’s only one chair.”

“Take one from the living room then, and sit with me.”

She could sense the hesitation, Marney not sure if this fit into her job responsibilities. Then, she opened the doors back into their house and dragged a chair outside. Carefully, she sat near Agnes, but not too close.

“We should talk about the season, what to expect.” She measured her words, trying for a balance between employer and someone who would spend months alone in the house with this woman. “What happened to my ankle isn’t unusual. I’m going to fall, burn myself, cut myself, have all kinds of accidents. You need to be able to handle that. So far, you’ve seemed way too nervous about a sprained ankle, and that can’t happen. I’m learning how to deal, but you need to help me without panicking, okay?”

Marney didn’t answer, but Agnes could see her head move against the background of the sky. She took it to be a nod.

“I need you to tell me if you can handle this. I know a lot of home nurses help comfort people with no chance of recovery, giving medicine and sponge baths, but that’s not what you’re here for. You’ll probably have to patch me up every few days. Are you sure you can handle that? I need a nurse who’s comfortable with cleaning up my accidents. Are you that nurse?”

She waited but didn’t hear anything. Then, Marney said, “I’m the person you’re looking for. I’m that nurse.” She didn’t sound excited as she said it, in fact, just the opposite. Agnes figured Marney had expected something different. After all, staying with a blind person isn’t supposed to be a difficult job, is it? And she figured Marney had just learned that her job responsibilities were quite different than what she’d expected.
“Good,” Agnes said. “Now, let’s get down to the daily things. Today is what, Wednesday? We’ll work out a schedule. I figure you’ll need two days off a week, but it would be better if you didn’t take them both at once.” She waited, but there was no answer. Wishing she could gauge her response by the expression on Marney’s face, she went on, “You tell me the days you want, and we can plan for them. Get some meals ready, make sure I can find everything. What do you think?” Hoping she didn’t sound too needy. She should give her two days in a row, but what would she do with herself? There was nothing here, just this house and the ocean. The real estate agent had told her all the houses surrounding this one were empty for the season. She could get by for a day but was afraid of two. “Marney, what do you think?”

“I’m live in help,” she said after a long silence. “I’ll be here for the season. No reason for days off.”

There were questions she should ask, could ask, but only said, “Of course not. You’ll need days off. I won’t have it any other way.”

Voice hardened. “Then I’ll spend them here.”

“Okay,” she said. Thought, where was Marney’s family? What kind of person has nothing better to do than spend her days with a blind woman? Eventually, she would want out, wouldn’t be able to stand it. But Agnes said nothing, peered out at the ocean, seeing large shapes, not asking what they were. There were some topics a person couldn’t broach.

On Saturday, Marney’s first day off, which she was spending in her bedroom, the phone rang. In five days, Agnes realized as she searched for it on the table, this was the first time it had made a sound. For herself, she understood. She’d told her few acquaintances that she was going to Maine for the season, nothing more. But Marney lived here and must have family or friends. She would remind her that they shared that house, that the phone belonged to both of them.
“Hello?” she said.

“Hello, ma’am, this is Charles with--”

But she’d already hung up. She refused to even make excuses to telemarketers, knowing that cutting the connection spoke for itself. A second later, she wished she’d at least listened to his spiel and then felt stupid at the thought. Blindness was one thing to deal with, but she wouldn’t add desperate to the list. After all, she was the one who’d decided to come to Maine alone.

When she first made plans to come here, she thought it was because she missed her late husband, the man she’d met at a camp they’d both worked at after high school, but that didn’t make sense. If she missed him after all these years, why wouldn’t she stay at home where they’d lived during their short marriage?

More likely, coming here was in response to life being so foreign. If she had to learn to live differently, she could at least make sure her own home wasn’t where it had to happen. But she couldn’t deny that life here wasn’t what she’d expected. In her mind, she’d planned animated conversations with her nurse, a growing friendship. After almost a week, she knew nothing more about Marney than when she’d first walked in the door. When she asked any questions about her past, the nurse either ignored her or changed the subject. So Agnes took to asking her to do everything she could think of, from fixing all their meals to helping her find a favorite sweater in the closet. But for the most part, their days were spent in relative quiet. And now, counter to her original plan, Agnes was becoming more reliant on Marney. It really was easier to let this woman do everything, to sit by and listen to the sounds of the table being set and dinner cooked. Let her go to the store with a list of what they needed, never getting in the car herself. Life without her began to seem unmanageable. Home seemed a long way off, the same way reality was beginning to.
In fact, she hadn’t left the couch all day. Her ankle was mending, but slowly. This morning, she had to insist again that Marney take the day off. And still the nurse peeked in occasionally to see if she needed anything. As long as she didn’t suggest taking Agnes to an eye surgeon, everything would be fine. The last time she’d visited a doctor, he said laser surgery was the only thing that would stop the vessels in her eyes from leaking. It was simple, he said. Blast the ones that were already bad and a few more minor surgeries when and if others acted up. During the surgery, though, that same doctor had been too liberal with the laser. Agnes had woken up with half the eyesight she’d had beforehand, and the rest of the blood vessels in her eyes seemed to start leaking the next day.

Of course, if that hadn’t happened, she may have gone blind anyway but would have had to do it at home. The lawsuit Agnes filed had been settled for enough money to see her through in a bit of comfort. There were small blessings.

Marney’s door creaked open, and Agnes heard her say, “You need anything?” for the hundredth time today.

“Yes.” She sat up and propped the swollen ankle on the coffee table. Marney walked in the room and stood as though awaiting instructions. “Sit.” She stood for a minute longer, and Agnes wondered if she was trying to decide between the space she’d made on the couch and a chair that gave off the smell of musty bathing suits. Patting the spot beside her on the couch, she said, “Here is fine.” Marney made her way over but then only perched herself on the edge, as though ready for flight at any moment.

“Listen,” she started, her voice too gruff for what she wanted to say. But she suspected that her reason for this was more for herself than Marney. In fact, she knew that she was bored and unwilling to amuse herself. Lying on the couch, no TV, a radio with snowy reception, the glass room too cold to sit in. A person could only take so many naps. “What are you doing in
your room?”

She wished she could read Marney’s face, because what had come out of her mouth wasn’t what she expected. She had wanted to be more subtle, to gauge her mood. “I mean,” she started over, “you’ve spent the whole day in there. There’s no TV, and I don’t hear any music. So what are you doing?”

“I read a little,” Marney said, her voice catching in her throat. Agnes waited for more, but apparently she was done.

“Are you having a good day off?”

She shrugged. “It’s fine.”

“How bored are you?” she asked.

“I’m fine.” But Agnes watched her turn her head, as though she thought the blind woman could read her expression.

“I’m bored,” Agnes announced. “I’ve been sitting on this couch since this morning. If you’re reading, how about reading to me?”

“What about those books on tape I brought from the library?”

“They’re no good. You can tell it’s just volunteers reading -- they stumble over half the words. And I bet the library’s too cheap to buy the ones done by professionals.”

“I thought this was my day off.”

“It is, it is. Never mind.” She wondered what had made her ask, what barrier she wanted to cross. Her boredom was no excuse for ending Marney’s freedom. She could feel the color rising in her cheeks.

“No,” she said, the words pouring out quickly, “I just wondered. I mean, you insisted that I take the day off. And now you want me to read to you. Do you want me to work, because I will.”
Agnes sighed. “I don’t want to ruin your day off. But, look at it this way: We have no neighbors, the high for today is fifteen degrees, and with all this snow, there’s no way you’re going to get that car out of the driveway. Besides all that, we have no cable and can’t pick up any radio stations. There is no way you’re not bored, sitting in your room doing nothing.”

“Okay,” she said. “Let me get my book.” There was the sound of relief in her voice, as though she’d heard exactly what she was feeling. Agnes leaned back and waited.

She returned and curled up at the other end of the couch. “I’ll start over from the beginning.”

“Just start where you’re at. Tell me the title, and I’ll figure out what’s going on.”

“No, we’ll start over. It’s *Little Women*, my favorite book. I used to read it to the kids.”

Agnes nodded but didn’t say anything, realizing that this was the first of any personal information she’d gotten from Marney. Still, she wondered what kids her nurse was talking about. She wasn’t old enough to have grown children.

She forgot this line of thought as Marney started to read in a voice not at all like her speaking voice. Each word was distinct, and from the first of the March sisters’ dialogue, Agnes knew that Marney had given each character her own voice. She settled back on the couch and closed her eyes.

“I checked out some books about going blind from the library,” Marney said before setting their plates on the table. In the weeks since Marney’s first day off, Agnes had gotten into the habit of sitting in the kitchen while Marney made dinner. “They said it’s harder if it happens when you’re older than to be born blind. Your body will automatically adjust to having only four senses when you’re a baby. But you’ll have to train yourself.”

She paused, and Agnes wondered where she was going with this. She sounded like the
damn occupational therapists, and the only good thing they’d taught her was falling. Her body
was usually covered in bruises, but that was the worst of it, no broken bones in a long time.
She’d never realized how many things stuck out of walls and off of furniture, odds and ends that
she would have maneuvered easily had she been able to see.

Beyond that, most of what they’d said had been too much for her, how to arrange food on
the stove and on plates so that it was the same every time. How to rearrange her cabinets and the
glory of extra large buttons. Like she was five years old.

“I thought we could try it tonight with supper. I won’t tell you what we’re eating, just
set it in front of you. Then, you get to guess.” Marney sounded pleased with herself, as though
she were the first person to try this.

“No,” Agnes said.

“What?” The nurse sounded surprised.

“I’ve done this before. It doesn’t help. Believe me. I can’t tell chicken from turkey. I
don’t know apple juice from grape juice. And I won’t do it again.”

Marney squatted beside the table, her chin level with Agnes’ hands planted on the table.
Agnes wanted to stand but knew she couldn’t, that the cane she’d been using for her ankle was
leaning against the refrigerator. “Please,” Marney said softly, “just once. And I won’t bother
you with it again.”

The begging in her voice was clear, that she had finally found something she could do right
besides clean the house. Each day, Agnes has noticed little things that most nurses should be able
to do easily, Marney had trouble with. That Agnes’ ankle hadn’t healed in almost two weeks
was bothering Marney, and daily she tried a different compress or method of wrapping it.
They’d elevated it and let it drop to the ground. Agnes kept all her weight on it or none of it.
Still, though the swelling had gone down, the pain was still there. And she’d sensed Marney’s
feeling of defeat, as though her skills weren’t enough to take care of a bad sprain.

“Okay,” she said. “But only this once. Don’t ask me again.”

Marney jumped to her feet and dimmed the lights. “No cheating,” she said. “I know you can see pretty well with these bright bulbs.” Agnes didn’t tell her that even with them, the world was starting to disappear more quickly again. “Don’t touch it with your hands, just scoop it up and put it in your mouth. See if you can tell me what it is.”

Agnes stabbed something with her fork and shoved it into her mouth. It was bland, both slimy and gritty. She took the napkin from her lap and spit it out. “The taste of those damn things is the reason I don’t eat them.”

“You know what it is?”

“Yes, and I think it’s unfair to give me these little tests. I mean, how many people eat avocados for dinner? They taste horrible.”

“I wanted to give you something easy the first time,” Marney said, hurt.

“Okay, you made your point. I want to eat now.” She hated the demanding tone of her voice. On days off, the two of them sat on the couch reading like they’d been doing it for years. But as soon as she was back on the clock, Agnes couldn’t act the same. Suddenly she was the employer again, and her needs came first, whether she wanted them to or not.

Marney stood and grabbed a plate off the counter. “There,” she said, pushing it in front of Agnes. “You figure out what it is.” Then she walked out of the room.

Her footsteps retreated across the hall, behind her door, then stopped. The bedsprings squeaked, and again, before settling into themselves. Agnes held her head cocked, hoped she didn’t look like those blind musicians sitting behind their pianos, their necks bent at odd angles, broad grins across their faces. The way their heads swung back and forth as the music moved them. No other noise, she grabbed the fork and shoved it into the middle of the plate, where it hit
the porcelain. For a second she thought the plate was empty but then realized that Marney had
set the food around the edges. She’d talked about this with the OT, how some people liked it
around the edges, others with something in the middle, but Agnes thought any way was fine, as
long as she could find the food.

She speared a piece of meat with her fork and shoveled it into her mouth. It was stringy
but moist, maybe a pot roast in the crock pot? Or pork loin? She wasn’t sure. Could even be
squirrel, which she’d eaten as a girl. She was no good at this game, and not knowing made her
stomach turn. What if Marney had given her possum, knowing Agnes would have no clue? She
put her fork down and pushed back from the table.

She knew it was unlikely, completely improbable, but she couldn’t quite convince herself
to take another bite. After all, she knew next to nothing about this woman. And even on her
days off, she only let information slip in by accident, though Agnes was embarrassed to
remember that she’d spilled all of her bad luck stories. She remembered ending their last day off
with the sob story of how her life had been fine for a while, how she’d thought that she’d ridden
the bad luck out, before her sight began to fail. As though someone had one last joke in store for
her.

“Not hungry?” she heard behind her.

Agnes jumped, wondered how she hadn’t heard Marney return. She wanted to say no,
that she’d had her fill. But her stomach growled. “I can’t eat it if I don’t know what it is,” she
said.

“What do you think it is?”

“I don’t know,” she said, her voice whiny.

Marney walked around the table, her heavy footsteps reverberating beneath the floor up
into Agnes’ chair. She sat and took a bite of something from her own plate. “I know what it is.”
“Don’t you think I know that?” The whine was gone, her voice now full of anger. “Your job isn’t to trick me. It’s to help me; so help, dammit.”

“Help yourself,” she said. “Tell me what you think it is.”

Agnes sighed, knew she wouldn’t get a straight answer without trying. Since their days off, even when Agnes was stern, Marney sometimes let her voice and manner turn lazy, as when she was off the clock. “First I thought pot roast, then maybe a pork loin. It is kind of like squirrel, but I figure it could just as easily be possum.”

“Possum?” She snorted. “You think I would serve you possum?”

“Who knows?” She threw her hands up. “I don’t know you. Hell, you were here when I walked in the door. I found you in a newspaper. You don’t say one word about yourself. For all I know, you could have killed my nurse before I got here and pretended to be her. My head’s full of thoughts about how I’m going to live when I leave this place, and I can’t even see your red hair anymore unless we go outside when it’s sunny.” She felt a few stray tears on her face. She wasn’t crying, not really, but her eyes had sprung leaks. They were betraying her every time she turned around.

“Pot roast,” Marney said. “I put it in the crock pot with carrots and potatoes, which are mixed together at the bottom of your plate. But now it’s cold.”

She picked up Agnes’ plate and put it in the microwave. Her back was still turned when she said, “I moved here right before I started this job, that’s why I don’t get phone calls. I haven’t had a chance to meet anyone but you.”

It made sense to Agnes that being new in town would mean no local calls, but she had to have family or friends somewhere. She decided not to say this, figuring Marney would clam up if she did, and instead asked, “Why aren’t you a nurse in a hospital? You’d meet more people that way.”
Agnes waited, not sure she would answer, until, “The money’s better, and you don’t have people looking over your shoulder in someone’s house.”

The microwave dinged, and Marney slid her plate back across the table. Then, she sat down and they ate together without speaking. Agnes was curious about Marney’s last comment, wondered if it should bother her that her nurse didn’t want someone else checking up on her. Then, she realized that maybe it already did. Maybe the reason she relied so much on Marney was because she was afraid if she did try to do something new, she’d hurt herself badly. Then, if her nursing skills really were poor enough not to want someone looking over her shoulder, what would happen to Agnes?

She listened as Marney read the list of titles she’d gotten at the library: *A Guide to Living with Blindness, Traveling without Seeing*, and the new John Grisham.

“Where do we start?” Marney asked.

This had been their habit for the past week, to move between studying books on going blind and taking breaks by reading something more playful. They’d moved through *Little Women* quickly, and Agnes had asked for something a little less preachy this time.

“How about the travel book? I’m away from home already, but I figure I can learn something.”

Marney opened it and flipped the pages. “Let’s start here,” she said, “‘Braving the Ocean.’”

Agnes listened as she started to read about moving through crowded beach space, never swimming in the ocean alone, talking to the lifeguard. As the wind outside rattled the windows and frozen snowflakes clicked on the window, Agnes smiled.

Then, Marney cut off in the middle of a sentence and looked at her. “Feel like going
swimming?”

Agnes’ lips cracked open and a bark of laughter escaped. “Have your bathing suit?” she asked.

“You won’t catch me near that water.”

“No?”

“The ocean’s scary. I’m an inland girl. Give me a swimming pool full of chlorine, and I’m in heaven. You never know what’s going to reach up and grab you in the ocean.”

“Have you ever been in it?”

“Nope, never even saw it before I moved here.”

“You should give it a try.” They sat in silence while Agnes added this to the short list of things she knew about Marney. “Got any better chapters?”

She flipped through the pages, eventually landing on one about traveling alone. As she listened, Agnes realized that she’d done pretty much everything wrong on her way up here, but she had made it in one piece. Still, she decided that they would practice some of the tips before Agnes went home, so she’d be ready when the time came. Besides, the return trip would be different -- she wouldn’t be able to see at all.

When she heard the bathroom door open, Agnes called, “Can you do me a favor before you go to bed?” The floorboards creaked as Marney came toward the couch and stopped. “Will you take my blood pressure?”

“Is anything wrong?”

“No. It’s just a good idea to take it every once in a while.” She wondered if Marney knew she was lying.

“Let me get my things.”
Agnes closed her eyes and waited, not that it made much difference now whether her eyes were opened or closed. Her vision was failing quickly. In the past, it got worse and then steadied for a while, but recently she’d noticed that she was losing little bits of the world daily, as though her eyes were in a hurry to get the process over with. Always, when her eyes deteriorated, her blood pressure was up. This time, she was worried, wondered how high it was.

Marney came back with her armload of supplies, most still crinkling in their plastic wrappers. “Okay,” she said, and Agnes heard a shakiness in her voice.

Then she heard the rip of velcro and felt the cold stethoscope on the crook of her elbow and the cuff tighten around her arm. Marney shifted, dropped the little pressure ball and picked it up again. She pumped, and Agnes smelled her sweat and felt how clammy the hand on her arm was. But it sounded normal as the air whooshed out and the pressure in her arm decreased.

Marney said, “Here, let me try again,” but Agnes didn’t notice a difference the second time around. Then, she pulled the stethoscope out of her ears and said, “Seems fine, a little low maybe but fine.” Her voice was high, breathless.

Agnes knew this couldn’t be right, wanted to argue. Instead though, she nodded her head and said, “Okay. That’s all I wanted to know.”

Marney let out a long sigh, gathered up her stuff, and hurried from the room.

Agnes took a tentative step off the front stoop and kept her grip tight on Marney’s arm. “I’m not sure about this,” she said. “I haven’t been outside since I got here.”

“All the more reason to come out now. You’ve been cooped up too long. Besides, we might not get another day this warm for a while.”

The temperature had hovered near freezing all morning, while Marney pressed her to take a walk. She tried to argue that her ankle wasn’t well enough, but Marney reminded her that it had
been well enough to move around the kitchen without it the day before. After that, she claimed to be too sleepy, but her nurse claimed she was only tired because she was cooped up in the house. Which was probably true. Agnes found herself napping daily, something she had never done before. When she and Marney weren’t practicing moving through rooms without bumping into things or slicing vegetables and not Agnes’s fingers, she found that time became a blur of nothing. She dozed and woke, dozed and woke, tired all day long.

And she did want to go outside, to feel the air against her face and walk on something besides hard wood. But what if she fell? What if she stepped on a piece of glass or a nail? Would Marney know what to do? After last night, she wasn’t sure. Before, she’d questioned her nurse, but now she was beginning to wonder who it was she’d hired.

Finally, though, she’d agreed, only because the thought of getting out was too enticing. But now, she found herself leaning too much weight on her nurse, keeping their stride identical. That way, she could be sure not to hurt herself. Besides, after so long inside, she had forgotten what the outside world felt like. It smelled better, for one thing, not of cleaning products or the mustiness they’d never gotten out of the furniture. She felt the sand give under her feet, remembered how difficult it was to wade through loose sand, but they kept near the surf where the ground was hard.

“You’re quiet,” Marney said.

“Just enjoying being outside,” Agnes said but knew she was giving her full concentration to walking normally, not tripping.

She didn’t know how far they’d gone, hadn’t yet learned to judge distance without sight. “Can you still see our house?” she asked.

“We’re only three houses away.”

“Oh, well keep your eye on it. Make sure we don’t go too far.”
“Why?”

“If something happens, there’s no one around her to help us. And I’m sure no one left their phone connected with their houses empty.”

Marney was quiet for a minute and then said, “Nothing’s going to happen. Even if it does, I’m here.”

“I know,” Agnes said but gripped her arm tighter and tried to gauge their distance on her own.

It was almost midnight, but Agnes couldn’t sleep, hadn’t slept well in days. She pulled herself up and made her way into the living room, the cane thumping on the floor while dragging the other arm along the wall, feeling the smooth surface end in nothingness. She crept to the couch, five steps to the left of the doorway. She didn’t turn the light on because she knew it wouldn’t be enough, that it would only create a feeble glow along the edges of her vision. To see the room, she would need the overhead light plus all the lamps, and she didn’t want to wake Marney. Besides, she didn’t really need to see the room to know it. So, she felt her way along and let her fingers find their way.

Her eyesight, though fading rapidly now, had become an afterthought. Rarely did she turn on the hundred fifty watt bulbs that were strewn about the house. She didn’t know the last time she’d flicked the switch in her bedroom. Her fingers were more nimble, her organization better. She remembered where things were, learned to listen for the force of Marney’s footsteps instead of trying to make out the expression of her face to understand her mood. Learned to taste food and decipher what it was by taste and texture. Never expected everything to be as it should be but instead to anticipate that nothing would be as it should. Learned to control her own fall.

She knew the heart of this was Marney, that she hadn’t been dedicated to adapting before
her. Whether it was the books she brought home or her refusal to do anything for Agnes without trying one of the techniques she’d read about, she didn’t know. She didn’t care so much either; that she was learning to live again, that the sense of doom was slowly lifting, was enough. Miles from their closest neighbor and unable to drive, she wouldn’t have made it this long without Marney, and she never would have come to the point she was, near self-sufficiency.

Now, she found herself questioning the very woman who had allowed this to happen and felt guilty for it, had for days. Not everyone knew how to take a person’s blood pressure, but all nurses did. When her parents were sick, even Agnes had learned. That she knew so little about her nurse’s life bothered her, more now than it had before. She wondered who it was she’d hired, how this woman could pass herself off as a nurse to her for the past month.

Her eyes closed, she dwelled on this thought, let it seep into her until she felt too afraid to move. Then, she shook her head and stood. Tomorrow she would deal with this; tonight she needed to sleep. And to figure out exactly what she should do. Right arm out, left arm holding her cane, Agnes took five steps back toward the hallway, then ran her knuckles against the wall until she felt the familiar impression of her own room.

In the morning her certainty that Marney was not a nurse had evaporated. In its place stood a strong inclination but no real proof. People forget things, even the most basic, sometimes, especially as they get older. Besides, who said that her blood pressure really was high? Just because it usually coincided with a sudden dimming of her vision didn’t mean it was the sole cause. Maybe it was just time. Maybe her body was tired of fighting it, or felt she was prepared for the final leap. Whatever it was, Agnes needed to know before she said anything.

Standing at the counter, she tried to think of a test, something she could do to be sure without embarrassing either of them. She tried out different ideas: falling on her weak ankle,
complaining of a blinding headache or a sharp pain in her side. But none of it seemed right, and she’d had her chance on the beach but hadn’t taken it. Now, her mind kept drifting to the coming day. She hadn’t been farther from the house than that one trip down the beach, but today they would venture into town. Agnes would help with the grocery shopping that Marney usually did on her own, learning to move amongst other people and maneuver in unfamiliar places. The thought both excited and scared her.

She tried to push the fear away as she sliced vegetables for their omelets. She realized that if she wanted to test her nurse, all she had to do was let the knife slip and take a chunk out of a finger, to push the blade clear to the bone. But the thought of her own blood all over their breakfast sickened her, and it would also mean that the trip into town wouldn’t happen. So she put more of her thought toward the knife in her hand and the vegetables on the plastic cutting board, careful to keep her fingertips away from the sharp edge. And she wondered that she was doing as well as this. Before Marney, she cooked from boxes or bought precut vegetables. Knives had scared her, cooking had been a chore, something that required intense concentration. She marveled at her ability to crack eggs and put them into the bowl without getting shells in, not needing her eyesight to tell her this truth.

She heard Marney’s heavy footsteps move from the bathroom toward her bedroom, smelled the steamy scent of the woman freshly showered. And prayed that this woman really was a nurse, that they wouldn’t have a confrontation where Agnes might lose her temper, fire her without thinking. Then, afterward, she could picture herself bumbling around the house alone, wishing she had her nurse back, even if she wasn’t one.

Agnes sighed, overcome by thoughts of losing this thundering, nervous woman. She turned to the eggs, cracked each one against the counter edge and heard them splat into the bottom of a mixing bowl. The milk she poured slowly, as she listened to Marney moving around
her room, getting ready for their day on the town.

“It’s going to be busy in here,” Marney said as she pulled into a parking space. “Maybe we should try someplace quieter.”

“No. We can start here. If it’s too much, we’ll try something else next time.”

Marney reached across the car and put her hand on top of Agnes’. “There’s no reason to push yourself. We have time.”

“I’ll be fine,” she said. “You’re the one who forced me to grow up. Now it’s your turn.”

Marney let go of her hand. “Be careful getting out. The parking lot’s icy.”

Agnes swung the door open and planted her feet squarely on the ground. She moved them a little and realized that her nurse wasn’t kidding as her feet slid easily across the ice. Bracing herself with the door frame, Agnes grabbed her cane and stood. Slowly, she made her way to the back bumper where Marney was standing.

“Let me have your arm, just for the parking lot. After that you’re on your own.”

She didn’t argue, afraid that even with her arm they might find themselves in a pile on the ground. Still, here wasn’t like home. If something happened in public, there would be people to help, even if Marney couldn’t. They inched toward the store, Marney whispering minor obstacles in her ear. Agnes kept a strong grip on her cane, tried to keep weight off her ankle, to maneuver naturally. Five minutes later, her feet met the salted sidewalk in front of the store, and she shook her arm loose of Marney, ready to move forward on her own.

The amazing thing was how she could feel people around her, sense their being there while only seeing vague shapes. Inside, she knew she wouldn’t even have the shapes with that fluorescent lighting they put in every grocery store on earth. Still, she’d have that extra sense she was slowly acquiring, where her ears heard the low hum of pant legs rubbing together, her body
felt the heat of others. It didn’t work perfectly yet. Sometimes she didn’t even know when Marney entered a room. But it was a beginning.

The doors opened with that pneumatic whoosh, which seemed louder now, more present. “The carts are about five feet straight ahead, slightly to your right, the entrance to the actual store just before them,” Marney whispered. Agnes nodded, determined to at least get the buggy and out of the entryway before making a mistake.

She moved forward, her right arm extended a little, and felt her hand hit the edge of a cart. She felt the surface, cold metal that someone had just brought inside, and moved along until she felt the very end of them. She pulled one out, taking a big step back. Done with that, she felt a small smile creep onto her lips.

Marney moved to her side and said, “Directly to your right.”

Agnes maneuvered the cart toward the door and felt her feet move from indoor/outdoor carpet to smooth linoleum. “Okay,” she said. “What’s first?”

“We need lettuce and mushrooms.”

She thought back to the map she’d memorized. Marney had brought it home and quizzed Agnes until she could tell her what every aisle contained. At the time it had seemed a little much. Even knowing what each aisle contained, there was no way for her to memorize where each thing was located on the shelf. But Marney had been right. There was no way for her to pick up each item, but she felt a little more in control knowing the general vicinity of everything she would need.

She started to move to her right, then heard someone cry out at the same time her buggy hit an obstacle. She stopped and said, “I’m so sorry. Are you hurt?” Her face felt warm, and she wondered if embarrassment were a side effect to blindness. She faced the direction the bump had come from and waited for an answer.
Silence met her for a minute, and then she heard a man clear his throat. “I’m fine, just fine. Sorry about that.”

Marney came to her side and whispered, “You okay?”

“Fine. I think I could have run over him and kept going, and he still would have apologized. Did you hear the stammer in his voice?”

“You should have seen his face. First he looked angry, but when he saw you, it just drained away.”

“The pleasures of being blind,” Agnes said and smiled. Her face was cooling and she wondered at this new sort of power. She’d forgotten how everyone felt so badly for the handicapped that they forgave them anything. She could be angry, but why, when she could run over every person in this store and probably get an apology out of each of them? “Which are first, lettuce or mushrooms?”

At the register, she took her own wallet out, a new one with separate sections for different bills. She pulled each one out and held them in the air in front of her until she felt a small tug on the other end. The change she shoved in her pocket to sort out later. Marney could tell her which bills were which.

Walking to the exit, Agnes was elated. Sure, she’d messed up a few times, running into other people or their buggies, once even knocking the corner off a display. But she was out in public again, and her stomach wasn’t tied in knots. At the door, they both took hold of the cart’s handle to help hold them steady.

“This is it,” Marney said. They stepped onto the sidewalk, Agnes leaning her weight on the buggy. “The ramp’s to your left. It looks like they salted it, but the lot still looks pretty bad.”
They maneuvered down the small ramp, careful to keep a slow pace. The lot was the same as earlier, a solid sheet of ice. Agnes chose her steps carefully, but halfway across she felt her foot hit a spot that was too slick. She only realized her mistake when she’d taken all the weight off her other foot and could feel herself slipping forward. Immediately, she loosened her body, let herself go into the fall that was inevitable. At the same time, she pushed the buggy away from her, no reason for more obstacles on the way down.

The ground though was not flat. Where cars had moved through slush the day before, they’d left their tire marks. Today, those marks had turned into jutting pieces of ice. Agnes couldn’t see them but felt every one that her body hit, in her stomach, across her shin, and on her shoulder. But the most painful was the one that hit her square in the middle of her cheek. She cried out as its sharp edge sliced through the skin.

Once down, she knew she was hurt but doubted it was serious. Still, she took her time and felt for pain in each of her limbs before trying to lift herself. The worst was her cheek, and she was sure she’d hurt that same ankle again. At least no bones seemed to be broken.

She could hear Marney who, making her way over to her, had probably been knocked away when Agnes had pushed the buggy. Like after the first fall, she was saying, “Agnes, Agnes,” in a nervous voice. When Agnes knew she was close, she lifted her head and said, “I’m fine,” but felt warm wetness on her cheek. Reaching her hand up, she felt the blood drip down and cover her fingers. Before it really registered that she’d given herself more of a cut than she’d suspected, she heard her nurse moan, then call out, “Can someone help us? Please?” And then she squatted to the ground beside Agnes and started to cry.

The local anesthetic they’d given her was starting to wear off, and it felt like her heart was beating in the side of her face. Besides that, her ankle was throbbing again, but this time from the
inside of a cast. She lay on the bed and wished she were home. There, Marney would put her in her own bed, make sure she had everything, and stick by her through it all.

Then she remembered that Marney wasn’t a nurse, that the woman cried at the sight of blood. They wouldn’t be going home together. She closed her eyes, not quite ready to face this new reality.

She was starting to fall asleep when she heard a sharp rap on her door. Groaning, she opened her eyes, expecting a nurse coming through for something or other. They’d been checking up on her all afternoon, keeping her awake. They said it was just a precaution, that she could go home in the morning. “Hello?” she said. From the heavy thud of the steps moving closer to her bed, she could tell it was Marney.

The wooden chair let out a creak of protest as she sat. “I’m sorry,” she said quietly. “I wanted to tell you myself. I figured I at least owed you that much.” Her words started to come more quickly, as they had that first day. “I didn’t mean to hurt you or make things worse.” Then, her voice cut off with a sharp intake of breath, and Agnes knew she was about to cry. Still, she didn’t say anything, unsure what a proper response would be, that Marney really could have hurt her, that she just thanked God they were in a public place. Neither of these comments seemed to fit the situation, so they sat quietly until Marney stood. Agnes listened as Marney picked up her pitcher of water, filled it in the sink, and put it back on her table. Then, as though they were home, she straightened Agnes’s blanket before sitting down again.

Agnes heard the chair squeak as Marney immediately stood again. “I guess I don’t really have anything else to say and shouldn’t take up your time,” she whispered, her voice choked. “I just wanted to say I’m sorry. I don’t think I can say it enough.”

She turned her head in Marney’s direction said, “Where are you going?”

“I’m going to get my things from your house, Agnes. I’m sorry, and I won’t bother you.
Agnes sat for a minute, not sure what to say. Then, not knowing what would come out of her mouth, “Why are you going?”

“I, because, you know. I lied. I’m not a nurse.” Her voice rose a little with each word, on the verge of tears.

“So?” Agnes said. “What are you really?”

Marney didn’t say anything, but she didn’t move either.

“I mean, what did you do before you came here?”

She heard her nurse sigh before saying, “I was a teacher.”

She kept her eyes in the direction of Marney’s voice and asked, “Then why are you a nurse now?”

“I’m not a nurse.” She took a deep breath. “There were problems though, at school. My aide hit one of the students, and I didn’t know until the kid’s mom filed a complaint. It was my classroom though, you know? I thought it would be easier to resign and leave.” She sighed again.

“It wasn’t. It isn’t.”

Agnes nodded, tried to roll this around in her head, to add it to the few facts she already knew about Marney. There was still the question about why she hadn’t done something she was qualified for, but Agnes could almost answer that one on her own. When you’re in a new place with no or little money, you do what you have to to make ends meet. And home health nurses made good money.

She thought about how empty her house would be now and knew that she could probably live alone as long as she had someone come out every week or so to bring supplies. Still, the thought of returning to that place to sit in silence bothered her. And Marney was right here; she would be unless Agnes told her to leave. She sat up straighter and said, “I’m bored. You know, I
bet I’m completely blind in another couple weeks, and I have a lease on the house until May.” She didn’t wait for her to say anything, just pointed beside the bed. Still, she didn’t relax until she heard Marney’s tentative footsteps and then the chair squeak under her weight. Then, as though continuing a conversation both were familiar with, she said, “I mean, really, who doesn’t have problems?”
Fathers

“That’s the Methodist church,” the boy said. He pointed out the window of Father Frank Bennett’s pickup at a building of cut stone with stained glass windows. It was in better condition than St. Patrick’s where the stone and windows were covered in soot from years of being too close to steel towns.

“Nice. What’s it doing all the way out here?”

“This used to be a Catholic place,” the boy said. “No one wanted it to be in town. Said it would mess things up.”

They were driving out 68, at least that’s what the boy called the road. His mother, Louisa Maynard, stopped by after mass and asked Frank to talk to him, said he was in some sort of trouble. But what kind of trouble slipped Frank’s mind when the boy showed up at the rectory. So he’d asked the kid to show him around town a little.

“I learned that in school. I didn’t know it on my own.”

“You’ve got to take it where you can get it.”

Frank clasped the wheel a little tighter as the blacktop gave way to rocks, then to dirt ruts with weeds growing down the middle. He hadn’t been out here before, hadn’t explored any of the back roads unless parishioners lived on them. In fact, he only learned all the main roads in
Mountview this week. At least he thought he knew them all. He was never really sure in any
town. There was always some street he hadn’t seen or had thought was a back road until
someone pointed out that it led to another part of town he hadn’t known existed.

The truck’s shocks were shot, and he and the boy were jolted with every bump and hole
on the road. He meant to get them fixed when he moved, but since then he’d had three funerals,
five baptisms, and two people in the hospital. He’d barely had time to unpack, never mind
worry about all the little things. He hadn’t expected such a small town to have so much going on,
or at least not all at once.

The road widened and opened to a grassy clearing littered with broken bottles and the
remains of a large campfire. “You can stop here,” the boy said.

Frank still couldn’t figure out his name, Something Maynard. He’d listened to what
Louisa told him, but it didn’t register. She was the first person in town who’d come to him with
something other than requests for prayers or ceremonies or invitations to dinner. He was so
thrilled to be doing something that didn’t have a direct connection to the church that he hadn’t
heard half of what she said.

He put the truck in neutral and pushed down the brake. They were in the middle of a
field, part of an old fire under the tires. “You’re gonna run over a bunch of bottles on your way
out,” the boy said. “They’re all over this place.”

Frank walked the perimeter of the field, noting old cigarette packs, discarded cups, and
empty cases of Natural Ice strewn about. The boy stood by the truck and lit a cigarette.
“Everyone throws parties here on the weekends. The cops know, but as long as we don’t burn
anything up, they don’t bother us.”

“You come out here a lot?” Frank asked, walking back to the truck. He stood near the
boy but not too close, shifting his weight between heels and toes. The kid was blonde like his
mother, same bony build, same broad shoulders. But his nose must be like his dad’s, a thin line starting between his eyes that mushroomed out into a giant pair of nostrils at the bottom. Still, the boy was young, probably only thirteen or fourteen, he could grow into it.

“Sometimes.” He kicked a bottle, sent it spinning across the grass until it hit the sharp edge of a rock and cracked through the middle. “Why?”

“Just wondering.” The boy blew out a plume of smoke, then flicked the ashes in the truck’s bed. “Does your mom know you smoke?”

“Only when she gets mad. She bums em off me, but she doesn’t buy them.”

“You drink?”

“What is this?” the boy asked, pulling deeply on the butt. “I know what my mom told you. Why you asking all these questions?”

Frank turned from the boy and rubbed his forehead. Never before had he done anything like this. He always known the reasons before a counseling session, and he’d never forgotten why he was here. He reminded himself to pray on this tonight and turned back. “What’d your mom tell me?”

“That I’m some sorta troublemaker, that she doesn’t know what to do with me. All the stuff she says to me when she’s mad.”

“Well then, what am I doing here?”

“Don’t you know?”

“No,” Frank said, deadpan. He took a breath, let it out slowly, the air whooshing through a thin space between his lips.

The kid laughed, bent double, and nearly choked on a chest-full of smoke. He started to cough and grabbed the side mirror, but it came off under his touch. The boy stifled another outburst and handed over the mirror. “Sorry about that.”
Frank tossed it in the truck and wondered if the whole thing would fall apart before winter. When he turned back, the boy was looking at him, a little smile on his face. “What did my mom tell you about me?”

“You know,” he said, “I’m really not sure. Something about your being a troublemaker, like you said.”

“What else?”

“I told you, I don’t know. I forget.” He kicked the tire, bent down to see if it was low. “I forget something else too.”

“What’s that?” the boy asked.

“Your name. Your mom told me, but I forget.”

“Damn, you’re not very good at this.” But he wasn’t angry. He laughed and looked across the field. “Manny. My name’s Manny.”

“Manny Maynard?” Frank asked.

“No.” He was on the defensive again. “Manny Bazeley. I have my dad’s last name.”

“Oh,” Frank said. He was used to this: the missing father, the struggling mom, the lost kid. He’d handled too many like this one.

The boy pulled another cigarette from his pocket and lit it. “He left when I was little, you know.”

“How little?”

“Like five or six. I don’t remember him too much.”

Frank leaned against the side of the truck and crossed his arms across his chest. The boy was kicking at the ground and pulling hard on the cigarette. “You don’t see him now?”

“He left. Mom said it was just like in the movies where the guy says he’s gonna buy a pack of cigarettes and never comes back, but I remember him telling me he was leaving. You ever
wonder how you remember some things, but not others?”

“Yeah, I do,” Frank said. He stopped, but Manny was watching him, waiting. “I remember my dad threatening to whip us, growling, ‘You wanna be the next member of the red ass club?’” He let his voice rumble in a deep southern drawl just as his dad had and got the reaction he wanted -- a little smile from the boy and the heaviness lifted from the air. “Still, I don’t remember his ever hitting us. My mom told me later that my brother and I switched positions between president and vice president of the red ass club, but I don’t remember it. Not one beating.” He smiled and shook his head. Once they grew up, his brother told him those beatings were pretty severe, but Frank’s mind refused to recall even one of them.

“See,” the boy said, “that’s just what I mean. Man, I can still see my dad coming in my room late one night with a bag packed, but I don’t remember anything about when he was there. I don’t even know what he looks like.” The smile slipped from his lips.

“No pictures?”

“Mom threw them all away when he left. She changed her name back too and asked me if I wanted to. I said no.” He ground the butt out under his shoe and looked up at Frank. “Figured I’d keep at least one thing from him, right?”

“Right,” Frank said. He looked at Manny, but the boy seemed to be lost in his own head. “I’d better get you home, okay?”

He already had his seatbelt on by the time Frank made it to the other side. The truck started with a rumble, and he drove across the field, bottles bursting under the tires.

As far as Father Frank could tell, the town had no mount and no view either. Still, it had character, and he liked his new home. The church and rectory were side by side between Videos to Go and the Dairy Kone. Sundays after mass, if no one invited him for lunch, he ate in the
Dairy Kone, a little box painted fire engine red. It stood out from the rest of Mountview, and there was an argument when the owner first painted the place. People said it made the town look tacky.

The inside was like any ice cream and hot dog place: fluorescent lights, mismatched chairs, and cracked linoleum. But there were pictures of old mine disasters on the walls. As soon as you walked through the door, on the right side, the pictures started with the explosion of 1919. Frank followed the pictures around the room while he waited for his food, all the way up to the 1999 disaster on the left side of the door. Each picture looked the same, except for the clothes of the bystanders. All the miners were dressed in coal dust, the whites of their eyes bright in the camera’s gaze.

After a lunch of hot dogs heaped with spicy chili, he liked to walk down to the basketball courts where all the kids played in the afternoons. He played with them once, but it wasn’t the same with him there. It was grimmer, more polite. After that, he only watched a quick game of pickup before heading home.

The rectory was a house that had originally been built for a family, not for a solitary man. With two bathrooms and four bedrooms, he didn’t know what he was expected to do with all the space. Two of the bedroom doors stayed closed, one a storage room, the other a guest bedroom that, so far, had had no occupants.

Frank used the largest bedroom as an office. His desk was set against a window that overlooked Main Street, and across the river, he could see a glimmer above the trees that was the bell tower of the Methodist church. He wondered if the last priest had spent much time looking at it. Frank knew that his desk was in the same place from the dents in the carpet. The man had been here for almost fifteen years, longer than they usually left a priest in one place. Usually,
they were moved within five years so that each man would always be the spiritual leader, not just a man of the town. That was one of the many things Frank didn’t understand about the Catholic church. How could a man counsel people if he kept moving? How would people ever come to put complete faith in him, knowing that he would be gone soon? Maybe that was the problem in Mountview -- they’d learned their lesson with the last man.

He sat at the desk plucking at his eyebrows, coming away with a few hairs every time, but it didn’t matter. His eyebrows looked like furry black caterpillars -- no amount of pulling would wear them away. They were the focal point of his face, along with his jaw that looked to be in constant need of a shave, even though he tried to twice a day. Still, he was a good looking man with classic Italian features, even if he wasn’t Italian.

He was writing a letter to a family at his former, and first, church in Logan. He’d spent five years there before receiving notice that he would take over duties in Mountview. They’d thrown a party before he left, and most of the families had written at least once since he’d moved. This was the first chance he’d had to respond since he’d arrived in town two months ago. But now, he sat at his desk with an almost blank sheet before him. What could he say? I miss you. I want to come back. Tell the new priest I’ll trade. No, he would only write of the town itself, how beautiful it was, how nice the people were. He wouldn’t let on that since his arrival, he’d been lonely. People talked to him, but they didn’t really talk to him. Of course it took time even in Logan to make friends. Maybe not quite as much, but this was a smaller town, and people seemed more distant toward him, as though religion were something to keep at arm’s length.

Here, he was learning what he was made of, whether the lonely business of the priesthood was something he could bear up alone or not. Once, just before he left the seminary, Bishop Bernerd had told Frank that he wouldn’t be able to deal with the solitariness, the way a priest is a
messenger of God first and a man second. Frank was a people person -- he liked to talk to them, liked to listen to them, liked large and small groups alike, but he was rarely if ever alone. During his time in the seminary, he was regularly called to spend solitary days, as both penance and as training. Before Frank moved to Logan, the Bishop said, “Call me. I was just like you, and I couldn’t have made it without a great number of people. But you have me. You call me anytime you need to talk.” But Frank didn’t want to ask him for help, and in Logan he hadn’t been tempted. There, he had been taken in by so many families. In Mountview, he wanted to make it on his own, to someday call up that bishop and tell him how he’d done it.

He supposed it was pride, not a positive attribute. But it was more than that, a feeling that only he could make this work, that the Bishop would help, but that Frank could do more for himself alone. That if he could make it work in Mountview, he could do anything. He’d never have to worry about himself again. That Mountview was a test of faith.

He decided to write about Manny and Louisa. He wanted to tell how when he dropped the boy off, they shot ball for a bit. He was a good kid, maybe a handful, but really a good kid. Louisa had come out in the middle of their game, a dusty bandana tied around her head and smudges of dirt on her face.

“Hey guys,” she’d called from the porch. Frank waved, but Manny mumbled something about needing to get some work done and handed him the ball. The boy took the stairs two at a time and barely looked at his mother as he moved past her. She watched him go into the house and met Frank on the court.

“How’d it go?” she asked as music blared in the house.

“Okay,” he said. “We didn’t really talk about anything. Just got to know each other a little.”

She nodded and glanced back at the house before going on. “Did he tell you what he did
last night?”

Frank shook his head.

“Damn. He walked out around nine and didn’t get home ’til after three. I asked him where he was, but he just growled at me. I was hoping he might say something to you.”

“Louisa -- is it okay if I call you Louisa? I don’t think he’s going to say much to me. I mean, I want to help and hope I can, but a priest may not be the person he wants to open up to.”

“I tried everything else. I’ve tried to talk to him, so has my sister. I even took him to a counselor. I’m out of ideas.” She sighed and plopped down onto the court, her knees pulled tight against her chest. She rocked back and forth a little and looked down the street. He could see blotchy red circles start to appear on her cheeks, but she ignored them.

“Listen,” he said. “I’ll try. I’ll do what I can. Just don’t get your hopes up.” He paused. She looked defenseless, sitting like that, almost childlike. As though Frank was here to help her more than her son. “Besides, he seems like a good kid. Like he’s doing what all boys do at his age.”

“At thirteen? Get suspended from school for two weeks?”

“Oh, I didn’t realize-”

“Weren’t you listening before?” She glared up at him. “Did you hear a word I said?”

He could feel his face redden. “I’m sorry,” he murmured. “I just didn’t remember what all you said. The last month has been a little crazy.”

“I guess so.” She stood up, dusted off her behind. “Listen, just try talking to him again, will you? I’ll send him over to the rectory one day after school, okay?” Her voice broke a little at the end.

“Hey,” he’d said. “I’ll talk to him ’til I’m blue in the face. I just don’t want you to put all your hopes in me.”
“I don’t have anywhere else to put them right now. You’re gonna have to do.”

He wouldn’t write everything in the letter, but he liked Louisa and Manny. She was a little rough, her hands red and chapped, her face cut with deep lines around the mouth and eyes. But soft in the way all mothers seemed to be when they had problems with their kids, tears always a moment or two away.

Frank was just beginning the letter when the phone rang. A recording told him to press one if he’d accept charges from Manny. He pushed the button.

“Father Frank?” the voice asked.

“What’s wrong, Manny?”

“I just need a ride. I can’t call my mom. I stayed here last night, and I know she’s mad at me. Can you pick me up?”

The address was in Fairmont, somewhere by the interstate. He stopped twice to ask for directions before pulling up in front of a house where teenagers straddled the porch banister in all directions. They were laughing, drinking beer out of cans and tossing them into the yard. Manny sat alone on the steps when Frank pulled up. He didn’t say goodbye to anyone, just headed for the truck, his shoulders bunched up around his neck.

“Thanks,” he said as he slammed the door. “I didn’t know who else to call.”

“No problem,” Frank said. He was still watching the kids on the porch. No one had seemed to notice his arrival or Manny’s departure. “Aren’t there any parents home?”

“Nah, I think they’re gone for the week. Not sure whose house it is, but someone said they were gone.”

They drove in silence for a while, Manny occasionally giving directions back to Mountview. Father Frank tried to take in Fairmont. The downtown section seemed dead. There
weren’t many cars on the road and even fewer people on the sidewalks. Those who were out seemed wilted in the summer heat.

“Aren’t you going to yell at me or something?” Manny asked when they were almost home.

“Why would I? Do you want me to?”

The boy seemed to consider this for a minute before saying, “No, but my mom probably expects you to.”

“Are you going to listen to me if I do yell? Probably not. Is it going to sink in? No, not a bit. Why should I waste my time?”

The boy smiled. “You should tell my mom that.”

“Maybe I will.”

They crested the hill that brought them back into town.

“Want me to take you home?” Frank asked.

“Yeah, may as well get it over with. My mom’s gonna kill me if she’s up. She worked the graveyard shift last night.”

“Where?”

“At Fairmont General. She’s a nurse’s assistant. Said she could get her nursing degree if she went back to school. But I don’t think she will.”

“Why not?”

“I don’t know. She just won’t.” He stuck his head out the window, and the wind pushed the hair off his forehead.

“How was the party?” Frank yelled.

Manny slid back inside. “It was okay. I just got tired of it. They’ll stay there drinking all week.”
They pulled up in front of Manny’s house. Louisa sat on the porch, her head in her hands. She jumped at the sound of the car, stood and strode down the driveway, yelling the whole way.

“Here goes,” the boy said.

“You want me to talk to her?”

“Nah, she’ll run out of steam real quick. I don’t think she’s been to bed yet.” He opened the door, then turned back. “Thanks for the ride, Father.”

“No problem.” He paused. “You know, if you’re gonna bum rides from me, you can call me Frank if you want.”

The boy looked at him in surprise but nodded before jumping out. He walked toward Louisa and stood a few feet away as she yelled at him, offering no defense, no resistance.

Frank took Louisa to the field on 68 after Sunday mass. People were filing into the Methodist Church as they passed by. Most he hadn’t seen before.

The night before, he’d seen a glow from the window of his office and figured there’d been a party in the field. Today, there were fresh bottles, and the grass was mashed down all around the remains of a fire. He sat on the tailgate while Louisa walked the field’s perimeter. She looked at the ground through most of it, but when she got to the fire pit, she looked up at the sky. The field itself was surrounded by trees, and there was a circle of clear blue above it.

“It’s pretty out here,” she said, walking back to the truck. “Or it would be if it weren’t so messy.”

She sat beside him and seemed content not to talk. Their thighs were almost touching; he could feel the heat from her skin. Under her perfume, he could smell sweat, enough to register in his nose, but not overpowering. He turned his head toward the road and tried to concentrate on
Just two weeks after his first meeting with Manny, he knew the town inside and out. On his off days, he had driven all the back roads, found his way to Fairmont and back, and even found an old road that led over the hill into Katy. Frank spent most of his time writing sermons at home, visiting people in the hospital, or wandering aimlessly in his truck. He was writing a lot of letters to families in Logan too.

So far, Louisa and Manny were still the only people he knew outside the context of church. Everyone else still seemed to be wary of him. He accepted the occasional invitations to lunch or dinner, but, like the boys on the basketball court, everyone seemed to put on their best behavior for Frank. The meals were fixed especially for him, and he always left after a reasonable amount of time had gone by. Out of the house, he pictured the people inside rolling up their sleeves, slipping their shoes off, sprawling across the couch, things they never did with him inside. Not like Louisa, who had stopped in after mass and didn’t hesitate to sit down without being asked. No one else would have done that.

They listened to traffic noises across the river for a while before Frank said, “He’s a good kid you know. Just does some stupid stuff.”

“I know,” she said. “But he’s pissed off most of the time. Mostly at me, I think.”

“He’ll grow out of it,” Frank said. “Or maybe he won’t. Anyway, he’ll be eighteen in five years.”

She laughed at that, but her chin shook and he wished he hadn’t said it. “I’m sorry,” she said, wiping her palms across her eyes. “I’m just being stupid. Can we talk about something else for a while? He always gets me like this.”

“Okay,” Frank said. He looked up at the ring of trees. “Can I ask you a question?”

“Sure.”
He didn’t know if it was appropriate to ask her, but he didn’t know who else to talk to. Besides, he liked Louisa, the way she kept herself busy all the time but dropped everything when her son was in trouble. The fact that she made it to mass every week, even after working the Saturday night shift. That she seemed to like him, as a person and not just as a priest. “Why does everyone seem to be afraid of me?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t know. Everyone talks to me, invites me over to lunch. But all they seem uncomfortable, as though they’re waiting for me to leave. And they talk about religion the whole time. Don’t they have any other interests?”

“Well, you are a priest.”

“So?” He was annoyed. “You’re a nurse’s assistant. People don’t talk to you about sick people all the time, do they?”

She laughed. “Okay, okay. You’re right.” She stood up and pulled a pack of Marlboros from the pocket of her shirt. “I stole these from Manny. He’s gonna be pissed when he realizes they’re gone.” She put one in her mouth, lit it and took a long drag.

Frank gestured for it. She looked surprised but put it between his fingers. “You smoke?”

“I used to,” he said. “In college, before I knew I was going in the seminary. When I realized I wanted to be a priest, I quit. But I still have one every once in a while.” He wanted to tell her about his decision to become a priest, about working at a crisis center and wanting to help, to serve people. Waking up one morning and knowing. That was the scary thing, how it wasn’t a question but a quest. But he was afraid she would react like his parents and ask why he couldn’t continue at the crisis center without being a priest. He couldn’t answer that question for his parents, and he wouldn’t be able to for Louisa. Unless you understood what it was like to know something was right, without a doubt, there were no words.
“Be careful,” she said. “I used to only smoke when I was mad, but I’ve been doing it everyday recently. It relaxes me.”

“Maybe you’re just mad all the time,” he said and handed the cigarette back.

“Is there something going on with you and my mom?” Manny asked. Two days after the trip out 68, he was standing on Frank’s doorstep, hands on his hips.

“What time is it?” he asked, rubbing his eyes. He’d been sleeping when the doorbell started ringing and didn’t stop, as though someone were holding it down.

“Late,” the boy replied. “Is there?”

“Is there what?” He stepped back and pulled the door open. “Come in if you want to talk. You don’t have to stand on the doorstep.”

Manny walked in but seemed reluctant. Frank closed the door behind him, but the boy didn’t move from the entryway.

“You want something to drink?”

“I want you to answer my question!” Manny shouted.

“Well, what was your question?” He started to move toward the kitchen. This could be a long conversation.

“Are you fucking my mom?”

Frank stopped and turned on his heels. “What?”

“Some people saw you two coming out 68. They said you were laughing and sitting real close.”

He looked the boy in the eye and said, “I am not sleeping with your mom. We are friends. That’s all.” He stopped, but the boy didn’t change his defensive stance. “Manny, I am a priest. You know that. I’ve taken a vow of celibacy.”
“So? You hear about priests sleeping with anything they can get their hands on anymore, women, boys, animals.”

Frank turned back toward the kitchen. “Come in here. If we’re going to have this conversation, I need coffee and a chair.”

The boy scuffed his feet across the floor as he followed, but at least he was coming. 

Frank busied himself measuring out the coffee and finding cups while Manny sat at the table. He couldn’t believe he was going to have this conversation with a thirteen-year-old boy, especially in the middle of the night.

“Now,” he said, handing him a cup, “to clarify: I am a priest, and I take my vows seriously. Whatever you’ve heard about other priests does not apply to me. If I wanted to live that life, I wouldn’t have become a priest. As for your mother and myself, we have become friends. And do you know why? Because of you. Every time I see her, we talk about you.”

“Why were you out 68?” the boy demanded. “That’s where people go to do it.” He laid his palms flat on the table and didn’t touch the cup of coffee.

“I showed her the field. That’s all. I wanted her to know that you’re fine. That you aren’t out killing people and stealing—”

The phone rang, and he jumped from his chair. He couldn’t believe this. “I’m coming,” he yelled.

He picked up the receiver, and before he had said a word, he heard, “Have you seen Manny?”

“Louisa?”

“Yes,” she said and continued in one breath, “Have you seen him? He was mad at me and left. He thinks—”

But Frank didn’t hear the rest of her sentence. Manny was standing in front of him on
his tiptoes, his lips pulled back from his teeth. “Nothing going on, huh?” he yelled before
grabbing the phone out of Frank’s hands. “What’d you do? Call your boyfriend?” he said into
the receiver. “Can’t find the boy. Let’s call the priest. He’ll take care of me. Yeah, real good.”
He hung up the phone before looking at Frank, his face red with anger and embarrassment. “You
think you can just walk into town, get with my mom, and be my dad? It doesn’t work like that.”
Frank stared at him, unsure what to say. He could feel the heat moving to his face, not because
of Louisa but because of the father comment. He opened his mouth to speak, but before he could
say anything, Manny said, “Yeah, nothing’s going on. Sure.”

With that, Manny shoved past him and stormed out the door. Frank looked at the door,
then back at the phone, unsure what to do. It started to ring, but he grabbed a coat and headed
out.

After an hour, Frank began to feel foolish wandering around in his pajamas and a coat.
Manny must have run after leaving the house, because he’d seen no sign of the boy. He’d walked
through New Mountview, past the school, through dark neighborhoods, then climbed down the
hill and over the bridge into Old Mountview. There, he moved past the police station and
through a couple blocks of brick apartment buildings. Now, at the far end of town, over two
miles from his house he realized how foolish he’d been not to take his truck. But he hadn’t
thought of it, could only think of finding the boy and making things right. Throughout the walk,
he’d called Manny’s name, softly so as not to draw attention to himself, but he hadn’t seen him
or anyone else on the streets. Frank slowed and then stopped his walk -- he had made it through
the town without one hint that he was nearby. He turned around and began to walk back, not
bothering to call out for the boy. Manny would be fine; he’d realize how silly this was and
forgive both Frank and his mother.
The climb back up the hill to his house was exhausting. Steep, winding, and full of holes, the road seemed too much, but he made it. He trudged the last mile to his house and opened the door. The light on the machine was flashing, and the phone rang as he took off his coat. He watched it until the machine picked up. “Hi, this is Father Frank Bennett. You’ve reached the rectory of St. Patrick’s Parish. Please leave a message, and I’ll get back to you.” The machine beeped, and Louisa’s voice cracked in the speaker. “Frank? Are you there? Frank? Oh God.”

He grabbed the receiver. “Hello?”

“You’re there,” she said. “What happened? Where is he?”

“I don’t know.” He looked around the room, toward the light burning in the kitchen. He noticed a cup of coffee spilt on the floor, the cup’s handle broken off. “I looked for him. I don’t know where he is.” He heard her sniffle into the phone. He was too tired, too exhausted to have this conversation. “Louisa? He’ll be fine. He will. We’ll talk about this later, okay?”

“Ohay,” she said, and before she had a chance to continue, Frank said, “Good. We’ll talk later,” and hung up. He could picture her sitting on the couch, smoking a stolen cigarette, her hair messy from sleep. He trudged up the stairs, too tired to examine how all of this had happened.

Before sliding into bed, Frank kneeled beside it and laid his head in his hands. He prayed for Manny, for understanding, for reconciliation. His lips moved silently, his eyes were squeezed tight. He tried to picture a happy ending for Louisa’s small family.

Sunday, as usual, he stood by the church door as everyone left, wishing them well. Louisa was last in line. Her face was pinched, and her eyes seemed to search his. He hadn’t seen or talked to her since the night Manny stormed out. He’d thought about calling her, to see what had happened, to explain everything from that night, but he didn’t want to go through it again. He assumed she’d call if she heard something, but she hadn’t.
“How you holding up?” he asked now.

“Manny really took off,” she said. “I haven’t seen him since that night. How can a kid disappear for four days?”

“Louisa, I’m sorry.” He took her hand and pressed it between the two of his own, her dry skin rough on his palms, but felt self-conscious. Manny could be watching from behind some tree, could record the moment to hold against them for the rest of his life. “Why don’t we go over to the rectory? I’ll make some coffee, and we’ll talk this through.”

She nodded. Frank didn’t stop to remove his vestments but shut the door firmly and started across the parking lot, Louisa at his heels. They sat at the kitchen table, each with their hands wrapped around a mug of coffee, as though it were December instead of June.

“What did he say to you?” she asked.

“Probably the same things he said to you. That we’re sleeping together. That I can’t pretend to be his father.”

Louisa shook her head. “He thinks you’re trying to be his dad? He didn’t tell me that.” She looked at him, and he tried to keep his expression neutral. But she seemed to see something and said, “You’ve been good to him. He’s not used to having a father figure around. I think it scared him.”

He nodded and cleared his throat. “So, what happened? Since I talked to you, I mean.”

She ran her hands through her hair and sighed. “Nothing. Nothing at all. I stayed up all night, but he never showed up. I don’t think he even came home to get his things. And he hasn’t been back.”

“Did you call the police?”

“No,” she said. “What are they going to do? Make him come home so he can run away again?” She gulped down some coffee. “He’ll come home when he’s ready.”
“Do you know where he is?” he asked.

“He’s moving between friends’ houses. I called the school, and he’s been there everyday. I’ve talked to a few parents. They’re nice, but they act like it’s partially my fault. They keep asking about you, but not directly, so I don’t really know what all he told them.”

“Nothing’s going on. And no one thinks there is. Everyone just wants what’s best for Manny. Remember that.” But Frank wasn’t so sure. After mass, a few of the nicer people had offered blank stares and limp hands. He pushed the thought away, sure he was imagining what wasn’t there.

“I’ll try.” She lifted the cup to her mouth and took a small sip.

“Want me to try to find him?” he asked.

“No, just leave him alone. He’s as mad at you as he is at me.”

Frank didn’t understand any of this. He’d never expected to be caught up in a scandal, no matter how small. Sure, he was on the young side for a priest, and probably a little more attractive than most, but that didn’t mean anything. It especially didn’t mean he was sleeping with Louisa. He didn’t think so much about sex as companionship. Two very separate things that had somehow gotten completely mixed up. This was all crazy, and he didn’t know how to stop it, because first he would have to understand it.

“So,” he asked, “what do you want to do about all this?”

“All what?” she asked, jolted from some reverie.

“The Manny business. How do we get him to understand the difference between friendship and sex?”

“I don’t know. I don’t get what we did wrong. We can’t stop sleeping together, because we’re not. What else can we do?”

“I’ve thought about it. I’ve prayed over it. And I can only come to one conclusion.”
“What?”

“Nothing,” he said. She looked at him but didn’t say anything, waiting for him to continue. “If we stop talking, stop being seen together, he’ll think we’re doing it out of guilt. So, if we act like we have been, maybe he’ll come around.”

“And what if he doesn’t? What if he thinks we’re sleeping together and flaunting it? I want him to come home, Frank. And I’m not going to mess that up because of a friendship.”

“Well,” he said and cleared his throat again. “Then I guess you should go before he gets any ideas.” He stood, his back oddly straight. He felt stooped, beaten. She tried to say something, but he held his hand up and ushered her to the door.

She turned as the screen door clicked behind her. “Frank,” she said, “I didn’t mean it the way it came out.” She stood with her arms wrapped around her body, slowly rocking side to side. “I didn’t,” she said.

He wanted to close the door, to turn his back. Instead, he looked at her, one hand on the door. Standing there, she looked tiny, too small for everything she was going through.

“I’m tired,” she said rubbing her hand across her forehead. “I say things, and I don’t know what they are until they’re already past my lips. It’s all this, everything. It’s weighing on me.”

Mouth still open, as though there was more she wanted to say, she looked close to collapse. Then, her face scrunched up, almost like a baby’s, and she started to cry. She was talking, and then she was crying, with just that lost look in between. Frank felt himself melting and opened the door. He grabbed her arm and pulled her inside.

The door closed, he wrapped his arms around her, rested his chin on her head, and smoothed her hair. She clung to him, her arms wrapped around him, her face pressed into his chest. He breathed the smell of her hair, smoky but clean. Eyes closed, he tried to remember the
last time he had held a woman.

He felt the sobs subsiding, the convulsions of her body losing their intensity. Her grip loosened a little, and she took half a step back to look up at him. Her eyelashes were matted together with tears, and he reached up to wipe them away. Then, his face was moving toward her, and he pressed his lips against hers. He felt her stiffen and then respond, her arms wrapping around him again. He felt the jagged pieces of skin where her lips were cracked, the tears on her face against his skin. He let the moment slow down in his mind before pulling away. Her lips were still parted, her eyes closed. He took a step back, and she opened her eyes.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “That was out of line.”

She opened her mouth to say something and closed it again. He opened the door and pushed her onto the porch. “I’m sorry,” he said again. She looked at him, her face pale, her hands clenching and unclenching in front of her. He admired her nervous habits that he’d grown so used to seeing; then he closed the door.

Frank lay in bed, his body folded into the fetal position, the sheet threaded through and around his legs. For two days, he’d been in more or less the same position. Occasionally, he got up to use the bathroom or grab something to eat, but he’d gone without showering or answering his phone. The machine had picked up a few times, and he listened as a parishioner spoke but didn’t answer it. Twice, Louisa had left messages, but he’d covered his head with a pillow, unwilling to listen.

He didn’t know what had happened to him. After complaining that a teenager didn’t know the difference between companionship and sex, it turned out that he didn’t either. He’d lost his way. Now, his body had decided it was too tired, too sick, to deal with anyone or anything. And Frank was afraid. Occasionally, he’d awoken and said aloud, “I am the spiritual
leader of this congregation,” just to hear the words that had been repeated to him so many times in the seminary. But they felt like paper, dry and scratchy, as they moved across his tongue and passed through his lips.

So, he resolved to remain in this position, trying to pray, trying to make the outside world disappear, until the words slid through his mouth without the slightest bit of hesitation. So far that had not happened, and he was beginning to wonder if it ever would. The longer the words remained caught in his throat, the more his fear grew.

The doorbell chimed as he was getting ready to utter the words again, so he closed his mouth and wrapped the sheet around his head. He would not see anyone, no matter what, not until the words would glide again. But the hand on the bell would not stop.

Frank forced himself into a sitting position, groaning at the way his back hurt from spending too much time in bed. The bell was still ringing. He stood, shuffled to the window, and lifted the curtain slightly. Below, Manny stood on the doorstep, his arm out, apparently holding the bell. Then, the noise stopped, and the room felt empty. He shook his head and watched as Manny stepped back and looked up. Their eyes met.

He dropped the curtain, but Manny’s voice floated up, “Stop fucking watching me and come down here.” He lifted the curtain again and was met by the boy’s angry stare. Hands perched on hips, he glared up at Frank, as though daring him to disobey.

Only after the door was open did Frank realize what he looked like. The boy had never seen him without his white collar, but here he stood in sweat pants and two days’ growth on his face, which on him was almost a full beard. He rubbed his cheeks, pushing the whiskers upward and enjoying the prickly sensation, while the boy pulled himself together.

He held the door open and motioned for Manny to join him. The kid walked under his
arm and leaned against a wall. Then, he slid down until his butt met the carpet. “I’m back home now,” he said. His eyes were focused on the floor as he picked at a piece of nap.

Frank crouched down until he sat across from the boy in the narrow hallway. “How’d that happen?”

A wry smile flickered across the boy’s face. “She called the cops. I got escorted home from school yesterday in the back of a police car.”

Frank laughed, surprised at how it bubbled out of his throat. “That’s one way of doing it, I suppose.”

“The guy told me I have to stay home, or they’ll put me in a special jail for kids. Can they do that?”

The boy looked at him, his eyes wide. Frank rubbed the back of his knuckles against his whiskers, liking it even more. “Sure,” he said. “I suppose so anyway. He can’t really lie to you about that, can he?”

The boy sighed and looked back at the carpet. “I don’t want to stay there. I liked it better moving from house to house. Everyone was real nice.”

“Why don’t you want to stay with your mom?” He was looking at the ceiling and almost didn’t catch the scowl on the boy’s face. “You’re not still mad at her, are you?”

The boy didn’t answer.

“Well then, are you still mad at me?” he asked. He felt guilty asking. Even if he didn’t know it, Manny had every right to be angry now.

“You guys were out then, she called here in the middle of the night. What was I supposed to think? It sure didn’t look like you guys were just friends.”

He wanted to explain himself, reason with the boy until he understood. But what was there to be understood, that Frank had betrayed his trust? He couldn’t tell him, but he couldn’t
lie to him either. So instead, he asked, “Why are you here now?”

His gaze fell even more intently on the carpet. “No reason.”

“Why?” he asked.

Manny looked at Frank’s chin and shrugged. He looked like a little boy, and Frank tried to shrug off his anger. The boy didn’t understand any more than he did.

“Okay,” he said and let a breath whistle through his teeth. “That’s fine. That’s perfectly okay.”

The boy stood and shoved his hands in his pockets. Frank looked up at him from the floor. “I guess I should go,” the boy said. Frank nodded but made no effort to stand. Manny watched him another second before opening the door. He stepped through and then stopped. “Go take a shower. You look like shit.” He smiled, the same way he had that first day, and then he was gone.

Frank did not go back to bed. Instead, he took Manny’s advice and showered. The water fell in stinging drops and washed away the sweat and bed grime that had settled in his skin. With his face directly in the stream of water, he questioned his next step. Calling the Bishop who had offered an ear years before was out of the question. Who knew if the man would even remember him? He’d been young, and the Bishop may have said those things to everyone. He didn’t know that man from anyone else. Still, if not him, there was something out there, something that could make this empty feeling disappear. He just had to find it. He was so close, if he could only find the key.

Instead of feeling sorry for himself or crying on someone’s shoulder or sitting at his desk staring out the window while his mind turned over all the events of the past months, he took the time to unpack the house. All those things still in boxes, stuff he’d made do without these last
eleven weeks but wanted just the same, came out. Each one found a place in the house, made it feel a little more like Frank’s home and not that of some anonymous family. One thing the Bishop had told him turned out to be true: even when nothing else worked out, even when life was tearing at your insides, home must be one place you can go to and feel at peace. And that was Frank’s goal, to make a home where he could be content.

He even called back the parishioners, setting up appointments for next week, explaining that he was booked solid this week. And Louisa too, though he didn’t tell her he was busy, just said that he would talk to her after mass on Sunday to see if they couldn’t work a few things out. She didn’t mention Manny or the kiss, and he didn’t either.

By Saturday, the house, minus the floor plan, looked just as it had in Logan. And, as long as he didn’t look out the window or wander through the whole place, he could pretend he was still there, that he was waiting for a family to arrive for dinner or getting ready to go to a basketball game with someone. Still, his sermon wasn’t finished for Sunday, wasn’t started really. So, he spent Saturday night closed up in his office, writing furiously, paging through scripture, trying to make it all come together.

Frank watched as Louisa lagged behind after mass, letting everyone else pass through the door before her. When the others had gone, she pulled Manny through the door and faced Frank. She didn’t say anything, just stood before him with her arms at her sides and her son one step behind. He felt more deceitful with both of them in front of him. When Manny was at his house, he questioned what he should do, but now he felt like a liar, not like the spiritual leader of a congregation.

He tried to smile. “Want to go for lunch?” he asked, cocking his head toward the Dairy Kone. She didn’t say anything, but Manny stepped up and said okay. “You mad at me?” he
asked her.

“No, not really.” And as she said it, the pinched look left her face.

“Good,” he said and nodded at both of them. “I want to talk to you both, but I have a few things to do first. How about we meet in an hour?”

Manny lifted one eyebrow but nodded. Louisa started to say something but then stopped herself and instead said, “An hour. We’ll be waiting.” He watched them walk down the stairs before going inside to remove his vestments. He wondered what she was going to say, because he didn’t understand how she acted as though nothing had happened, as though they weren’t lying to her son. His armpits were drenched in sweat just from that small conversation. He didn’t see how she was living in the same house with the boy without hearing his accusations every time she looked at him. He was remembering enough without being face to face with either of them.

Frank drove through the now familiar ruts on 68, his truck rocking and jarring him up and down. Slowing as he passed the Methodist church, he watched people enter the double doors, all of them dressed in their Sunday best. His foot moved toward the accelerator, and his hands left a sweaty sheen on the wheel, while his truck bounced over the holes a little too rough for his comfort. But then he was in the field, looking the same as last time with possibly more trash. And his foot wouldn’t leave the gas pedal, so he circled before turning back onto the road. His hands still sweated, and he could taste salt dripping from his upper lip. He licked it away, but it replaced itself. Back on the road, he tried to keep going, to just drive past that Methodist church and make his way back into town, but he found himself slowing and pulling into the parking lot. He set the brake and leaned back.

Through the walls he could just barely hear them singing. He closed his eyes until the hymn ended and then wondered what he was doing here. His first thought had been to walk
through the doors like anyone else, to pretend he was a part of this community, to be accepted and loved. Then, he realized that even if no one else knew him, the preacher would. They always knew one another in small towns. They sought each other out with a look that said, “Yes, we are in that club together.” And Catholic priests were always given a larger part than the others, those who married. Priests were not just in that club -- they were the officers too, the ones who gave more than anyone else. They were the ones who gave up being men to be in that club. And the Methodist preacher would smell it on him, would sense that he was more than just a man who had decided to attend Sunday services.

So, Frank sat in his truck, the windows rolled down, but there wasn’t much of a breeze. His sweat soaked through the black shirt, and at some point he pulled off the white collar. And he watched, just stared at the building, wondering what it would be like to join them. Maybe an old woman would scoot over to make a spot for him. Then, she’d give him a little smile and mouth the word *welcome* and he’d be a part of something. He’d be the new guy. At least for an hour.

He remembered when he thought that his time in Mountview was a test of his faith and realized that he’d been wrong. Louisa was his test, and he knew that right now he was flunking. Even if he did walk in the church, even if by some miracle the preacher didn’t spot him, he would still not be the new guy. He would not be welcome, no matter how many people said it. He was in between worlds right now, unable to join either one until he had set things straight. During his sermon, he had felt his voice falter when he remembered the kiss. He was losing his flock. If he wasn’t true in spirit, how could he expect it of them?

When the doors opened, Frank pulled back onto the road, spewing gravel behind him. He remembered the hymns, one after another it seemed, each swelling louder than the last. But he had not noticed the hour pass by. He’d thought minutes had passed, maybe twenty, no more.
Louisa and Manny were waiting for him -- they had to be. He’d told them an hour at 10:00, but now it was closer to 11:30. He didn’t feel the bumps and holes as his truck scurried down the road. His mind was on the two people who meant more to him than everyone else in town. And he’d kept them waiting. He pushed the gas down as he made his way up the last hill to the Dairy Kone and squealed the tires a little as he pulled into the lot. He pulled the key from the ignition and leaned back.

Through the window, he saw Manny and Louisa sitting on opposite sides of a table, and Manny was pouting. He couldn’t see her face, but she must have done something because Manny smiled and tried to hold it in but then laughed. Frank wanted to join them, but he sat in the truck and watched the little family.

He imagined himself sitting beside Louisa, sharing her laughter. In his head, the two of them shared a cone, each licking one side. Manny’s face held the embarrassment that was expected of all young people when they caught their parents acting goofy or romantic. If a stranger looked in the window of the restaurant, Frank knew what he would see: a family eating together on a Sunday morning, a family without a care in the world at that moment. Minus the collar, he could be the dad, and they his family. Not Father Frank but just father.

He sat a few more minutes, letting the picture burn itself into his brain before reaching for his collar. Then, Frank opened the door and returned to the world as he knew it.
The Accidental Arsonist

Henry Bogad fidgeted on the steps of a house badly in need of a carpenter and a can of paint. He smoothed his secondhand coat, brushed dirt off the lap of his pants, and tried to appear unassuming. Even though his hair was thinning a little, he hoped he looked closer to eighteen than twenty-six. He needed youth to work for him, because he hadn’t expected to stop in Marion, Pennsylvania. But he was there and wouldn’t be leaving for a while.

The town wasn’t much of a place, full of people who thought about how much work they had to do, when they would get paid, and how much money they could afford to waste on beer. But a quiet place, one of those middle of nowhere towns with an equal number of bars and churches.

A woman answered the door, wiping her hands down the front of a pair of stonewashed jeans. “Yes,” she said, peering through a dirty screen.

“I’m Henry, Henry Bogad,” he started, stopped, and cleared his throat. “They told me at the truck stop that you might have a room to rent.”

“Yeah, I do.” She peered at him for a minute, and he tried not to squirm under her scrutiny. When he didn’t say anything, she said, “I’m Leena Marchuk. Come on in. Let’s talk.”

She held the door open, and he followed her into a living room full of faded furniture and
old newspapers. The house was dry wood, old. The whole place could catch fire in minutes.

“Excuse the mess. I don’t get around to cleaning much.” She moved a pile of unrolled newspapers from a chair and patted it. Dust flew up from its insides. “Don’t get around to reading much either.”

He sat and bent his head back to look up at her. Leena was taller than he was by six inches. He thought she must be in her mid-thirties, with black hair that was beginning to gray at the temples. She moved across the room and lit a cigarette. He watched the flame waver as she held it an instant too long, blackening part of the cigarette. “So, what’re you doing here? Why you want a place?”

“I’ve been traveling around this summer. Hitchhiking.” He watched the end of her cigarette, followed the little ball of fire as it moved between her mouth and the ashtray. “I ran out of money here. Thought I’d stop a while and get a job. They told me I could cook at the truck stop.”

“I have a room to rent, but I’m not letting it out to just anybody.” She stopped, flicked the ashes, put the cigarette back to her lips. Henry liked that her lips were painted the same orange as the flame. “So, why should I rent to you?”

She sat down and waved her hand in his direction. He took it as his turn to talk, cleared his throat again, rubbed his hands a little more roughly against his pants. “I’ll help around the house if you want. Or I’ll stay in my room when I’m home.” He started to smile but felt his lip crack in the corner. Too much heat, not enough water. His skin was dry. He wiped a spot of blood off his lip and onto his coat. “I’ll live around your life and won’t expect too much.”

“I work down at the doctor’s office in town. I keep the whole thing going. You know: settle the books, make appointments, make sure doc eats lunch. All the fun stuff. Besides that, I don’t do too much. Always trying to keep my head above water.” She smiled, and the smoke
lines around her lips disappeared. “So, where you from?”

“Maine,” he said, surprised by her sudden shift in tone. “Poland, Maine. It’s a small town, about forty-five minutes out of Portland.”

“What route you taking through the country? Going down the east coast or all around?”

“Everywhere,” he said. “Just wandering.” She nodded and her eyes narrowed, as though she could see through his flimsy story. Maybe he should have told her that the police were looking for him in three states: Maine, New Hampshire, and Vermont. That he would go anywhere but there. Of course, the cops didn’t know who he was, but they were looking for a man who fit his description.

She nodded for him to continue. “I walked down from Vermont, caught a few rides on the way.” She lifted her eyebrows at the word walk, but how would she feel if he’d told her he ran all the way? All the way from a tinder-dry barn that he’d lit up the night before. “I like to walk. So, I started in Maine and made my way through a little bit of New England. I’m heading south now. But it’s time to settle in for a bit.”

“So, you’re a bum,” she said.

“A bum?” he asked.

“Yeah, you don’t live anywhere, and you’re hitching rides off people. A bum.”

He smiled, all teeth. “No, actually a guy trying to see the country before going to college.” She looked skeptical, so he said, “I’m getting a late start on it. I went to work straight out of high school.”

She eyed him a minute longer and took a drag off her cigarette, letting the smoke curl from her mouth, over her lip and around the tip of her nose. “I always wanted to see the country,” she said. “You can stay if you want to. Rent’s forty dollars a week. You get your own bedroom, but we share everything else.”
“The thing is, I don’t have any money ’til I get paid at the truck stop. But I promise I’m good for it.”

She leaned back, thinking for a moment, then moved forward and rubbed her chin. “The yard needs some work. You help out there, and I’ll wait for the money, deal?”

“Okay.” He watched as she put the cigarette out. Felt the tension recede as the last ember died.

“You go get the rest of your stuff, and I’ll show you the room.”

He stood up, showed her his palms. “It’s just me and what I got on my back.”

She raised one eyebrow and looked him up and down, a moth-eaten coat, old cotton slacks, and a stained button down shirt. “I travel light,” he said, trying the toothy grin again.

“I guess you do.”

“Since I work in town,” Leena said at dinner. “I can drop you off down there in the morning so you don’t have so far to walk.”

Henry nodded, barely lifting his head. He shoveled the pork’n’beans into his mouth, not quite sure when he last ate.

“Good to have someone in the house who can eat,” she said, pushing her plate away. She’d only eaten half of it. “You can have what’s left of mine if you’re still hungry. Nice to have another warm body in the house too. It’s been a while.”

“You been married?” Henry asked, gulping milk out of an old jelly jar.

“Yeah, I was. For a while.”

“What happened?”

Leena stood, grabbed pans and plates, threw them in the sink. “How about we don’t talk about personal matters? That okay?”
“That’s fine.” Henry put his face back down near his plate. He pushed food in his mouth mechanically. “Sorry,” he mumbled.

“Hey,” she said moving toward him. He could see only her feet when she put her hand on his arm. He jerked his head up. “No harm meant. I just don’t want to talk about it.”

He nodded, and didn’t stop until she walked back to the sink. Then, he pulled her unfinished plate closer and began to eat it too.

They fell into a routine with their days -- she dropped him off in town on her way to work and drove him home afterward. They ate together, then sat in the living room, now clean, watching TV. The day after he moved in, he rounded up a vacuum, broom, bleach, sponges, and all the other cleaners he could find. Then he spent three evenings scrubbing the house from top to bottom. He even found an old fireplace set in the attic and put it below the mantle, even though there was no fireplace. He put the newspapers in the wood holder so they wouldn’t clutter the room. With the house clean, they found themselves spending their evenings in the living room watching television. She held the remote and flipped from station to station, rarely watching a show all the way through.

They were watching Jeopardy when she put a cigarette out and cleared her throat. “I need that rent you owe me.”

“I don’t have it. Remember? I told you, I can’t pay you 'til I get paid. I told you--” His voice trailed off as she stood and swaggered over to him. She put her legs on either side of his lap and stared down at him. Her legs reached his face, arms dangling down past his shoulders. He dropped his chin down to his chest. “I’ll see if I can--”

“You know what I like about you, Henry?”

He sat, didn’t say anything, didn’t look up at her.
“I like it that you listened to me about not getting too personal, you know?”

He nodded, as much as he could with his chin pressed to his chest, trying not to look at her crotch, inches from his face.

“People ask too many questions,” she continued. “I mean, you could've asked why I don’t talk about my husband. But nope. And I don’t ask why you wear long sleeves, even when it’s hot and sticky out.”

His eyes darted up to hers, but she was grinning. “Still, I wonder if there’s something that would get you to take that shirt off. Hmmm? And there’s that back rent.” She sat on his lap, her feet planted on each side, and shoved her orange lips in his face. “And I like that you don’t talk much. Too many people talk too much, don’t you think?”

He would have nodded, but she was kissing him. He liked the way she tasted, like cigarettes and soda pop. He could feel an erection growing and groaned a little.

“Oh, so you can talk,” she said. She pushed her hands in his pants. “You don’t mind, do you?” He wondered when he’d last had a woman. It must have been at least a year.

When she tried to pull his shirt off, he pulled back from her. “No,” he said. “Leave the shirt on.”

She nodded and didn’t ask again.

“I can’t believe this,” Leena said, looking up from a newspaper. It was a week old, but she was only now reading it. She was looking at all the papers that had collected in the past weeks, not necessarily in the right order. “A man shot his wife then himself trying for a murder/suicide, but he hit his wife in the shoulder, not her heart. He’s dead, but the wife is recovering at Mercy Hospital.” She looked at him and shook her head.

“She probably feels pretty damn good not to be dead,” he said. She glared at him and
grabbed another paper.

“Have you heard about this?” She pointed at the lead story, *Apologetic Arsonist Still Moving Through Northeast.*

“Yeah, I read about that a while ago.” He glanced at the date, over a week ago.

“I always wonder about a person who does things like that,” she said. She paced the small living room, maneuvering around the furniture. “I mean, why? Why would anyone burn things down, without any reason? I don’t get it.”

“Maybe the guy loves fire. Maybe he likes to watch it eat things.” He said it with his chin pressed to his chest, but he watched her out of the tops of his eyes. She looked at him, her expression something he couldn’t gauge.

“You seem to know quite a bit about it Henry. You want to clue me in?”

“I don’t know,” he said, moving gaze away but still watching her. “I don’t know why anyone would do something like that.”

“Mm-hmm,” she said, her lips pressed tight, eyebrows arched. She continued pacing, threw the paper down, and chose another from the pile.

Henry loved to watch Leena smoke, the way she moved her arms while they talked, taking the fire with her, never thinking about the beauty it could give if she let it go. But he tried not to think about that. After three weeks in her house, he hadn’t started a fire. Reading the paper at work, he learned the arson stories were beginning to disappear. It made him a little sad.

With every fire, he’d lived in the town first. He got a job, picked the place, and then watched it. He even made friends in the town, was the new guy that people warmed up to pretty quickly. Then, one night, a building burned to the ground, and the new guy was gone.
The only thing left was a note that read *I'm sorry*, found near the ruins of the structure.

Now, sleeping in her bed every night he didn’t get the urge to burn. He was settling down a little, thinking about life more. Sometimes though, he still tried to puzzle out why people put fires out. He could only understand what caused people to start them -- the crackling, the smell, the black flakes falling thick as snow on his head, the beauty of a fire that’s reached its height but looks for something else to latch onto.

“Leena,” he said while she waved a cigarette above his head. She’d noticed that he liked to watch it and sometimes dangled a lit cigarette above him to watch his enjoyment. “You don’t think it’s weird that I like to watch your cigarette?”

“Yeah, it’s weird, but I’ve seen weirder. Besides, I figure, if this is the worst, I’ll have it pretty easy.”

His eyes twitched, moved away from the fire, and to her face. She was watching him, and he shifted his gaze to the wall.

“What’s that look mean?” she asked. She pulled the cigarette back and took another drag. Henry stared at the ceiling and said, “I don’t know. I’m wondering where you think we are.”

“We’re in Marion, Pennsylvania, in my bed. In the morning, we’ll go to work, then we’ll come home. And tomorrow night will probably look something like this.”

“And the night after that?”

“Hopefully the same. And the night after that too.” He looked at her, but she’d pulled her gaze away. Her eyes were narrow, the cigarette dangling from her fingers.

“That sounds okay,” he said, but she didn’t answer. “We can probably do that.”

At work, he stood over the grill and forgot what he was doing. The smell of burning
burgers didn’t register in his nostrils until one of the waitresses came running in.

“Jesus Christ. Henry, what the hell’s the matter with you?” He grabbed a spatula and
turned the burgers over. Too late -- they were charred beyond what anyone would eat.

“Where the hell did you go?” she asked. “You were like, in some dream world. You
didn’t even hear me yelling at you from out front.”

“Sorry. Sorry. I blanked for a few minutes. I’m fine now.” He tried to look fine. “I’ll
throw these away. Those guys can wait a couple extra minutes, can’t they?”

She smiled but looked a little uneasy as she walked through the door. “Keep your head
on the grill, Henry,” she called over her shoulder.

He tossed the burgers in the trash and put more on the grill before he realized he was
doing it all with one hand. His left hand sitting idly in his pocket. He pulled it out and only then
noticed that it was gripping a book of matches so tightly his knuckles had turned white.

He finished the burgers before yelling out to the girl. “Hey, could you come keep an eye
back here? I gotta piss.” He gave her an apologetic grin as she pulled her considerable weight
back through the door.

“Lordy, the things I do for nice guys.”

Henry jogged to the bathroom and pulled his hand out again. It still clutched the matches.
He opened the hand and watched them, as though they would do something on their own. Then
he went into a stall.

He lit the first one, breathed the quick smell of sulfur in the air, letting the flame lick his
fingertips, and watched as it tried to reach up before dying between his fingers. He took out
another and watched the flame waver before pulling itself up. Slowly, he put the flame against
his arm. He watched the skin turn red, then bubble before turning almost black. He watched his
body bend to the flame. Not only could he control a fire he set, his own body could withstand it.
He threw the second one in the toilet and reached for another but decided to wait. That fat girl would be wondering what took him so long. He’d take his break soon and burn as much as he wanted.

“Tell me why you don’t take your shirt off,” Leena said.

“I take it off.”

“No, no you don’t. Even when we make love, you don’t take it off. You always stop me. So, what? You only take it off when you’re alone?”

“I take it off in the shower. That’s about it.” He paused and looked at her. If she saw his arms a month ago, he could have made up a story about an abusive father, but not now. Now, he couldn’t hide behind any story. His arms were covered in fresh burns, some overlapping. Some so infected he wasn’t sure they would heal. Below them lay the ones from his teen years, after he’d been caught setting fires and people in town watched him every second of the day. Then, only in bed at night, could he burn all he wanted. “Does it bother you?”

“No, makes me curious, like you have a lot of stuff in there.” She tapped an orange fingernail against the side of his head.

“I don’t know much about your life, do I? And I don’t say anything.”

“That’s different.”

“Why?”

“It just is. I told you before, I don’t want to talk about it.”

“I don’t want to take my shirt off, okay? I don’t.”

“I know why you don’t take it off,” she said. He waited, holding his breath, and let it out slowly when she said, “Okay, maybe I don’t know. But I’ve got ideas. Right in here,” and she tapped the middle of her forehead with a nail. She smiled, and he didn’t like the way she looked
at him, as though she could see the blackened skin through his sleeves. “Aren’t you gonna ask my ideas?”

“No,” he said. “I really don’t care.”

She sighed and bent over a new paper. In the past week, she’d caught up with the news and now spent every morning pawing through the paper. When he asked why, she said she wondered what was happening with the arsonist.

“You could be him,” she said and tapped a picture of an apartment building that was still smoldering. She pushed the paper across the table. “That arsonist’s still going strong. Could be you going out burning things up and coming back to me after.”

He grabbed the paper, saw a picture of a charred building, people standing out in the streets. *Apologetic Arsonist Now Has a Death Toll; Three Die in Harveston Fire.* He scanned the article. The fire was set in the middle of the night, and almost everyone had gotten out. A six-month old baby, a toddler, and an old woman had died.

“No,” he said. He took a deep breath and let it out slowly, making sure his voice didn’t shake. “I was in bed with you when this started. Look at the time: midnight. Besides, this isn’t the same guy.”

“What?” Leena asked. She took the paper back and scanned the article. He watched her lips mouth the words and moved his eyes away when she looked back at him. “It doesn’t say anything in here about that.”

“It’s just not. It can’t be.” He got up, poured himself another cup of coffee. His hand shook so badly he splashed a little coffee on his wrist. “The arsonist doesn’t kill people. He’s been careful not to kill people. He wouldn’t start.”

“How do you know that? What are you pulling here, Henry?”

“Nothing. It doesn’t add up. Why would he start?” Turning back, he tried to look at her
but couldn’t. He watched the floor and gripped the edge of the counter.

Leena moved in front of him and forced his head up. There was nowhere else to look.

“Tell me the truth. I promise I won’t get mad,” she whispered. “Are you that guy, the arsonist?”

“No,” he whispered back. “How could you think that?” Tears filmed his eyes, but he wasn’t sure why. He turned back to the counter, his head down, his shoulders shaking. Leena came up behind him, put her arms around his waist.

“Hey,” she said, “I’m sorry. There are worse things you could do than burn down a few buildings.”

“I’m fine.” He straightened up, took a sip of coffee. Turning in her embrace, he looked her in the eyes. “I have a funny feeling it’s not the same guy. That’s all.”

He hugged her around her chest, and she lay her chin against his forehead.

Leena began hinting about marriage on a Wednesday, hamburger night. He looked at her, his mouth open, a bite half-chewed.

“I guess this is bad timing,” she said and took another bite of her sandwich.

He tried to say something, but she stopped him. “No, you don’t have to say anything. I shouldn’t have brought it up. What, we’ve known each other a few months and I already brought it up? Don’t listen to me.” She stopped and straightened her shoulders. “Don’t worry. I’m not pushing you. You just act like this is forever. So, I talk about it.”

Henry closed his mouth, not sure what he was expected to say. He was waiting for the tears to come, knowing this woman couldn’t hold it in.

She took another small bite before letting loose. She laid her head on the table and cried, big blubbery wails. The food she’d put in her mouth floated around in there somewhere.
Henry sat and watched, still unsure what he should do.

“I’m sorry,” she sobbed, lifting her head from the table. “I’m being stupid. It’s just—”

“What?” he asked, the word forced from him. It came out sounding like nothing more than expelled air.

“I love you Henry.” She put her hand over his. “I know it’s stupid, but I do.”

“I think I love you too.”

“You think you do?” The tears were still there, but her face was now an angry red.

“Either you do or you don’t. You don’t think you might love someone.” She stood and looked down at him, almost the way she had that first day, but this time there was only anger in her eyes. “You need to make up your mind, mister. I don’t have time to be fucking around.”

She walked out the door, and he didn’t make a move to follow her. He spit out the food he’d been holding in his mouth and pushed his plate aside. He put his head in his hands and sat there until he heard her come back and slam her bedroom door. Then, he took a lighter off the kitchen table.

A little fire. To calm his nerves, nothing serious. Just to help him forget, to help him understand. Fire could do that, if you wanted it to. And that was exactly what Henry needed -- something to calm him, something to tell him the next step.

He felt edgy in the house and stepped outside for a little fresh air. On the back stoop, careful to keep his back to the house, he lit match after match. He held them to his skin but didn’t get any pleasure. He stared at his bubbling arm and felt ashamed at what he’d turned into. He pulled his sleeves down and walked back toward the house.

A little metal bucket beside the door caught his eye. It was filled with weeds from the yard that he’d picked weeks ago and forgotten about. Now they were completely dried out.
He picked the bucket up, strolled around the house, and hoped Leena wouldn’t peer out the window. Behind the garage, he hunkered down over the bucket and lit a match. The flame grew and shrank until it was almost at his fingertips before he dropped it in. The dried weeds went up instantly in a quick, short blaze. He breathed in the smell of fire and held his face over its warmth. He listened to the crackling of the weeds -- it was a symphony, each sound separate yet coming together to create an elaborate whole. Yes, this is what he’d needed: this smell, this sound. He’d missed being a little jumpy as he burned, always afraid someone was going to come around the corner at any moment to throw him in a cell.

“Henry, where’d you go?” Leena called from the house.

“Getting some air,” he yelled back. Was his voice shaking? Could she hear his excitement? “I’ll be in soon.”

He heard the screen door close behind her as the last flame died.

“Do you know what this is?” Leena asked. She shoved the charred bucket under his nose.

“Where’d you find that?” he asked as he pulled his arms out of the dishwater. He pulled his sleeves down, but not quickly enough.

She stared at his sleeves as though she could still see the marks. Her face contorted into a smile, but it didn’t hold happiness. He rubbed his hands across his sleeves and looked at the weave of the fabric without saying anything. With his arms covered, you really couldn’t see anything, one small mark at his wrist, but he’d told her it was a burn from the grill.

She wrapped her hands around his wrists and pressed her thumbs into his forearms. “I never did tell you about Dale, did I?”

“Dale?” he asked.

“My ex.”
He shook his head and tried to pull his arms away, but she gripped tighter, her thumb rubbing a scab under the fabric.

“He was a good guy, real nice. We were straight out of high school and decided to wait until our wedding night. Before that, we kissed and held hands, but nothing else. We were doing things right. That first night, he tried to be interested in me, tried to like it. But he wasn’t, and I could tell. You know how you can tell some things, without the other person saying a word?”

He nodded, and even though she was looking straight at his face, she didn’t seem to see him.

“Anyway,” she said, “we didn’t say anything after that first time, nothing to say really. We stopped, you know, having sex. We still slept in the same bed, held hands, but that was all. Then I decided I wanted kids. Oh, that was maybe four years into it.” She laughed, almost without sound. “I know, I know. Four years, all dry. Believe me I found ways around Dale, found ways to please myself if you know what I mean. Anyway, I brought up kids, and he was happy with the idea, but couldn’t seem to get it up for me. Like I was all wrong or something. Then, it hit me. He must’ve known, must’ve been wishing I was some boy all along. So I thought of something. One night in bed, I told him, ‘I’ll lay on my stomach. You can picture whoever you want; I don’t care.’”

His face bunched up, and she said, “Oh, don’t look at me like that. Our marriage was great, except in the bedroom. It was really great. Anyway, I took my clothes off and laid on my stomach, even buried my face in a pillow. He did it, got it up, and came. But that was it. Next morning, he was gone. Didn’t have it in him to make it work.”

She looked at Henry, seemed to be waiting for him to say something. But he didn’t know what to say, didn’t know what this story had to do with him. She let go of his arms and stepped back. “Anyway, that’s it. So, let’s have a look at those arms.”

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He pulled at the bottoms of his sleeves and backed away from her. He shook his head, but she pulled him to the table and pushed him in a chair. She sat across from him, and because he didn’t know what else to do, he raised his sleeves and showed her the oozing sores, the swollen welts, the blackened skin. Leena laid one hand on his while the other began to finger the sores. Her hand moved from one to another, touching each one without looking away. She gave his arm all of her attention, as though memorizing each blemish.

When she was done, her words came in a hushed whisper. “Show me,” she whispered. “Show me how you do it.”

“Do what?”

“Your arms. Show me.”

“I don’t... I mean, I really,” he stuttered.

“Show me. A little one, right there.” She pointed at a little patch of clear skin near his elbow. “Here,” she said, pulling a cigarette from the pack and lighting it. She handed it over.

He looked at her one last time, to make sure she wanted to see this. Leena leaned forward and nodded her head. Her eyes were wide, bright. He took it as the cue to begin. Holding the cigarette close to his skin, they watched the hairs sizzle away. He laid the glowing ember on his skin, careful not to push too hard. He didn’t want to put it out. Her eyes didn’t move as the skin grew red, then began to blister before peeling away completely. He lifted the cigarette when his flesh started to char and blacken. He handed the it back.

“Wow,” she said. She took a drag before putting it out. “Now, a fire. I want to see one.”

“I don’t know about that,” he said. But she grabbed his arm and pulled him from his chair.

“Come on. I’ll just watch. Promise.” She was a new girl, seeing a new world.

She pulled him out the back door, toward the middle of the yard. “What should we burn?
There’s a chair.” She pulled a chair off the porch.

He grinned and looked at her. “That’s plastic. It’s not going to burn, probably melt and make a stink.” He looked around, pulled a few branches from under a tree. “You’ve got a lot to learn. Let’s start with this.” He was warming up.

“Can I do anything?” she asked.

“Yeah, go get a lighter and some rope.”

She headed toward the house, jogging as though he might change his mind.

“Now,” he said when Leena returned. “You’ve got to respect the fire. Calm down.” She nodded, erasing the grin, trying to look solemn. “Remember, if you’re not careful the fire will own you. But, if you respect the flame, the power in each flame, you can control all of it.”

She nodded and watched as he unraveled the rope, made a little ball of it in his palms.

“Get some small twigs,” he said. She ran away, came back with more than they’d need. He looked at her in wonder.

“Now, you sit back and watch. This is your first time.” She backed away and knelt on the ground, her butt settling on her heels. Henry built a little teepee of the twigs with the tinder in the middle. “You ready?” he asked, enjoying the way she squirmed.

“Yes. Get on with it.” She laughed.

“Patience. Patience.” Slowly, he lit the lighter. Her eyes followed the flame from his face down to the unraveled string. The tinder burst into flames, which leapt to the dry twigs. He stood and pulled Leena up. Holding her hand, he said, “We have to wait now. When the twigs catch a little more, we’ll add something bigger, then even bigger. Last, we’ll add the branches.”

She nodded, not taking her eyes off the flames. “It’s beautiful,” she whispered.

“Yes.” He wrapped his arms around her, and they watched the flames dancing, reaching, bending.
“Should we add more?” she asked.

“In a minute,” he said. “Let’s control the flame first, trick it into thinking it’s going to burn out.”

They watched as most of the flames died, until only one was left. Alone, it reached up, higher and higher, searching for more to grasp but finding nothing.
Live Humans

It’s embarrassing to move home after college, worse when you’re thirty-seven, and even more painful when you bring your wife. Arlene is forty-two and hasn’t lived with her parents since well before we met. She’s used to a certain lifestyle and at least a couple states between us and our respective families.

We don’t really live under the same roof as my father. Actually, it’s a small house behind his, what used to be an in-law house. He offered us the main house, claimed he’d be fine in the “guest house,” but I said no. Somehow, that would have been even more degrading. I can deal with moving my wife across five states. I can even deal with sponging off my father for a while. I cannot allow myself to take his home.

The little house is fine, cramped maybe. No door between the living room and kitchen, you only know that the rooms have switched where the carpet lies flush against the linoleum. What I first thought must be a closet off the kitchen is actually the bathroom. I’ve seen larger in motel rooms. The bedroom is the biggest, as long as the murphy bed is pushed into the wall. Still, it’s better than the outside, which is finished in the same vinyl siding as my dad’s. Looking at both, you’d swear our little home must be a child’s doll house.

When we first got here, it seemed like the house would close in on us, turn us against one
another just from lack of breathing room. The first day, I lay on the bed, arm over my eyes while Arlene moved the boxes and set them in place. “Books,” she said, “they go in the living room or bedroom?” I didn’t answer. My head was thumping in the July heat. “The living room,” she said. “Always good to have books out in the open.” Then she edged around the bed into the main room and grabbed another box. I let the sweat drip off my head, down onto the bare mattress, and wondered how the hell we’d ended up in my father’s house. A few slip-ups at work, a layoff, no other job prospects, and then our house was on the market. End of story. Jump on a bus and crawl back home, wife in tow.

The mattress creaked as Arlene sat on the edge. I could hear the huff of her breath and removed my arm from my eyes. Her face was red from all the lifting and moving, still pretty, but it looked older than it had two months before when we still had a house, and things seemed to be on the up and up. Cracked lines had appeared around her eyes, radiating outward, trying to meet the ones that edged her mouth. There was more gray in her hair too.

She would have been better off if we hadn’t gotten married, I think. When we had our own house and I had a job, she looked more put together, wearing tailored pants instead of jeans, jewelry and makeup everyday. She got her hair done in town, and I almost never saw her without it fixed. She was a banker’s wife and tried to play the part, though sometimes I could see the strain. Some days I’d come home and her hair would be in a ponytail. She’d be wearing one of my old shirts and jeans, mowing the grass or shampooing the carpet. Those were the times when she looked most relaxed, doing work that ruined her manicured nails, not having time to fix a full meal for us, instead ordering takeout. Other days, I came home to see her putting dinner on the table, her look coordinated perfectly, but she never seemed to be as comfortable then. The looseness she had in the garden was gone when she presided over dinner, even if it was just the two of us. For me, the manicured life was what I needed, and I had inhabited it well,
enjoying the large collection of ties in my closet and the way the crease down the legs of my pants were always perfectly pressed. Arlene seemed surprised by this life at first, but eventually, I think she grew to depend on it as much as I did, the way our lives were the same day by day, no sudden crises or changes in plans, even if she never did feel quite at home in the world I’d created.

Growing up with my dad was up and down. Some months we’d talk about buying a big house like he had now. Others, we were trying to keep our electricity on. It all depended on how well his current job was going and whether any extra money was coming in. Depending on the month, he had a different venture that would make us rich: buying cheap cigarettes and then selling them for a profit at the steel mills during shift changes, custom painting muscle cars, selling vitamins door to door, getting off work early to panhandle during rush hour. It never stopped, his grand ideas. Then, once I had escaped from that life and married Arlene, he struck gold with a pyramid scheme. Not very inventive, but he was one of the first out there. And he was lucky, getting out before things went bust and living off the interest.

When I was young, like eight, this way of life was an adventure. My jobs ranged from collecting aluminum cans on the sides of roads to keeping an eye out for the police while my dad sold cigarettes from the trunk of his car. Dad and I were in cahoots, even dressing the same, Levis on bottom with white t-shirts up top, the sleeves rolled to show tanned shoulders. As I got older, the novelty wore off. Trying to call my girlfriend at sixteen only to find no dial tone became more than I could handle. The worry of not knowing if we could afford the next month’s rent fell on my shoulders. According to my dad, everything would work out, if only because there was no other choice. Slowly, the Levis found a home in the back of my closet, while khakis and button downs had a new home on the hangers, and resentment for my dad filled the rest of my room. While Dad searched for the next adventure, I tried to separate myself from his life, to
dream of a time when I would be secure.

That was the kicker, I think, that he could live the way he had all those years and still make it. And now I was asking him for help. I ended up being the one who couldn’t handle money, the guy whose drawer came up short at the bank one too many times. They were downsizing anyway because of a corporate takeover and gave me the easy way out. I know they thought I took it, but no one asked me directly. Nine years into our marriage, I could see that Arlene was beginning to pull at the seams, worrying over our credit card bills, declining to pay money for someone else to style her hair, saving the change from my pockets in a jar. Before that, I thought we were happy; then she informed me that I was happy. I guess my mind was on her, and I started pocketing a few dollars at a time. At first, just a ten so that I could buy Arlene some of that perfume I liked so much. Soon, bigger bills were finding their way into my pocket, ones that I would present to Arlene for the next credit card payment. The idea that I’d been wrong about our marriage was gnawing at my guts -- she’d liked her life before we were married, and our growing debt wasn’t something she could handle easily. I thought I was saving her and ended up making her miserable, the same thing my dad had done to me, making me money conscious at a much younger age than my classmates. Still, when she first saw our tiny new home, I figured she would file for divorce right then. But she didn’t, even if I still wasn’t sure why.

“Stop moping,” she said, her mouth set in a hard line. “You’re not helping anything.”

“I don’t want to get too comfortable here,” I said. “Let’s live out of the boxes until we find a new place.”

She gave me that look I’d been seeing a lot recently, the one that told me I was a jackass.

“And where are we getting the money for a new place?”

Just before our house was turned over to the bank, I’d looked at every apartment I could
find, trying to find some way to cover a security deposit and first month’s rent. I applied for every job I could find, at least those that would allow me a little bit of dignity. I did not apply to Walmart or McDonald’s or places like that. Instead, I looked for something we could actually live on. Maybe it was that I didn’t revise my resume before I dropped it off, or maybe they could already see the beaten look in my eyes, but I did not receive a single callback. At some point just before we were going to be evicted from the house, I had lost the energy to look for jobs or apartments. Lying on the mattress, I knew the energy hadn’t returned, but I still said, “I’ll get a job. We’ll make it.”

“Wish in one hand,” she said. “Do you-know-what in the other, and see which one fills up first.”

I looked at her and rolled my eyes. She just stared at me, then said, “Let’s go out tomorrow.”

“Not yet,” I said. “I want to settle in a little first.”

“You look pretty settled to me,” she said, staring at my body flopped across the bed.

“Your dad said the zoo is getting a bunch of new animals this year. They’re building a bunch of new exhibits, almost doubling the size of the place. We should go.”

“We will,” I said, “just not tomorrow.”

“A drive then,” she said. “I don’t know this city at all.”

“In a few days.”

She looked at me for a minute, probably biting back a sharp retort, then went back outside for another box. I put my arm back over my face and listened to her huff and grunt as she lowered boxes to the floor. I could picture her brushing the hair out of her face, giving me the evil eye every now and then.

I sighed and rolled over. Taking a man’s dignity looks a lot like an overweight ex-bank
teller lying across a bare mattress in boxer shorts. What’s even worse, the dots on his underwear clash with the stripes on the mattress. From his comb-over to the chubby cheeks, it’s a lesson in bad taste.

At some point, my dad stepped in the doorway and said, “Looks like you guys got a good bit of your stuff.”

Arlene chuckled and said, “It might look like a lot, but we don’t have a pot to pee in.” I heard my dad laugh, but I pretended to sleep, let my lips part a little and made a snoring noise. Arlene sounded almost happy, and I wondered if she liked our life better now that we were broke.

“You’re working too hard, Arlene. Let Arty finish up.” I felt his foot kick the mattress. It sprung back and waved like a waterbed. “Your wife and I are going up to the house to sit in the shade and drink a beer. Finish up these boxes,” he yelled as though I really was asleep.

When they were gone, I sat up and rubbed my eyes. The house looked almost put together. The living room had too much stuff in it, not because we had gotten so much out but because it was so small. The two shelves overflowed with books. The coffee table seemed to hold all of the knickknacks Arlene hadn’t been able to give up, from the paperweight in the shape of a crumpled piece of paper to the little metal basket that was too small to actually hold anything. The bedroom was still full of unpacked boxes, ones labeled WINTER and PHOTOS. I looked at it all and wondered how our life had been condensed into twenty or thirty boxes. More depressing was that some of them weren’t important enough to open.

I looked at the ones that needed to be unpacked and decided they could wait. I went to the doorway and peered up at my dad’s house, a monstrosity that he shares with two cats. Each has its own bedroom, complete with a little cat bed and its own dishes. They each have a litter
box with their names painted on the rim. It’s sad, the things people do with their retirement years. Some people get old and catch up on all the daytime television they didn’t watch when they worked. Others collect things that never seemed to mean much. My dad buys a big house and treats his cats like people.

Arlene was recently divorced when I met her and had just taken a job at a department store in the mall. The first time I saw her at the register, I knew she hadn’t expected to be working at a place like that, even if it was upscale. She seemed like she was used to being taken care of, which is why I asked her out.

She had the suburban housewife look that I craved. My mom almost had it, but worry had settled over her whole body by the time I was five, hiding the look of relaxation that was natural to her. When she gave up the job, Arlene took on that natural look, and I knew that she was the woman I’d been waiting for. We would fit into a life together without much need for adjustment.

The only thing missing was the kids, and we were working on that. Or at least I thought we were. While we were packing, I found birth control pills. First, I was confused, and then I was embarrassed. How could I not know what was going on when I’d been living with Arlene for ten years? But I pushed that away and became angry, because it was one more thing in my life that had turned out to be a sham. I didn’t talk to her again until we signed the house over to the bank. Then, I forgave her as I cried and held on to the only thing I had left.

When I lost my job, it felt like I was backing out of an unspoken deal. She’d signed up for one life, and I’d given it to her. Then, when we were both getting comfortable, I showed her the truth -- that what we had been was just a glossy trick, a sleight of hand.

Now though, she was the one pulling all the tricks. Filing for bankruptcy before things got too bad was her idea, along with cutting up the credit cards before they were canceled, and
moving to my dad’s. She even called him without saying a word to me, told him what happened and asked for a little help, probably knowing I would never have asked. At that point, I was beyond making any decisions more difficult than getting out of the bed in the morning. Fruitless job searches and a lack of options will do that to a man. But Arlene seemed colossally prepared for this, able to make the calls and show me where to sign. Through our ten year marriage, I thought I had done her a favor, and only now was I learning that maybe I hadn’t.

From our little patch of grass, I could see my dad and Arlene sitting on the edge of the pool, their feet dangling in. They were laughing. I wanted to join them. Instead, I went back inside and rearranged the boxes. I put the box labeled WINTER in the bathroom, TOILETRIES in the closet, and packed the books back into an empty box that said EXTRA, whatever that meant.

In bed, Arlene straddled my butt and kneaded the muscles in my shoulders. “You’d think you were the one who unloaded all the boxes,” she said as she pushed on a stubborn knot. “You’re tense.” I didn’t say anything. “Of course, I noticed you put some stuff back.” She dug her fists into the meat between my shoulder blades. Her bony knuckles hurt, and I bit my lip. “Now, I’m just wondering where you put my toothbrush. I looked all through the bathroom, but it’s gone. The only thing in there is an old bar of soap, and I think that was left from before us. Well, that and a box full of sweaters.”

She rolled off of me and lay on her back, her hand resting against my head. I looked at her but didn’t say anything. Her fingers started to move through my hair, pulling the combover out. Laying flat, on the side of the head where it grows, it reaches my shoulder. She leaned over and started to braid it. “You know, we’ll get back on our feet. This is for now, that’s all.”

“But it won’t be the same,” I said.
“No,” she said, “it’ll be better.”

I wondered what she had in mind as better but didn’t ask. In the past months, I’d learned too much about my wife and our life together. I found that my terra firma was actually a sinkhole.

“Do you like my dad?” I asked instead.

“He’s nice,” she said but looked at the braid, not at me.

“Do you think he’s attractive?”

“As far as dads go.”

“Yeah, but he’s not that old.”

“So?” She was pulling too hard on my hair, so I rolled over.

To the ceiling, I said, “He’s attractive. And he has a house, a big one.”

She looked at me and didn’t say anything. I sat up and stared at her. “What?” I could see the laughter bubbling behind her teeth.

“How think I married you for your house? Your money?” she asked.

I shrugged.

“Arty, if I was marrying for money, I wouldn’t have married you.”

“I had money.” I heard the pout in my voice but didn’t try to hold it back.

“You never had money,” she said. “You had a checking account and too many credit cards. There’s a big difference.”

“I had prospects,” I said. I could almost feel my lower lip poking out. I had been white collar, maybe not the president of the bank or anything near it, but I used to wear a tie to work and neatly creased pants. That should count for something. And we had the nicest of everything. Maybe the credit card companies owned most of it, but that was supposed to be temporary.
“Okay,” she said. “You had prospects. Big ones.” She paused. “Let’s not talk about the mutual funds again.”

I went to the closet and found our bathroom stuff, but I couldn’t find her toothbrush. I handed her mine, and she used it instead.

Four days later, I still had not gone up to my dad’s house or even farther than our doorway. Part of me knew my dad wasn’t a bad man, but the other part told me to stay as far away as possible. Living in a house that was a miniature of his, I was beginning to feel like a miniature of him. I would flounder through my life, eventually hitting on some stupid scheme that would give me what I’d been trying to work for all along. I’d lived through that once, and I refused to do it again. My life would be normal, had been normal before this setback. I would have what my dad never tried to offer me, and eventually my wife would be grateful.

Lying on the bed, I watched as Arlene went up each evening and sat by the pool with him, drinking beer and laughing. I lay in my striped boxers and listened to them through the window. Sometimes they were quiet, and I peeked out to see what they were up to. But I couldn’t see much in the darkness. They sat side by side, and I could picture their arms touching, their knees rubbing together. Once, I think I saw him put a hand on her knee. I know he leaned in close a moment later, but I put the curtain down. If they kissed, I didn’t want to know about it. I understood her aversion to me, and I didn’t blame her for looking for stability. I just didn’t want to know if she was finding it in my father. When she came back, I pretended to be asleep, but on the back of my eyelids, the kiss that I didn’t see played over and over.

The evenings were bad with her up there, but when she left in the middle of the morning or afternoon, it was worse. Then, they knew I wasn’t asleep, but they were still doing whatever it was that they did. Sometimes they were inside. Other times, they floated beside each other in
the pool. Once I saw her weeding his flower garden, and I wanted to yell at her to come do that at our house until I realized that even this place belonged to him.

I was still getting used to my surroundings, spending each afternoon arranging and rearranging the contents of the boxes, looking for some semblance of order in the little house, one that wasn’t like our old life. The knickknacks had bothered me at the old house, so I packed them up. The little basket that didn’t hold anything, that one I hated more than the rest. I put it in the garbage can and immediately dumped coffee grounds and our leftover breakfast on it. Our life had already been pared down in bankruptcy court, a little bit more couldn’t hurt.

As I layered pieces of banana peel over the basket, I heard a knock. I looked over and saw my dad, the Marlboro Man minus the cancer, standing on the other side of the screen door. “Can I come in?” he asked.

“It’s your place,” I said, watching as he made his way inside and looked around. The ripped up banana peel was still in my hand, so I dropped it in the can.

“I thought you might come see me,” he said. “Arlene said you weren’t feeling too good.”

“I was going to come up tonight.”

“Your ears turn pink when you lie.”

I touched my ear and then dropped my hand. I’d never really thought about my father much after I got married. He was that guy I visited every couple of years, the one I could go months without speaking to. Standing in the kitchen, still wearing my boxers at noon, I wondered if I liked him. He gave us a place to live, no questions asked, but I wasn’t sure that could make up for all he lacked.

“Listen,” he said, “I don’t care how long you stay here. Hell, you guys can stay forever as far as I’m concerned. But your wife told me you don’t like it here.”

I nodded.
“I talked to her and told her I’d get you guys an apartment in town if you want. Once you get a job, you can take over the bills. No strings. A gift.”

He stuck his hands in his pockets and grinned as though what he’d done in that moment could make up for the whole of our past. I decided I didn’t like him after all. His smile was too satisfied, as though telling me that the life I’d created for myself didn’t mean as much as I thought.

“I don’t want charity,” I said. “I don’t need it. I’m updating my resume right now, so don’t worry. I can take care of us.”

“I’m just trying to help, Art. I know you’re not doing a damn thing down here except packing and unpacking the same shit. I thought getting out of here would help, that’s all.” He looked concerned, but I didn’t believe him. It was the same face he put on after our phone got turned off when I was a kid.

“You want me out?” I asked. I turned around and started throwing dishes into a box sitting on the counter. I tossed a dirty pan on top of the stuff already in there and heard glass break. “Don’t worry. We’ll be out by the end of the day. Okay?”

I was being irrational but didn’t care. In a way it felt good to hear the glass break. If I couldn’t build a life, at least I knew I could destroy one.

I heard his steps behind me and felt his hands on my shoulders; his fingertips were rough. He squeezed and turned me around. I looked into his chest. “Christ, boy.” He shook his head. “You’re talking out your ass. You’re not taking your wife and living out on the streets.”

“She can stay here,” I said. “I think she’d rather be here, and maybe you’d like her to stay.” Spit flew out of my mouth, spraying his shirt. “You two and the cats can live up in the house, a big happy family.”

“What’s wrong with you?” he asked. He really did sound puzzled. I looked up into his
face and felt like a kid again. My mouth was open, and my face felt hot. “Get yourself together.” He stood a moment, his face too close to mine. Then he stepped back and put his hands in his pocket. “I am sorry,” he said. “I know this is hard. I remember when the same thing almost happened to us when you were little.” He shifted his gaze away from me and said, “I just want to help.”

I watched as he turned and walked back out of the house, stepping over half-full boxes. “Last thing Arty,” he said from the other side of the door, “take a shower.”

He smiled a little as he said it, but I was angry again. I said, “You’re the one who can’t get your shit together. You never did, even if you think so.” I didn’t mean for him to hear me, but he turned around and looked at me. He smiled again, lips closed, eyebrows arched, but didn’t say anything. After he turned away, I smelled under my arms but didn’t notice anything.

Arlene dropped a stack of mail on the coffee table but didn’t say a word about her knickknacks. The air was stifling in the little house, stagnant. I’d taken my boxers off earlier and sprawled across the couch face down. A crumpled copy of my resume was laying above my head, but I hadn’t had the heart to look at it yet. I was sure that somewhere on there it read loser, maybe under the Other Experience category.

“This is getting old,” she said.

I picked up the mail and thumbed through it. A flyer about a zoo protest, a postcard from someone at the bank, and a large manilla envelope stamped by my lawyer. I picked up the envelope but didn’t open it. It contained the last bit of paperwork, the ones that would sign the rest of me away. At only a few ounces, it was too light, too easy after all we’d lost.

“Life is like that. It gets old.”

“No, it’s not like that. This is nothing close to life.”
“Sometimes it’s exactly like this,” I said.

I looked over my shoulder at her staring down at me. “We’ve been here almost a week, and so far all you’ve done is take more clothing off each day.”

“It’s hot,” I said.

“Go swimming. Take a shower. Stick your head in the fridge. I don’t care what you do, as long as you do something.”

I sat up. During the last two months, Arlene had been supportive, forgiving. This was a new phase in our relationship.

“I’m working on my resume.” I picked it up and waved it in front of her face; she snatched it out of my hands.

“When was the last time you updated it?”

“Before I started at the bank.”

“You worked there twelve years.” She skimmed it and let it fall on the coffee table. “You haven’t done a thing. It still has your high school jobs on it.”

“You interrupted me. I was just getting started.”

She sat down beside me and put her hands over her face. I put my hand on her back, but she pulled away. “Are you planning on doing anything to get out of here,” she asked from between her fingers, “or are you just going to feel sorry for yourself?”

I opened my mouth, but she put her hand up. “I really want to know,” she said, “because if you’re not planning on getting a job, I will.”

“No.” I said it automatically. Arlene and I had been married for ten years, and she quit her job two weeks before the wedding. My job at the bank was enough, and I liked the fact that I was the only person there who could brag about having dinner on the table as soon as he got home. I liked that we were living not only a normal life, but a life that surpassed everyone else’s
in its regularity.

I stood up. “We can make it through this, right? I’ll put in applications tomorrow. We’ll get a little apartment in town and--” I looked down at her, but she was staring at my penis, wagging back and forth as though telling her I was lying.

She shook her head and lay across the couch. “This isn’t supposed to happen, Arty. And I don’t want to go back to how things were. Let’s do something else. That life didn’t work out, so let’s not try it again. Let’s do something new.”

I sat down and stroked her forehead. Maybe this whole thing was harder on her than I thought. I’d been ignoring her, feeling sorry for myself, letting her be strong for both of us, and forgetting to comfort her too. This wasn’t the life I’d promised when we got married, and I didn’t know how to make it up to her. Her eyes were closed, the skin on her face drawn and pale. I was a shit. “I’m sorry,” I whispered.

She put her hand on mine, moved it across her face. Her breath tickled my palm; I looked down at her little tank top, cut low. Her shorts were riding up her legs. She seemed to have the same thought, because she moved my hand down her throat, toward her chest. I bent down to kiss her, but, my face poised right above her, asked, “Are you sleeping with my dad?”

She sat up fast enough to knock her forehead into mine. As I rubbed it, I could feel a bump beginning to form. “What do you take me for?” she asked.

“You just said that this isn’t life, that this isn’t anywhere near it. I thought you might be looking for something that resembles it a little more. And I know he seems exciting, not really like me.”

Moving toward the freezer, she said, “I don’t want someone else, Arty. That’s not what I’m looking for. I want to be with you, but you need to figure out what you want. Our old life wasn’t the only one there is.”
“But it was so good,” I said.

“No.” She shook her head and handed me a washcloth full of ice. “We were in debt up to our eyeballs, and you spent every second you could at work. Remember how we used to go driving on the weekends? We haven’t done that in forever. You always volunteered to man the drive-up window on Saturdays and spent Sundays figuring out which bills we could get put off ’til next month.” She sighed. “We need to make something completely different for ourselves, but I don’t know what you want. And I don’t think you do either. We can’t have a non-life.”

“You don’t get it. This same thing happened to my dad. It’s like someone’s up there laughing at me for trying to change.”

“Your dad sat around naked all day, moaning about how horrible the world was?” I could see the trace of a smile on her lips, the first in a long time. If nothing else, at least I was a source of amusement.

“No, not like that.” I stood up and paced in front of her, trying to find the words, to show her that sometimes what life gave you was shit. Or maybe what you gave to it was shit. Either way, the outcome was the same -- whether it was an in-law house in your father’s yard or a job doing hospital laundry.

But the only thing that came out was, “He was horrible to my mom. He drove her out, and we lived like animals, picking up scraps and calling it good. What do you think he’s doing with those cats now? They’re his family. Anyway, I’m trying not to do that to you too. I don’t want to drive you away. I don’t want to have a family full of pets.”

“Honey,” she said. I stopped and looked at her. “Your dad didn’t drive your mom out. She died. A long time ago. You told me that.”

The facts were all mixed up in my head. “That’s not the point. He would have driven her out eventually. All those get rich quick ideas of his would have driven anyone away.”
“One of them must have worked. Look at his house,” she said, and I could see that she didn’t get it. That what I was trying to say was coming out wrong. Sure, my mom had died when I was a kid, but it was more than that. She wanted a better life than he was giving her. I was only a kid, and I knew that. I faced Arlene, hands on my hips, ready to speak, but she held her hands up and shook her head. “Go to bed. We’re getting you out of this house tomorrow.” I started to object, but she talked over me. “And then, we’re going to figure out what we want to do with our life. I’ve put up with this long enough.”

She stood and moved toward the door. I called after her, “See? You can’t stay away from him. From his house and his pool.”

She turned and said, “No, it’s the fact that life goes on up there. Down here, we’re like death. I don’t see you doing anything to change that, and you won’t let me help.” She looked sad as she said it.

My dad drove; Arlene sat shotgun. I huddled in the back, a pen in my mouth, crossing out words on my resume. So far, I’d gotten rid of the job at Sears I had at sixteen. The bankruptcy papers lay on the seat, still unopened.

“Stop moping,” Arlene said.

“I’m working on my resume, remember? You want me to get a job.”

She sighed and looked at the road. My dad hadn’t said anything yet. Arlene had forced me out of bed at ten and told me I had to go out with them or she was getting a divorce. Fear of her leaving was only slightly greater than leaving the house. I got up.

My hair was greasy, and I couldn’t find any underwear (probably repacked), but I threw on a pair of shorts and an old T-shirt. They didn’t tell me where we were going, and they still didn’t seem to know. They were looking at all the signs, Arlene pointing at an exit occasionally,
and we’d take it until we ran into the interstate again.

Now we were on city streets, somewhere in the North Hills moving away from 576. The
car felt cramped, and I wanted to go home. The contents of my stomach were churning. “Where
are we going?” I asked. “I’m carsick.”

“We’re just driving,” Arlene said. “Remember when just driving was enough?” But she
scanning the side of the road, her head whipping around at each telephone pole. “Slow down,”
she said to my dad. She was looking for something to do; we’d been coasting too long for her to
want to continue.

He downshifted and let the car drift. Cars behind us honked and moved into the left lane;
my dad waved to the drivers as they zoomed past.

“There,” she said, pointing. A xeroxed sign taped to a mailbox read, LIVE HUMANS AT
THE ZOO! “I told you I wanted to go to the zoo,” she said to me. “Now we have a reason.” I
wanted to ask her if she knew what the sign even meant but didn’t. She wanted a destination,
and now she had one.

My dad nodded and sped up, switched into the left lane, and made a U-turn at the next
light. I turned back to my resume and wondered how important my experience as a lifeguard
was.

They looked nice up there, my dad’s hands at ten and two, Arlene humming to herself
and tapping her nails on the window. I wondered if they realized how good they looked and
whether that had already turned into something more. “Dad,” I said, leaning across his seat.
“What did you do before we showed up?”

I knew they both were shocked to hear me initiate a conversation, but I had no clue what
he did with himself besides take care of the cats. “What do you mean?”

“You’re around the house all day while we’re there. You sit with Arlene in the pool, but
what did you do without us?”

“The same,” he said. “I keep myself busy.”

“Do you have a girlfriend?” The thought just occurred to me. After my mom died, he never dated. He kept busy trying to get rich, but I never thought about it at the time. My mom was gone, and I thought that was the end of the story. And it didn’t occur to me until then that maybe it should be different.

He had his cats, of course, but they weren’t much for conversation. I should have brought them up with Arlene the night before, but she probably would have told me that at least he has something. And she would be right. All I had was some boxes and an envelope I was afraid to open.

“No.” He kept his eyes on the road.

“You should. You’re young, not even sixty-five yet. You have long years left in you.” He cleared his throat. “I don’t really know any women around town.”

“Yes you do.”

He arched his eyebrows and glanced at me in the rearview mirror. “You’ve been here about a week and haven’t stuck your head out of your house. Before that, I hadn’t seen you in three years. How would you know?”

“Come on. You know one woman in town. I know you do.”

He shook his head.

“You know Arlene.” I held my breath, waiting to see a telltale sign of some guilt. He didn’t say anything for a minute, then, “She has you.”

“But she could do better. I mean, look at her. She’s attractive, don’t you think?”

She was looking straight ahead, her mouth set in a grim line. My dad looked over at her and then back at the road. “Yes, she is.”
“See?” I said. “The two of you. You match up better.” But I was getting nowhere with this. I pictured them sitting together by the pool and wondered if it was as innocent as they both said. My guess was yes. They were uncomfortable, but neither of them seemed to be lying. If anything, they probably thought I was coming undone.

“She’s your wife.”

Arlene turned to me, her mouth open a little, as though she was trying to say something but the words wouldn’t come. I ignored her.

“Listen guys, I know you like each other. Think about it, will you? It might sound weird now, but you two can live up in the big house and leave me to the in-law house. I’ll be the overgrown son who didn’t make it in life. It’s your classic story.”

The idea that began as a crazy trap was starting to sound better to me. I could live out the rest of my days watching them, taking care of the cats when they left town. I hadn’t thought of it before it came out of my mouth, but it would fix everyone’s problems. I could ignore the resume, and Arlene could have a life again. My dad would have some company. I would be content watching my wife from across the yard.

It wasn’t that I didn’t love my wife, the opposite in fact. I had promised something I couldn’t deliver, and now I had a chance to remedy that. With my father, she could have my promise, even if I couldn’t have her. As for my father, I could try to get past the resentment and maybe even learn to love the man. After all, we’d taken two different roads to get to the same place, and his had worked. I could love them both in my little house, I was sure of it.

“You’re forgetting something,” Arlene said.

“No I’m not. It’s perfect.”

“Besides the fact that you and I are married, Arty, ignoring that fact altogether, I’ve been sleeping with you for ten years. It might be a little odd to turn into your mother.”
We were passing more of the signs: LIVE HUMANS AT THE ZOO! The closer we got, the more we saw them. Some telephone poles were completely covered. “You’ll get over it,” I said.

A group of people had a whole setup in the parking lot. They wore shirts the same color as the signs, each one with the same message. It was early, and they were still setting up. People milled past them, glancing at in their direction but never facing them directly, ashamed to be going into the zoo.

Dad found a space near the back of the lot, away from all the other cars. He always did this, at every place we’d ever gone. No matter how old his car, he was always afraid of door dings. I took my time getting out, laying the papers in a nice pile, finally ripping open the envelope from the lawyer. Arlene looked at what I was doing and grabbed my wrist before I could pull the papers out. “Later,” she said. I sighed, put it down, and opened the door.

Our trek across the lot was slow. The heat was already rising from the blacktop, and my feet burned through my sandals. As we got closer, I could see the protesters fanning out, inserting themselves in the crowd. Behind them, near the ticket office was a makeshift cage, each side constructed of black metal bars. The pieces reminded me of the temporary barriers you see at concerts, not too large so they could be moved but solid enough to keep people from knocking them over. A few of the protesters were inside, mulling around, trying to look depressed. Their T-shirts read the names of different animals, and some of them seemed to match perfectly. A man with a long neck and a head too small for his body wore the giraffe shirt. A woman with a huge nose was the elephant, a little boy waddled around as the penguin. Besides the LIVE HUMANS signs, there were others that explained the new expansion project at the zoo, one where they would bring even more animals in. These people thought they already had enough,
too many really. A few signs even complained about what the noise and disorder of the
construction would do to the animals already housed there. Apparently animals could go just as
insane as humans.

As we neared the gate, Arlene slowed down until she stopped. “What?” I asked.
She shook her head. “I’ve never crossed a picket line.”
“It’s not a picket line. Not really. Just protesters, they’re at every zoo in America.”
“I can’t.”
My dad and I turned to look at her. “I’m not getting back in that car,” I said, pointing
across the lot. Our car looked like a little speck. “You dragged me out of the house, and I’m not
going back without seeing something. You told me we were going to live today.”
“And I’m not going in there.” She crossed her arms over her chest, and my dad looked
between us, rubbing his hands together. He didn’t say anything.
“Goddammit,” I said.
Arlene’s face seemed to shut down, until all her features were scrunched together. Then,
with no middle ground, it opened again and she smiled. Grabbing our hands, she pulled us up to
the closest protester. His shirt was already soaked with sweat, and no one would take his fliers.
He stuck his hand out automatically, but Arlene ignored it. “We want to go in there,” she said,
pointing at the cage.
He looked at us and didn’t seem to know what to say. “Here,” my dad said. “Take this.”
He fumbled for his wallet and held out a twenty dollar bill. “Let us in.”
The guy shrugged and pocketed the money. “Follow me.”
My dad and Arlene moved forward, but I stayed where I was. My wife turned around
and waved for me to catch up, but I said, “I’ll watch.” She frowned at me but kept moving
forward.
The guy talked to another person who looked at my wife before smiling and shaking her hand. My dad slapped him on the back and laughed. The two protesters pulled a side of the cage loose and let them slip through. Someone else ran up and handed them shirts.

I moved closer to get a better view. Everyone in the cage moved listlessly and occasionally hit the bars. My dad and wife slid into their matching monkey shirts. They looked around at all the glum faces before joining them. Moving slowly, they weaved in and out of the others. Sometimes my dad shook the bars.

I thought of the bankruptcy papers in the car and wondered what would happen if I didn’t sign them. In an odd way, they were the last connection I had to that life; signing them would be like giving up. And I wasn’t sure I could do that yet. I would turn to the ranks of my father who thought his pet cats were enough. Furry animals who wrapped themselves around his ankles and turned against him when they didn’t get enough to eat, have a clean litter box, or want to deal with him. With their simplistic lives of food and a scratch on the back of the neck every now and then. I was made of better things.

I looked up as Arlene let out a high pitched monkey shriek. She grabbed a bar and started to rattle it. The protesters glowered at her and shook their heads, but she didn’t stop. She leapt back, shrieking in my dad’s face until he started up a strange hooting sound that really wasn’t monkey-like at all. She laughed, and the protesters moved away from them, as though afraid of being contaminated. “Eeek!” she called and slammed into the cage again. My dad joined her and pounded his fists.

I looked away, embarrassed for them, and noticed that I was standing in the middle of a group of protesters. A security guard had come out and was confronting them. He tried to look menacing but fidgeted and waved his arms around instead. A low grumble went up from the people around me, and I only caught a few words: “Property... trespassing... police...” The
grumble became a shout, and I tried to push my way out of the group, but I was wedged in. I looked over at the cage for my wife, hoping she could get out to help me. But she and my dad were now shrieking at the security guard, and the other people in there had taken up the cry. All of them were making animal noises. I noticed a roar but didn’t see any shirts that said tiger or lion, then a hiss. They had abandoned their animals and were making whatever noises came to mind.

Then, before I could help it, I said, “Oink.” I said it again, louder. A few people around me joined in, oinking in different pitches. Some stretched the word out, while others made it a short sound. The guard closed his mouth and looked at us. I heard my wife’s short, sharp, “Oink!” I answered her, “OINK!” and pushed the guy in front of me. He took the hint, and the whole group surged forward. The noise swelled, and I dug my heels in to help push the guard back back back.
The Properties of Holy Grace

Follow Route 250 through Fairmont toward Mannington until the First Exchange Bank. There, take a left onto Buffalo Street and make your way past Red Dot Pharmacy, the Elks, and the taller buildings that once upon a time were storefronts and apartment buildings but are now half empty and ready to fall into Buffalo Creek. Let Hough Park slide past on the left, up toward Grandview Addition. Even there, keep going. The buildings are gone, residential neighborhoods have set in past the park, and the speed limit is still twenty-five. Pass the trailer park on your left, hit Dent’s Run a mile out, but don’t turn up that road. Keep to Route 1, what was Buffalo Street while still in town. Houses are farther apart. Most lie in the middle of farms: horses, cows, and sometimes hay. The speed limit increases to 35, but the road’s too narrow, too bumpy. Then, another eight miles past Dent’s Run, there is a road on your left. No sign at the end, narrow, rutted, shoved between two farms like an afterthought. Take this road, which will lead you up the ridge, past the Underwood farm and through a corner of Dell Roy’s land. Beyond all this, once you’ve reached the highest point you can find, even after the makeshift road has begun to peter out, you’re in Grace.

And at its center is the Holy Grace Church, clapboard with a coat of white paint thin enough to see the grain of the wood underneath. A Christian church, no denomination, just God-
loving and -fearing. Through the red door and toward front.

On the makeshift altar see Maddy Markley. Sixteen but the size of a preteen, she grips the podium while speaking to the crowd in a hushed voice, light brown hair falling across her forehead though she pushes it behind her ear again and again. The congregation leans forward and back, believing then not, repeatedly, as she moves from proclamation to explanation.

Eyes meant for a face twice the size of hers, nose jutting out at a point, she is the type of girl who stands just on the far side of the pretty line. With smaller eyes or a different nose, she could be called interesting but misses it by an inch. Once, she lets go of the podium and touches her stomach, but the rest of the time, her grip is tight. “We believe that Christ’s next coming will be the last, that he’s taking the righteous. That we will go home.” A few shouts of “Amen.” She clears her throat. “But I have to tell you that we’re wrong. God wants us all to know that we’re wrong. And he sent me to tell you.” She stops and wipes a bead of sweat from her brow. Her audience is still and silent for almost ten seconds. The Lord has only spoken through Pastor Gilman, and no one wants to believe this slip of a girl. Murmurs in the crowd. “Through his angel, he spoke to me.” This in a whisper. A few smirks from the congregation, a smattering of whispers, until the pastor half-stands from his chair and sweeps his gaze across the crowd. They are silent again, and Maddy swallows, the sound echoing through the microphone. “A virgin,” she says, “and I’m carrying the second Christ child.”

All rustling stops. A few women who haven’t yet forgotten their old denominations cross themselves. Then, all eyes turn to Pastor Gilman, even Maddy’s. This is his cue, and he’s sitting there, his eyes glued to hers. She tries to read his expression but can’t and wonders if he wants her to say more. But she wouldn’t know what; her speech is done.

As he stands, she backs up, unsure whether she should stay with him or sit down. Then, he grips her hand and pulls her back to the podium. “I asked this little girl to speak first,” he
says, “so that you could hear it straight. I only want to fill you in on the details of how she came to be here.” He puts his arm around her shoulder and hugs her close.

She scans the small crowd and sees her mother who looks, by turn, upset and joyous. Before today, the only other person who knew Maddy was pregnant was Pastor Gilman. And the baby’s father, but he’s gone now.

“Maddy came to me looking for guidance. She didn’t want to believe. No one wants to believe that they’re on this earth to do more than serve their own lives.” His grip on her shoulder tightens, and she leans against him, tired suddenly. It’s been a long week, and now that his voice is moving into sermon mode, she knows it’s okay to let her mind drift. He doesn’t expect her to add anything else; she’s done her job, just as he asked.

When she first went to him, they sat in his little house behind the church, one of only two on the hill. Before her arrival, she told and retold the story in her head. Under his eyes though, her voice slipped into a breathy whisper, her gaze moved across a paisley rug, her story emerged uncertain. She felt as though she were asking him a question, looking for his permission to tell this tale. And in a way, she was. She made it up, and she needed someone to tell her that he believed.

Gilman was the only person she could think of who might take her story at face value. Holy Grace Church had only two members, Ona and Maddy’s mother, before he proclaimed that a great devastation would come down on their little pocket of West Virginia, that men would be forced into unemployment, that families would eat government cheese, that even those who live far out of town in the country of Grace would find that their lives were changed. About a month after this pronouncement, which no one besides Ona and Maddy’s mother had believed, the coal mines began laying men off by the hundreds. Some even closed down, until Mannington and all the outlying areas had turned from coal country to welfare central. After that, the congregation
grew, with people wanting more visions of the future. But Pastor Gilman told them that he did not know the future, only what God told him.

Now, with that pronouncement almost a decade in the past, people had moved away from the church, had gotten used to living off of the government or working at the Walmart for minimum wage. The congregation was shrinking again, and Gilman needed another miracle. If he believed Maddy’s tale, it would save both of them.

“You don’t believe your story,” he said. “You sat in your house and made up this story because you’re afraid. Then, you came out here hoping I might believe you.”

She nodded, afraid that he would now order her out of the house, not sure that she could continue to lie to a preacher. She wasn’t a member of the church, wasn’t religious in any way, but her mom had told her enough stories about fire and brimstone that she was afraid to take her lies too far.

Instead, he nodded and said, “God does work in mysterious ways. You know that, don’t you? I’ve seen you here a few times, with your mom, a wonderful woman by the way.”

Maddy didn’t know where he was going with this, was confused and beginning to get frightened. He either needed to believe or tell her to leave. All his talk of God and how he works made her nervous, as well as how he called her mom a wonderful woman. As far as Maddy could tell, her mom was a holy roller, one of those people who seemed to find herself in out of the way churches, a woman holy to the core who never thought beyond what the Lord had done for her.

“You think you made up your story,” he continued, “but why did you come here? You could have gone anywhere with this story. Or, you could have gotten an abortion, told your mom and hoped for the best. You could have married the father or at least raised the child on your own. But no, you came to me, a man you barely know. This is a sign Maddy Markley. You had too many options, better ones possibly, but you chose Holy Grace Church. God sent
you here.”

She looked at him for the first time as he stared out the window, could see his eyes shine, knew that he was picturing what their church would become. What he would become when people heard that his church was raising the Christ child.

He turned back to her. “You’re bringing something our congregation needs -- a reason to band together and trust in the Lord. We have a lot going for us, but we’re not gaining enough ground yet. And I think you just found the way, yes, you did.” She felt his dry, calloused hand stroke the back of her head. She knew that the church was losing ground, that people drifted away without explanation. She was what he needed. A scared sixteen year old who would follow his alteration of her plan.

“First,” he said, “we need to work on your story a bit. I have faith, enough to see what God has in store for us, but I’m not sure the rest will. We can’t tell everyone that you made up the story. It has to be real. Have you read your New Testament?” She shook her head. “Well, go to it. That’s the first thing you need to do. Not all of it, mind you, but the important parts. You need to know how the angel came down and what it meant. Then, we can reconstruct your story, plan how to tell it to the others.”

She nodded as he explained his plans, ready to let someone else take on her burdens. He gave her a Bible, marked the passages she needed to read. “Rest and read your scripture,” he told her. “I’ll figure out the rest, and we’ll go from there.”

His voice is rising, the crowd leaning forward, and she knows that they are hooked. Pastor Gilman could convince them that he was God if he wanted, she believes. “Our Joseph,” he says, “is on a pilgrimage. He underestimates the power of God and doesn’t understand his ways. But I promise he’ll return when he finds his own way.” She looks up at him and wonders if he believes what he’s saying or if he is using Maddy to get what he wants. She isn’t sure what
she believes, whether she is a gift from God or a scared, pregnant teenager who is using these people for security. She watches a vein pulse in his temple and feels his grip on her shoulders tighten. He does believe, she decides, or at least he understands that this is the only way to let his flock grow.

He said that her Joseph, her boyfriend Troy, would be taken care of, that they didn’t need to worry about him. He was her biggest obstacle, because only he would be able to rat on her. But Gilman knew what to do, what the next steps were. And she didn’t ask. Before she left his house, he said, “Remember Maddy, ends do justify means. We’re not lying to anyone. God sent you to Holy Grace Church, but if we have to change your story a little bit for the rest of them to believe, it’s okay. Keep that in mind, and you’ll never have to worry about anything again.”

Now her part is finished, and he’s taken over. She can feel her eyes closing and is ready to let the congregation do what they want with her. Gilman promised that her worries would be over, that she would be treated like a queen. She knows he’s right, but only almost. Maddy will be treated like a saint. With his stamp of approval, no one will wonder if she slept with Troy Jarvis.

She still questions why he believes in her, knowing that she did have sex with her boyfriend. When she mentioned it, he told her that she had to proclaim herself a virgin on the altar, that sometimes people don’t understand the truth. Somehow, his faith is too strong. He told her that she had to believe, and now she’s doing her best to follow his lead.

His voice is quieter now, ready for the grand finale. She’s been to Holy Grace services too many times with her mom and wonders why no one else sees through Gilman’s charade. They probably don’t want to; she knows there are things too intoxicating to question. “Our Mary is here now, one of us,” he says. “Our job is not to ask why, not to wonder why this isn’t
the final coming of our Lord. Instead, we need to support this girl and make sure that when the Savior is ready to reveal His plan, we’re ready to hear it. And if we do that, each of us will find our place as a member of His flock.”

Maddy can feel the congregation’s intensity, women rocking in their seats, a few men with closed eyes and mouths full of prayer. Gilman pounds on the podium, forcing each word into the air, and then he steps back, wipes his forehead with a handkerchief, and lets go of Maddy’s shoulder. She looks up at him, but his eyes are focused on the back wall. So she steps down toward the front pew, aware every eye in the room is on her.

Over tea in his house, Gilman tells her mom that they will do what they can to build a home for her on the hill. “But for now, Maddy needs to stay here.” Her mom looks at her but pulls her gaze away. “She is the strength of our congregation now, and we can’t have that corrupted. You understand, Mrs. Markley.”

Maddy watches from the other side of the room as her mom nods slowly but doesn’t look convinced. As one of the first members of the congregation, one of the few who stayed with Pastor Gilman through it all, she wouldn’t dare question his words, and so she stands from the chair. Slowly, she makes her way to where her daughter lies on the corduroy couch and kisses her forehead before moving toward the door. She doesn’t say anything or look back, but Maddy sees her lips moving in a silent prayer.

The pastor hasn’t moved and doesn’t look in her direction, so Maddy closes her eyes. Only noon, but she feels like she’s been awake for days. Her mother looked old when she left, what with her long skirts and uncut hair. Maddy knows Gilman stole that from some other holy roller religion -- she’s seen girls in the school hallways dressed the same way, ones who don’t attend Holy Grace. She knows she should have said something to her mom, at least that she’ll
see her next Sunday. But even on the walk from the church to Gilman’s house, she seemed wary of her daughter, as though Maddy wasn’t the girl she was two hours before. And she supposes she isn’t. She’s God’s Maddy now, or at least Holy Grace’s Maddy.

“Come on,” Gilman says, shaking her shoulder. “We need to get you set up somewhere.”

“I’m fine here,” she says.

“No you’re not. What would people think?”

She opens her eyes and looks up at him standing directly above her. “Nothing. They’ll think you’re taking care of me.”

He shakes his head. “They have faith, but not that much. And if rumors start that you’re having my baby, they’ll have even less.” He stops and peers up at the ceiling. “I’ll bet Ona will let you stay at her house. She might even let you have the bed.”

Maddy sits up and says, “Not her. Anyone but her.” Ona was the first person to build a house in Grace. At sixty, she looks older. Her skin is tightly wrinkled, the grooves in her face so deep, she looks like one of those dried apple dolls they sell in souvenir shops. She winds her thin silver hair around her head, bobby pins sticking out in every direction. Holy Grace isn’t as old as the other churches in the area, but Ona followed the rules at some other church well before Gilman even came to Mannington to create Grace -- long hair, no makeup, ankle length skirts, and loose shirts. Maddy wouldn’t be surprised if Pastor Gilman sat down with her to make up the rules before he invited everyone out to Grace.

“Who else is there?” he asks.

And really there is no one else. Gilman in one house, Ona in the other. “Okay,” she says, “Ona it is.”

Not only does she give Maddy the bed, but also the whole bedroom. Ona insists that it’s
the least she can do, that she would move if there were somewhere to go. Instead, she lays a bedroll on the floor of the main room and says she’ll be fine.

The bedroom is painted in the same whitewash as the outside of all the buildings, and Maddy can see that the interior walls are particle board, the pressed chips showing through. Right away she sees that this won’t be as nice as Gilman’s house, where there are plaster walls and thick carpet you can sink your toes in.

The bed is lumpy; instead of a mattress, it’s more of a giant pillow filled with feathers. And Maddy has no doubt that Ona made this by herself, killing each bird for its feathers. Even the head- and footboards look homemade, as though giant trees were felled and then whittled by hand.

She lies on the mattress and looks out the window, the only one in this house. The view is that of the church, the blank western side. It would have made more sense to put the window on another side of the house, what with all the hills and farms around. But she supposes the only thing Ona really thinks about is Holy Grace. She even genuflected when Maddy walked through the door.

Closing her eyes, she knows that now she’ll get to take the nap she’s wanted all day, and Pastor Gilman won’t bother her. She feels the quills poking through the sheet and wonders if she could ask for a real mattress, one from Sears. Or maybe one of the kinds she sees on TV that sit up with the push of a button. She laughs quietly, realizing that this baby will do more than save her.

There is a knock on the door. “Maddy, dear,” Ona calls but doesn’t open it.

“Yes?” she asks and sits up. “Come in.”

As she comes through the door, Maddy sees that she’s repinned her hair and even changed her clothes. In her arms, she carries a tray with milk and cookies. “I remember when my
sister was pregnant,” she says, “and she was hungry all the time. I know you’ve had a long day, so I figured this might do the trick.” She lays the tray on the bed, and Maddy sees that not only has she brought cookies, but that she has an array of them to choose from.

Picking up one that is still warm, Maddy smiles. “Thanks, Ona. I am hungry.”

“Would you like more, you know, something more substantial?”

She is perched on the edge of the bed, ready to be of service, her wrinkles rearranged into a smile, something Maddy’s never seen before. Ona is the church mother, the one woman who speaks for all the others, and Maddy’s noticed that she takes her job a little too seriously.

Maddy knows that she can ask for anything right now and for a long while to come. So she leans back against the wall and says, “Not right now, but I’m sure I’ll need something later.”

She wanders around Pastor Gilman’s living room, running her fingers across the spines of books, touching figurines of Christ, completely ignoring Ona standing in the doorway. Book bag on, Maddy waits for Gilman to come into his living room and tell her that he will drive her to school. Ona has already told her that she will not be going today, but Maddy doesn’t want to stay here. School is not where she would choose to go if anyone had given her a choice, but she wants to see her friends. And that’s where they are. Besides, after one day here, she’s already bored. With only Ona and Pastor Gilman around, there’s no one to talk to. No TV or radio either, both being servants of Satan.

Gilman enters with a tea towel draped over his shoulder. Stepping forward, Ona says, “She wants to go to school. I told her it wasn’t a good idea today, maybe tomorrow.”

Maddy watches as he sits down on the couch and takes the towel from his shoulder. Without looking at her, he says, “Ona, could you leave us alone for a little bit?” She looks at him a moment too long, and Maddy is suddenly sure that she is usually as much in charge of this
religious community as he is. “We’ll only be a minute, I’m sure.”

After Ona walks out the door, her back a little straighter than usual, Gilman waves his hand for Maddy to sit. “I’m fine,” she says, and he sighs again.

“I want you to listen to me,” he says. “What we have here is fragile. People in town are already whispering, and I know a reporter from the *Times West Virginian* is calling up everyone who was at service yesterday. We back down for one minute, and it’s gone. Then there’s no Holy Grace, no grace either. Which means that God’s will won’t be done. I can’t have that. We can’t have that, Maddy. You’re our miracle. You understand?”

Maddy nods.

“I could let you go to school, I could. But if I do, there’s a good chance you’ll be ridiculed enough that even you’ll lose your faith, or maybe someone will try to hurt you and the baby. Any number of things could happen. Then, what we have here,” he raises his hands and then drops them, “all comes crashing down. We’re done.”

“So I’m not going to school?”

“No, Maddy, you’re staying here. For now, this is where you belong.”

She turns from him, starts toward the door, and then turns back. “What am I supposed to do here? You live on a hill with no TV, no kids, no nothing.” Her voice is whiny, her eyes filling with tears, but she wipes them away. She won’t cry, not in front of Pastor Gilman, who has so much faith in her, even when she doesn’t.

“Help Ona,” he says, “or take a walk, clean your room, read a book. Better yet, pray. That’s what we do here -- we pray for God’s mercy.”

Maddy falls into a routine: up and to morning mass by eight, breakfast before midmorning group prayers, to her room for a nap, then lunch. After that, she spends the afternoon walking
the area, winding into the hills that come fall will be full of hunters. Sometimes she lies under a
tree and takes another nap, but usually she wanders through the woods on Dell Ray’s place, the
only one that hasn’t been timbered in recent years. Eventually, she hears Ona calling her home
for dinner. They eat in silence, at Maddy’s request. She gives her mornings to the women who
want to pray over her -- she can’t give the evening too, especially when she doesn’t even know
what to believe. She wants to think that she is helping these people, but if what Gilman said
about her isn’t true, she doesn’t want these people to rely on her too much. When the meal is
finished, she closes herself into her room and opens the window. By sticking her head out far
enough, she can see the road that leads down the hill and back toward civilization, a long road, but
one that eventually leads back into the small town. She looks at it and wonders if she should
return to Mannington. Each dream of leaving is more elaborate than the rest, the kids at school
realizing how cool she is, her mother letting her back into the house and offering to help her with
every aspect of raising her child. Still, these scenarios don’t block out the fact that Pastor Gilman
believes in her and her baby. She may not be sure what the truth is, if she created a story or if
God willed it, but she knows that Grace will die without her. And until she finds her own truth,
she knows she’ll continue to live on this hill where the most exciting part of the day is walking
through the woods and thinking. When her mind drifts toward knowing she has to make a
decision, Maddy lets herself back in the window, lies down, and waits for sleep.

And wonders about Pastor Gilman. Before she came here, she thought he was a fraud,
that he would be happy to take her in and make her a pet project, a fairy tale for everyone to
believe in. Now, she isn’t sure, because if he believes so fully in Maddy, how can she not believe
in herself? She’s realizing that faith is a tricky thing, that you either have it or you don’t. Right
now, Maddy isn’t sure where she stands. The thing is, she wants faith but knows that isn’t the
same as actually having it. Gilman has it, so does her mom and Ona too. The congregation has it,
and more will come. So, she tries to will herself to blindly follow their lead.

At fourteen weeks, her stomach is no longer flat. Not big yet, like she knows it will be, but there’s a slight roundness that was never there before. This is what keeps her here when she doesn’t know what to believe. Besides, she sees her mother more now than she ever did before, as she comes to Grace every morning. If she can’t make it to mass, she takes her lunch break early and heads out for the prayer session. There, all of the women gather around Maddy and pray -- sometimes aloud, sometimes quietly. They aren’t asking her to grant their wishes, but they believe she is a holy object. To them, it’s the same as praying before a statue of the Virgin Mary. To her, it’s a new experience. Never popular in school, being the center of attention is flattering. She doesn’t tell this to Pastor Gilman, because she knows he would disapprove. Still, to herself, she can admit that she likes her new position in the social hierarchy.

That is part of the reason she made up the story. Even without Troy in her life, she could have stayed at home with her mom, raised the child as best she could, taken it to the high school daycare while she was in class, but that’s what everyone did. All the girls who found themselves pregnant were lumped together in school, spending part of their days in the daycare to learn how to care for children. She wouldn’t do that. All through school, she’s been normal. Now, to be able to step out of normal life, to be special in some way, that has a certain ring to it. To not grow up the way most girls in her position do, on welfare or working shitty jobs for next to no pay, wasn’t in the cards.

To leave would be a disaster, putting her back in that boat of the sad, pregnant teenager. Before coming to Grace, she planned to move in with Troy. Then, when they got in a fight, she came up with the story that Gilman believes was willed from God. Either living with Troy or in Grace would put her outside of the sad story all girls in her town lived, but now, she wishes she hadn’t gone through with it, or that she and Troy hadn’t fought. Not that she hates Grace, just
that she doesn’t like not knowing the truth. It would be easier to stay if she knew she was lying, or if an angel really had come down to see her. But neither of those things had happened, and limbo is a difficult place to be.

If she could, she would find Troy and ask him what he thinks, whether God planned their fight and her exile. The problem is that Pastor Gilman only told her that he got rid of her boyfriend, not what he’s done with him. For the past month, Maddy has assumed that she’ll hear from him soon, that he’ll ask people where she is and sneak up to her bedroom window at night. Now though, she realizes that this is a pipe dream. Whatever Gilman said to Troy must have worked.

At night, in bed, she tries not to think of her baby but always does. And those thoughts lead her to remember her old life. She and Troy could have been happy, would have gotten married eventually. At nineteen, he was a mechanic at the Exxon in town and making good money. They would have been fine, and if it hadn’t been for that fight, they would be living in his little apartment above Snider’s Florist waiting for the baby. Instead, Maddy cries herself to sleep, imagining every possible way her life could have gone if not for that fight, if Gilman didn’t tell her that the hand of God was upon her.

“You’re not doing anything,” Gilman says. He and Maddy are on their way to town, her first trip back since she got to Grace. “You walk, sleep, and eat. And that’s not helping Holy Grace.”

“Everyone seems to think me and my baby belong to the church. Isn’t that enough?”

“You offered yourselves. Don’t try to pretend you didn’t.” His voice is gruff, but it changes quickly, coming out more softly. “God chose you, Maddy. He asked you to offer yourself.” She watches as he drums the palms of his hands on the steering wheel and wonders
why he seems so nervous.

Since she came to Grace, he’s been calm, always has the right answers. His faith in Maddy has been beyond question. Now though, he won’t look at her. His eyes never leave the road, as though he isn’t sure of the way. Maybe he has doubts too, she thinks.

“I know I offered myself, but I didn’t know you’d keep me under lock and key.”

“We’re keeping you safe, Maddy. That’s all.”

What is there to be kept safe from? She heard that the newspaper articles mock her and Holy Grace, but that doesn’t mean someone will try to hurt her. Mannington is too small a town for something to happen.

“Not just you safe,” he says, “but your faith too. I see the look in your eye, and I know you wonder if you’re supposed to be here or not. I know you don’t trust me and that you’re not sure if it’s God’s hand on your shoulder or my own. When you believe, you’ll be safe. Not before.”

She nods and realizes that he sounds sincere, not that he hasn’t before. It’s just that he usually talks about the baby inside her, not about her.

“Listen,” he says, “I want to talk to you about something else too. Since you came to us, we have twice as many people in church on Sundays. And word is that more people are thinking of coming back. We’re regaining ground.

“The big problem is that some of the people who’ve been here since the beginning want to live in Grace, to give up what they’ve been doing. It’s possible, but right now we don’t have space for anyone. Besides the church and two houses, we need the rest of the room for cars to park. You with me?”

She nods but doesn’t like the way he always asks this, as though his ideas are bigger than she can grasp. It always reminds her that he thinks of her as a child, that she may be the center
of Grace, but she’s still sixteen.

“Dell Roy has all that land, but the Lord knows he won’t sell it to us. We invited him down before you came along, and he showed up for mass but never came again. Now though, we have something to offer him: you.”

“What do you mean offer me?”

He glances at her. “Not like that. What kind of person do you think I am?”

“I don’t know,” she says, truthfully. “I just don’t know what all you want from me.”

“I only want what you can give. Right now, you can have anything you want. What I ask isn’t too much. Besides, you wouldn’t want to be in town now.”

“Why not?”

He is silent for a minute and then lets out a long breath. “There’s talk. That’s part of the reason people want to move out here for good. We’re the laughingstock of Mannington, you especially.” Gilman speeds up as the road shifts from dirt to blacktop. “You’ll be surprised when we get to the doctor’s. People are going to stare at you. A few might say things, laugh.”

She hears the pleasure in his voice and sees the corners of his mouth drawing up in a small smile. “That’s funny to you?”

“No,” he says. “Not at all. It’s just that the congregation’s ignoring them. We’re getting stronger, Maddy. Already. I didn’t expect it to happen so quickly, but it is. Those nonbelievers will see it sooner or later. Then they’ll stop laughing.”

“No they won’t. What if they’re right, that you’re lying to me?” She takes a deep breath. She’s not sure that she believes what she’s saying, but there’s something in his manner she doesn’t like, the glee he’s finding in the people who don’t think like he does. “I could tell them what I think tomorrow, that it’s a hoax, all of it.”

The car slows, and he turns in his seat to look directly at her. “No, you won’t, because
it’s not a hoax. Maybe it’s not enough that I believe, but as soon as you got up on the altar and everyone else believed you, it became true. Whether it was true before then doesn’t matter. Now it is.”

Gilman is right about Mannington. They have to park a block away from the doctor’s, and she sees people looking at her, some turning away, but others staring without bothering to hide it. She wants to yell at them, ask them what’s so interesting, but Gilman has a tight grip on her shoulder, guiding her down the sidewalk, not giving her time. She looks up at him and sees that his face is rigid. He doesn’t glance at the people around them. Even when someone yells out to them, he pretends not to hear.

She sees a group of her friends standing in the doorway of Malone’s, all watching her silently. “Hey,” she calls, but Gilman’s grip tightens. And none of her friends answer; they look but say nothing. Only when they get through the door does his grip loosen.

Maddy slouches in a padded chair and watches as Gilman goes to the reception desk to announce her arrival. He starts to fill out a form, turns to her and asks, “How many weeks?”

“Sixteen.”

And he turns back. She doesn’t know what he’s putting on the form, but at least he’s paying for this visit. She hasn’t been to the doctor since she first found out she was pregnant, and then she had to hitch a ride to the free clinic in Fairmont.

On his way back to her, she sees two or three women in the office peek through the little window. When they see that she’s watching at them, their eyes move away quickly, as though they were really looking at something else.

“You saw them, didn’t you?” she asks. “I said hi, and they didn’t even answer. Troy was right. They are bitches.”
Gilman lays his hand on top of hers. She feels his fingers wrap around her own and then begin to tighten slowly. Once she starts to feel the pain, he whispers, “Watch your mouth. There’s no need for smut. Besides, everything we do today is going to be talked about for the next week.” He lets go, and she sees the blood rush back into her fingers. He sees it too and looks away. She wonders what he’s thinking now, whether he’s sorry, or if he thinks she deserves whatever she gets. He puts his hand on her head and runs his fingers down her hair. She guesses this is his apology but doesn’t say anything, just moves her hand into her lap.

After Sunday’s service, she stands beside Gilman to shake everyone’s hand as they leave the church. A few touch her stomach; all seem to be more interested in her than the pastor, though he doesn’t seem to mind. She figures he’s happy to give up his role for the miracle that they’re awaiting.

When the parking lot chatter has ceased and everyone’s in their cars, Gilman turns to her. “Come over to my house. We have to finish our conversation.”

He puts his arm around her shoulders to guide her, but Maddy pulls free. “I can’t. Ona and I are making cookies.”

“I’ll be quick.” He takes her arm and starts to pull her toward his house. She doesn’t want to go, doesn’t completely trust him after the way he grabbed her hand in the doctor’s office. She knows she could fight him, call out to Ona, but if the pastor’s caught manhandling the holy object, people might start asking questions. Then she would just be another pregnant teenager again. At this point, her mother’s gotten so wrapped up in her as the mother of God that she seems to forget that Maddy is her own daughter. And there’s still no word from Troy.

Maddy stops resisting and follows him across the dirt path to his house. Once he’s done telling her whatever it is he wants this time, she’ll get her chance to ask about Troy. If Gilman
did something to him, she’ll know why he hasn’t come to get her. And if he didn’t do anything, well, she guesses she’ll know why then too. Because without Gilman’s faith, she feels more like a fraud everyday.

“Can’t I tell Ona I’ll be a few minutes?” She glances back at the house where Ona disappeared just after the service. Cut off from everyone, Maddy is beginning to realize that she likes the old woman she lives with. Last night, they even talked during dinner. Maybe they didn’t talk about things she’s interested in, but at least Maddy got a chance to have a normal conversation without someone waiting for her to proclaim the will of God.

“She’ll figure out where you are. Besides, I thought you didn’t like her.”

Maddy doesn’t answer, instead speeds her step so that she reaches his door first. Going in before him, she turns and says, “Why do you believe in me? Where does your faith come from?”

Now, he chooses to ignore her, moving over to his recliner while she plops herself onto the couch. She runs her nails over the grooves in the material, liking the zzz zzz sound it makes.

“From God, Maddy,” he says. “If you believe in the Lord, the answers will come.”

“What if I can’t believe?”

“Then you try harder. That’s all. You pray and ask for God’s guidance. And when you’re ready for it, He’ll give it to you.”

She doesn’t say anything, isn’t sure whether this is a rebuke toward her or not.

Gilman clears his throat and says, “We need to finish the conversation we had in town last week, where I told you that you need to help me out. Remember Dell Roy?”

She nods.

“That land of his that you like so much, we need it. And I figure since he came here once, maybe he’d be willing to come again. Like I said before, we have more to offer now.”
“Me,” she says and stops running her nails across the corduroy.

“Not you really, just the idea of you. The idea of salvation coming from you.”

“Why would he care?”

“Because he’s looking to be saved. Everyone knows that. He’s visited every church in Marion county, just waiting for something to come down and tell him that this is the right place. Doesn’t even matter what religion it is, as long as God’s in there somewhere.”

She sighs. Whatever he wants her to do, she will. That’s the way it is here, the thing her life has turned into. No school, why not? Don’t leave Grace; who would want to anyway? Loose shirts and long skirts -- at least they’re cool now that spring is turning into summer.

He watches her, so she nods her head for him to continue.

“I’ve talked to him already, and he invited you to dinner Thursday. I told him how you like to walk through the woods on his land, how you talk about it all the time.” She starts to object, but he holds up a hand. “I know you don’t talk about it, but you like it, don’t you? Whenever Ona is looking for you, she always finds you there, never over on the Underwood place, always there. It’s the same as talking about it all the time.

“Anyway, Thursday at six, Ona will drop you at his doorstep, and you’ll eat and talk about that wonderful land of his. Maybe even invite him up to services on Sunday.”

“That’s all?”

“For now, yes. The rest will come.”

“I’ll do it on one condition.”

He raises his eyebrows and smiles a little. She knows this is probably the wrong thing to do, to tell him what she will and won’t do after his faith has carried her so far, but she doesn’t know how else to get Gilman to answer.

“Tell me what you did with Troy.” His smile grows. “What’s so funny?” she asks, and
his smile is gone.

He looks at her and then away. “Why should that be important? If you have faith, it
doesn’t matter.”

She shrugs and looks away from him. What she lacks is the only problem Holy Grace
has.

“I told him the truth, that he would get in the way here,” he says. He’s somber now,
leaning toward Maddy. “Then, I gave him a little pocket money, and that shut him up. All I told
him was to leave. And, poof, he’s gone.” He holds his closed fists in front of her face, and at the
word poof, he spreads his fingers, his hands open and empty. “It’s for the best anyway,” he
says when he looks at her. “Someone who would leave you for five hundred bucks isn’t worth
having, now is he? He can’t really be your Joseph.”

He’s leaning close to her, and she can feels his breath in her face. The tears are coming;
they burn behind her eyes. Quickly, so he won’t see, she says, “Can I go now?” And she’s
already standing, moving when he nods. Through the door and down the stairs, out into the air,
across the grass, around the church, and now she’s in Ona’s house. Her skirt tangled between her
legs, she sits on a chair to unwind it, to make sure it covers her ankles.

The tears are still there, but she’s pushed them back a little, knowing they’ll come out
tonight but not before. She takes a deep breath and says, “Time to make cookies?”

Ona is propping her bedroll against the wall, her back to Maddy. “I wonder about our
pastor,” she says. “He likes his little talks with you quite a bit.”

Maddy watches her but doesn’t respond. She knows Ona expects a rundown of their
conversations, that she’s not used to being kept in the dark.

“Is he having a crisis of faith, dear?” She’s looking at Maddy now, her hands on her hips,
a crease of worry on her brow.
Maddy wants to laugh. She thought Ona had figured out the truth, but no. Actually, if
the church mother believes in her so much that she’s willing to question Gilman, Maddy sees that
even without faith, she can make it here.

Of course, that’s if she decides to stay. Troy is out of the question now, the boy who
would give her up for less than a month’s pay. But it’s Dell Roy’s land that worries her. She
knows what Gilman will do if he gets his hands on it. Her source of comfort will be gone,
particle board houses standing in place of the trees where she can lose herself everyday.

Besides, she likes Dell Roy. Not that she’s ever talked to him, but she sees him working
in the fields sometimes. She waved at him once, and he waved back. For the most part though,
she stays hidden in the trees, sometimes watching him when he can’t see her. Over seventy,
according to Ona, and he still works the land, putting all his weight behind the Rototiller to plow
his garden, keeping the grass near his house mowed, separating it from the fields beyond. He
smiles a lot too; working alone, he always seems to be happy, whistling or singing to himself.

“He’s worried is all,” Maddy says. “I don’t think he realized how much faith there
would be. It scares him a little.”

Ona shakes her head. “I knew when I met him he might not have enough backbone. Well,
it’s too late now. Besides, God must think he has enough of something to send you here.”

Monday night, and someone’s outside. She hears feet crunching the bushes under her
window, heavier and more deliberate than the deer that sometimes come close to the house.
Maddy sits up in bed, looks, but it’s too dark to make out anything. She wishes she’d closed
and locked the window before bed.

“Who’s there?” she calls, her mind moving through a list of names from town who Gilman
said have a grudge against the church and her in particular. She’s even seen some of the letters
that tell her she’s going to hell for her lies.

The rustling stops, and she hears a voice whisper, “Maddy?”

She knows this voice but can’t place it, so she slides her feet over the side of the bed and moves to the window. To the side of her window stands Troy, wearing his Exxon cap over stringy, blonde hair. In a minute, she is over the ledge, her nightgown hitched above her knees, and standing beside him. He reaches for her, but Maddy pulls away. “What do you want?”

“Shhh,” he says, and she realizes that her voice is much too loud. If Gilman sees them, who knows what he’ll do.

“Well?” she whispers.

“You,” he says, then stops. He pulls off his hat and wipes his forehead. He looks at her face, down at the bulge in her stomach, then back. “I want you to come with me.”

“Where?” she asks and tries not to think that he abandoned her. After all, Troy was her other path, being married and happy and not worrying about being like all the other girls in town. Where they raised their kids alone, she’d have someone, would create a home and family.

“Morgantown for now. That’s where I’ve been. When I save up some money, we’ll go somewhere else.”

“Why now? Why not a month ago?” And suddenly her anger is back, Gilman’s words in her head.

“That guy made me leave.” He is whining, looks down at the ground and kicks a rock with the toe of his sneaker.

“Gilman gave you money, and you just run out on me? And I’m supposed to forget that? Do you know what I’ve been doing here? Women stand around me and pray everyday. I’m special for getting knocked up.” Her voice is rising. Troy is watching her, his eyes wide, but he doesn’t tell her to be quiet. “They write down every word I say, thinking my words are the
same as God’s. I don’t know what the truth is anymore, and now you’re back to collect me? It’s that easy, is it?”

“He didn’t give me any money.”

“He gave you five hundred dollars.”

“No, he told me if I stuck around he was going to charge me with statutory rape.”

Maddy looks at Troy and tries to see if he’s lying, but she knows he’s not. Gilman has a stubborn streak in him, one that made him squeeze her fingers to shut her up, one that told her ends justify means. “He said that?” She’s whispering again, her voice gone.

Troy nods. “Will you go?”

She wants to say yes but wonders what will happen to Grace and the church. It’s silly, she knows, but there’s something to be said for living for a goal, to have a place in something so large. And life may be boring here, but at least she knows what to expect.

Standing with her arms wrapped around her chest, Maddy remembers Dell Roy and his trees, so grown that you can’t even see daylight when you’re in far enough. The way her feet sink into the rotted leaves and the bugs that eat at fallen trees.

“Okay,” she says, and Troy is kissing her then. She wraps her arms around him and breathes in his smell of grease and motor oil. Before, she missed him and his promises to take care of her and the baby. Now, she realizes that this is what she wanted, the smell of him, the way he comes home from the garage with black hands that won’t come clean no matter how much he scrubs.

Next to her window, she hears a knock on the bedroom door and jumps back from Troy. “Maddy?” Ona calls. “Are you okay? Did I hear something?”

Maddy leans in the window and calls, “I’m fine Ona. A nightmare.”

“Can I get you something?”
“No, I’m fine.”

And hopes Ona doesn’t open the door to make sure, but then she hears, “Okay, sleep well.”

She turns back to Troy. He’s stepped back against the edge of the house, ready to bolt.

“I need to go in.”

“I thought you were coming with me.”


“Why not now?” he asks, and he’s suddenly the boyfriend she had before, the one who always wanted to know why she did what she did, who never liked to hear her disagree.

“Because they believe in me.”

“Who cares?”

“I do. I don’t want to sneak out without making sure they understand. Don’t worry. Come back tomorrow night at eleven, and we’ll go. I promise.” She kisses him again and heads back toward the window. But she can’t get up on her own. It was much easier getting down, to let her body slide out. Then Troy is boosting her, pushing her up toward the window, and she knows that he understands and will be back tomorrow, that they will leave Grace and disbelief behind.

She’s hasn’t come to his house on her own since that first visit when she told him her plan. Now, she’s sitting in his recliner, waiting for Gilman to get back from visiting someone in Mannington. He told her he’d be free at noon, so she let herself in without waiting for his return.

She leans back and closes her eyes, pictures the little apartment she and Troy will have. Once, she and her mom went to Morgantown to buy benches for the church. She remembers the little store on High Street, the way it was tucked into the bottom of a tall, brick building. The
guy who rang them up told her there were apartments up above, that students lived in them. She hopes Troy has one of those, where she can look out the window and see all the foot traffic moving down High Street, people peering into stores that line the bottoms of apartment buildings.

“Maddy,” Gilman says, and she opens her eyes to see him standing over her. “Is everything okay?”

She shrugs, not sure how to tell him that her life is fine now but that his won’t be. Then she wonders whether that matters. After all, he lied to her about why Troy left. Who’s to say he isn’t lying about his faith in her?

He sits on the couch and leans forward. “Tell me what’s wrong. I’m supposed to go out again in a few minutes, but that can wait.”

“I’m thinking about leaving,” she says. “I don’t believe. I’ve tried to, but I don’t think I ever will.”

“It’s more than that,” he says.

She looks down at her hands in her lap and says, “I want a normal life.”

“No you don’t.”

“Why not?”

“You’d leave here and realize that you don’t even know what normal is. Should you get married? Or raise your kid on welfare? Maybe get your mom to help you out? What if you realize that Grace is the most normal place you’ve ever been?”

“But this isn’t normal.”

“Then what is?”

He’s looking at her, and she wants to turn away from him but doesn’t. It’s like staring down a cat -- if you look away first, it will never do a thing you say. “A family is normal. If I
leave, I can start one.”

“What do you think this is? People love you and your baby. You have a community that will help you through every step. Just because it’s not a mom and dad and little kids doesn’t mean it’s not a family.”

Now she looks away, knows that he is right. Troy is her baby’s father, but she isn’t sure how much of a dad he’ll be. And she doesn’t know the first thing about taking care of a baby. Here, everyone will help her, and everyone will love the baby.

“Anyway, it’s too late,” Gilman says. “We’re in too deep. You came to me; I didn’t come to you. You belong here, at Holy Grace.”

She feels anger welling up, wonders how much of this conversation has been the same thing he uses in his sermons, a trick of words to make everyone believe what he wants. She wonders who she can trust, whether Troy or Gilman will offer her a life worth living. “I think I need to leave,” she says slowly. “I don’t have what you need.”

“You are what we need,” he says. She looks at him, again wants to know where his faith comes from, whether it’s real or not.

“I should rest, think about this.”

She stands, and he does too. Then, Gilman does something he never has before and pulls her into a hug. He rocks her back and forth but doesn’t say anything. She doesn’t mean to, but Maddy wraps her arms around him and buries her face in his chest.

She’s lying in bed with her clothes and shoes on, her blankets scattered. Below the window sits a plastic garbage bag filled with everything she owns. She’s been looking out every few minutes for the past two hours, since Ona went to bed. The clock says it’s ten after eleven, and she wonders if Troy changed his mind. As she worries over this, she hears him smashing the
bushes again.

This morning after prayer group, Ona mentioned her flattened shrubbery to one of the other women but didn’t connect it to the noise last night. Even tonight when Maddy gave her a hug before bed, she didn’t question it. And that had never happened before. Up until now, Maddy has been careful about keeping herself to herself. But she doesn’t know if she’ll ever see Ona again, and it seemed like the right thing to do.

“Maddy?” Troy whispers. She can barely hear him through the closed window, tries to remember why she closed it before bed. He pecks at the window with his fingernail, but she doesn’t turn to him.

Instead, she closes her eyes. “Wake up,” she hears him say, a little louder now. “It’s time to go.”

Again, he taps on the window, but she can’t get herself to move, can’t go to him. In her mind, she sees what life will be like with him, a little apartment, beer and football with friends, her raising the baby and any others that come along in the future, him working in a garage for the rest of his life, her only job to take care of their children. She hears Gilman asking her what normal is. She wonders what faith really is. “Maddy,” he says, his voice rising more. She hears him try to lift the window, but she locked it before she lay down.

Now, he pounds on the glass with his fists, and she’s afraid it will break, that he will reach in and pull her out. She holds her breath, listens as he says her name again, then waits until Troy stops calling for her, until his hands no longer try to get through the window and take her away. When all is quiet, she breathes.
Unpainting a House

Harold Greene watched from behind the screen door as a car crept up the dirt road trailing a cloud of dust so thick he could see it in the starlight. In his arms was a twelve gauge, loaded, with the safety off. A black Cadillac, old enough that it had little fins above the tail lights, made its way up the drive, carefully swerving to miss the holes he hadn’t filled with gravel.

He slid behind the door frame as the headlights rounded the final curve and shoved the barrel through a hole at the edge of the screen. The driver gave one last bit of gas before pulling in beside his truck and switching off the engine. The headlights went out, leaving orange spots across his vision. He tried to make out shapes in the darkness, but his eyes were old and the spots danced wherever he looked. Instead, he yelled, “Who’s there?” It came out more a shaky question than a harsh demand. He cleared his throat to try again but heard a girl yell, “Dad, it’s me. Marie. Put the gun down.”

His hands shook as he lowered the gun and shoved it under the couch, leaving the butt of the stock peeking out. “Marie?” he asked, stepping out onto the porch. The girl, now a woman of thirty or more, walked up the steps with her head tilted to the side, her mouth set in a thin line. Behind her, two kids stood beside the car but didn’t come closer.

A duffle bag in hand, Marie stood in front of Harold without saying a word, her arms
down at her sides. She’d gained weight since the last time he’d seen her, more than ten years, and her pants pulled across her hips. As a child, she’d always been tiny, but Harold had sworn she was a Greene through and through and would grow so her hips were the biggest thing on her. Even now, she wasn’t too big, just filled out where she never did in high school. And her face seemed worn, too old for someone that young.

“How are you, Dad?” she asked.

“Fine,” he said, his voice clipped. “What are you doing here?”

“I thought it’d been long enough. Besides, it looks like you need some human interaction.”

“Why?” he asked before turning and walking into the house. He let the screen door slam behind him, but she pulled it open and followed him in.

“For one thing, you answer your door with a shotgun in your hands.”

“You come out here in the middle of the night and expect me to go to the door empty handed?”

“Dad, it’s ten at night.”

“This is a farm. Night starts when the sun goes down.”

She sighed. “I didn’t come out here to fight first thing. I wanted to see how you are.”

“Well, I’m fine,” he said, shoving a chewed cigar between his teeth. “Now, you can go.”

He sat back in his recliner and closed his eyes. Marie didn’t say anything, but he didn’t hear the door slam behind her either. He opened his eyes. She stood in front of the chair with her hands on her hips. “What’re you still doing here?”

“I wanted to talk to you,” she said. “Hasn’t it been long enough?”

“Since what?”

“Dad, I’m worried about you.” She squatted in front of his chair, her knees popping, and
laid her hand on his knee. He jerked back, his reflexes faster than he thought. She took her hand back and stood above him again. “Okay, I see. We’re still holding grudges. I think I have a little more right to than you, but...” She shrugged and held her hand up when he started to argue. “Can we at least spend the night?”

He watched her for a minute, unsure how to answer. In a way, he missed the girl. In another, he never wanted to see her again.

“One night, Dad. I drove fourteen hours, and the boys are tired. The least you can do is put us up for a night.”

He knew they were her kids but couldn’t turn it over in his mind. Too many years had passed, and somehow he couldn’t connect this woman with the girl who’d left this house years ago. “You can have your old room. It’s like you left it. You should all fit on the bed; it’s big.”

She nodded. “We’ll talk in the morning, okay?”

“I suppose,” he said, wishing his voice didn’t sound quite so gruff. She went to the door, opened it, and walked out. Harold waited, his muscles still taut from the exchange with his daughter. If he didn’t approve of the kids, out they’d all go. He didn’t care how far she’d driven. But when she came back in, the kids were both towheaded, and they nodded shyly before turning toward the stairs. The smaller one even had Harold’s beak nose. He should have said hi, at least introduced himself as their grandpa, but he couldn’t. They were strangers. Marie didn’t look at him, but he watched her move up the stairs, her backside pushing side to side like it had since before she even had hips to wiggle.

Marie woke to the sound of horses neighing below her window. The boys were still asleep, laying spread eagle across the bed. She pushed the covers away and looked at the room. When the door creaked open the night before, she’d realized that it had been closed all these
years, that the room really was as she’d left it. The bed was unmade, and all the clothes she’d left behind were still strung across the floor. The night stand and dresser were covered with a thick membrane of dust, and the wood floor was matted with gray fuzz balls. It was like her dad had left a shrine to her, as though she wouldn’t change as long as her room didn’t.

Peering out the window, she spied her father lifting buckets of grain from the bin behind the barn and dumping them on the ground. The horses shoved each other aside, swishing their tails, and the strong ones bit the weaker ones when they got too close. A colt nipped at her dad’s hand, and he yelled, “Yaw!” and slapped its muzzle. Abashed, the young horse took a step back and watched him until he dumped a bucket at its feet. Then, it munched happily until one of the older ones finished its own pile and butted it out of the way. Her father stood back, surveying his six horses. He slapped one on the side and then took to stroking its sleek back and whispering in its ear.

She used to do this when she was in high school, get up early to watch him feed the horses. Where he was gruff with his daughter, his voice always a gravelly growl, he spoke in soothing tones to his horses, full of patience. She pushed the curtains closed and stepped back from the window, angry at the horses for getting a better greeting than she did. The horses, even though he had six of them, were for fun -- “hobby horses” he called them. He rode them around the farm, up and down trails that had been beaten clear by their hooves.

She looked down at the boys, Stephen and Dustin, wondering whether to wake them. But it was early still, and they’d had a long day yesterday. She hadn’t even told them they were leaving until the night before, then had them pack their suitcases for a trip. They were excited at first, but when they saw that their dad wasn’t coming, she could see their confusion grow. Then, all the way down yesterday, she’d been bombarded with questions and bickering. Fourteen hours of it. Now, she needed a little peace and quiet and would let them sleep until she figured
out what her next move was.

She shook the dust from a robe on the bedpost, then made her way downstairs. In the kitchen, three plates sat on the table covered by oily napkins. She peered under one and saw an assortment of breakfast foods: bacon crisped to the point where it was almost black, fried eggs freckled with pieces of bacon from the grease, an apple sliced lengthwise with the core removed, a bagel covered in cream cheese, and a piece of french toast. The back door slammed, and she dropped the napkin on the plate.

“Eat up,” her father called from the back porch as he unlaced his boots. Marie was still standing beside the chair, her hand poised over the plate when he came in the kitchen. “I didn’t know what you wanted, so’s I made a little of everything.” She still didn’t move, unsure how to take this gesture. “Don’t wait for me,” he said. “I ate hours ago.” **When you were still asleep,** she added in her mind. He always used to say that instead of calling her lazy. But he didn’t say anything else, just pushed his way past her.

She sat at the table and lifted the napkin. The grease had congealed on the bacon and eggs, but she ate every bit and washed it down with a cup of bitter coffee. Yesterday, they’d left Portland, Maine at six in the morning, but she had no appetite when they’d stopped to eat. She was anxious to see her father, to show him that she’d made out just fine even if he had thrown her out of the house. She also wanted to know the truth about her mother. There were stories around town, a few different versions of one or two, but she never really knew. And her dad had never mentioned it, always pretended that her mother had never existed.

Her husband had helped her get the kids up before they left. As she got into the car, Marvin asked her, “You sure you want to do this?” but she hadn’t answered. Instead, she offered her cheek for a kiss and then pulled out of the driveway. It was unfair really, the way she was leaving her husband, but when she looked in the rearview mirror as she drove down the road,
she saw his arms wrapped around his chest offering no last wave goodbye. He must know that she was thinking of leaving him, even if she hadn’t said anything. That was the way things were when you lived together as long as they had, where you could almost read the other person’s mind and didn’t need to know what their exact plans were, because you could always get the gist of it just by how they acted.

“Marie,” her father called. “You down there?”

She pushed herself back from the table and headed toward the voice.

Harold clicked the mouse, not sure which button did what. He’d figured out how to turn the damn thing on, but he couldn’t make it do anything. All those little pictures on the screen and the bright blue background made his eyes water if he looked at them too long.

“How’d you get this thing to work?” he asked when he heard her footsteps behind him. He felt the warmth of her right behind his head and leaned forward a little. “I want to do that online thing.”

“When did you get a computer?”

“Last week. I bought it. Now, how do I work it?” He clicked all the little pictures, and boxes opened, but he had no clue what any of them were.

“Well, what’re you trying to do?” she asked, pulling a chair up beside him.

“Sampson told me about a web site. I want to see it.”

“Scoot over,” she said.

He pushed his chair over and watched as she clicked on picture after picture, as he’d done. “You don’t know what you’re doing either,” he said.

“Be quiet. I’m trying to get you online.”

He watched as she read all the little boxes, checked the back of the machine, pushed wires
in, pulled others out. Sprawled across the floor, she looked like the eighteen-year-old girl he’d
tipped out so long ago. He wished he hadn’t spoken so harshly last night, that he hadn’t told her
to leave, that he’d given his grandsons a hug.

“Where does the phone line connect?” she asked, her voice muffled behind the desk.

“What phone line?”

She scooted out and looked up at him from the floor. “You don’t have internet access, do
you?”

“What’s that?” he asked. She lay her head back on the carpet, and closed her eyes.

Harold watched her belly quake with laughter, but none of it made it to her mouth. She lay there
and didn’t say a word. And he still had no clue what she was talking about.

She didn’t know whether to laugh or yell at him, so instead she lifted her head and looked
at him. He’d gotten old since she’d been away. His hair was full gray now, his arms so bony
they looked like a little pressure would snap them off. But his beak nose still stood prominent
on his face, maybe more so because his face was much thinner now. “My kids are eight and ten,
you know,” she said.

He looked startled by this realization, as though he thought her life stopped when she left
home. “What are their names?” he finally asked.

“Stephen and Dustin. I let them sleep in. It’s been a long few days.”

She started to rise, but then he asked, “Why did you bring them?” She dropped back on
the ground.

“Because,” she said. “I wanted you to see them, to see me. To see that I didn’t fuck
things up like you thought I would.” He winced at the word, and she wondered if he still
expected her to be the teenager he’d last seen. “I’m a school teacher now, and the boys and I are
“on summer break. My husband Marvin stayed in Maine, working.” She laid her head back and continued. “I’m thinking about divorcing him. I’m not sure yet, but I thought a little time away might make things clear, you know?” Her intent was to make him angry; she knew her dad didn’t believe in divorce. In fact, as far as she knew, he was still married to her mother, assuming she was still alive. Her dad knitted his eyebrows and scratched his chin, the sign that he was in serious thought, the one she’d always made fun of when she was younger. Now, it was even funnier than then, and she tried to keep her lips folded but smiled in spite of herself. Loving and hating this man at the same time confounded her.

“Is he bad to you?” her dad asked.

“No,” she said. “I just don’t love him anymore.”

He nodded, as though he understood, as though this happened all the time. And she supposed it did, that two people who knew each other for years stopped loving each other, sometimes even stopped liking one another. Became too familiar with the other’s habits to truly understand why they’d ever wanted to build a life together. But she didn’t tell him it was because she thought she was falling in love with another man.

“Now,” she said, turning the conversation before he could ask. “Why do you answer the door with a gun, Dad?”

“Did you see that gray house, bout a half a mile back toward town, on your way in?” he asked. She nodded, ready to stop him if he was going to tell a story with some roundabout answer. “New people moved in there a few months back.” He paused, as if for effect.

“So?”

“A bunch of niggers moved in the house.”

She winced at the word, one that she’d grown up hearing almost every day of her life. Even when they had all the aunts and uncles over for Christmas dinner, that word and others like
it were sprinkled liberally through the conversation. One Christmas, she’d left, simply walked out the door and waited until everyone was gone before she went back inside.

“And what’s wrong with that?” she asked slowly, letting the words seep out with the air in her lungs.

“They’re a dirty breed, Marie. Can’t be trusted.” He said it simply, as though it were common knowledge.

“Since when?” she asked.

He looked confused, said, “Since always.”

“Even before Mom left? Is one of those stories I heard the right one?” she asked, but he turned away from her.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” he finally said.

She pushed herself off the floor and walked to the door. Turning back to him, she saw that he had a far away look on his face, that he was somewhere in the past. “You’re going to have to tell me sometime,” she said. Then, she walked out.

Harold stared at the wall and wondered what Marie knew. They’d never spoken of his wife, and as far was he knew, his daughter had never said Mom before, at least never in his presence. Now, out of nowhere, she was back, a full adult with her own family and wanted to know about Sarah.

Almost, it was too much. But he couldn’t pretend he hadn’t been lonely. Some days, he whiled the day away on the porch, thinking back to those years when he first got married, when his wife’s stomach grew and grew until Marie was there, the way they’d both loved the little girl almost to death. He kind of skipped over the time when Sarah left, when all those stories started around town, but he knew the truth, that she’d left with that nigger who’d done a few chores
around the farm for him. Otherwise, why would the two have disappeared at the same time? Still, he wasn’t sure if she was kidnapped or chose to leave. Most everyone in town decided she’d wanted to go, but Harold never was sure. The boy she’d gone with was a slick type, one who Harold always kept an eye on when he worked within range of the house. Sarah had a wild streak to her, always had, but he didn’t think she would have left Marie.

Whatever the case, after she was gone, his daughter became his to raise, his to make sure she knew to ways of the world, how to spot a loser at half a mile. And when he’d had to kick her out of the house, it almost broke his heart. To have her back now, that was something. But he couldn’t stop picturing her as she was in high school, a good girl who never got into much trouble, the one who brightened up this old farm. Of course, he hadn’t known that until she was gone. Now though, he wanted to relive those years, to keep his daughter safe by his side, explaining to her exactly what had happened to Sarah. He knew he should have told her sooner, should have told her the story on the day he kicked her out. But at the time, all he could see was his wife’s face on his daughter’s body.

“Excuse me,” someone said in the doorway.

Harold turned to see the two boys standing there, hair on end and clad only in shorts. The older one, Stephen, said, “Do you know where our mom is?” The other boy stood behind him, almost shielding himself from Harold.

“She went out, I think,” he said, not sure if he needed to introduce himself or not. The boys continued to look at him without moving. “I’m your grandpa, you know.” They nodded but didn’t move closer. “I made you boys some breakfast, if you want it.” Here, they both nodded, and he saw a way to make them happy. He stood from the chair and walked closer to them. “Let’s go downstairs. I’ll show you.”

At the top of the stairs, Dustin slid his hand into Harold’s, probably a natural response
to his parents. All the same, Harold felt his heart fill a little in that moment.

Marie made laps around the house, the first one a near trot, slowing with each revolution, until she was walking slowly, her breath coming in short gasps. Her father hadn’t come out, and she didn’t hear him or the boys inside. Still, she continued to walk, letting the sweat drip, taking the anger with it. She should have been used to her father by now, but his comments had reminded her of the last time she’d seen him, an incident she doubted would have played out as it did if her mom hadn’t run off. If that’s what happened.

It was an ugly scene, his quiet anger when Marie had returned from a date with a black boy from Fairmont. By the time she got home, he’d already heard. He accosted her when she walked into the house, handed her a suitcase, and told her she had fifteen minutes to pack, his voice a restrained whisper. When the suitcase was full, he drove her an hour to the bus station, silent the entire time. Then, he handed her an envelope with two hundred dollars in it and told her not to come back. She hadn’t talked to him since, until she’d turned up at his house yesterday.

For most of her life, she’d wanted to know about her mom. She never asked her dad when she was home because she knew it was a taboo subject, but when her dad first kicked her out, she spent a while trying to find her and never did. Now, she was afraid that she was turning into her mom and needed to hear the full story from her dad. Then, she could start to make decisions about her marriage.

Marvin didn’t know about Terrence, the new gym teacher this year at school. He’d caught her eye from the very beginning, and after she got to know him, she thought he was the man Marvin should have been. When they’d first met, her husband had a fire to him, and even though part of the reason she went out with him was because she was young and scared, she
stayed for his ability to make her believe that one person could make a difference in the world. He was the one who’d encouraged Marie to go to college at the age of twenty, after two years of waitressing in one of Maine’s resort towns. He’d helped her get loans and scholarships and shown her things she never knew about the world. At the time, he was in his last year of law school and wanted to save the world. His plan was to work against the foresting companies in Maine, the coal companies in Appalachia, anywhere the earth was being raped, as he always said. After only a year of that work, he’d realized there was no way he could support himself on it alone. Then, he’d gotten a job at a law firm, at first still giving a lot of his time to the causes he loved. Now though, he hadn’t done any of that for years. When he first gave it up, she didn’t even know. It had just petered out over time, never a conscious decision but not quite accidentally either. And now that he wasn’t a part of that world anymore, he seemed to have lost the fire he used to have, the one that had drawn her to him from the first time she saw him in the restaurant.

Terrence though, he talked to her about why he was a teacher, about wanting to shape the lives of today’s youth. He told her that he wanted to teach gym not because it was the easiest job but because he worried about the health of kids today, where more and more of them lived off fast food and were obese by the age of ten. His ambition reminded her of the old Marvin, but she hadn’t meant to fall for Terrence. Still, she’d only kissed him, hadn’t really cheated on Marvin. She was determined not to take it any further until she’d made up her mind, which was why she was now running around her father’s house in rural West Virginia.

She needed to know if she was turning into her mom, running off with some random black man and forgetting her past. Of course, she wouldn’t leave Stephen and Dustin behind. But she was afraid there was something about her mom that had made its way into her, and she didn’t want her life to take the same direction. After all, she was still mad at the way her mom had left
her alone with her father, and maybe she would end up doing the same, leaving her boys to
wonder over her choices and curse her in their minds. If that was the case, no matter what she
felt for Terrence, she would push him away. She would tell him no when he asked for her
decision. She would not be the person her own mother was, or at least the person Marie thought
she was from overheard conversations in town.

She stopped in front of the house and let herself lie down in the yard. The light was still
on in the new computer room, but everything else was dark. The air had taken a chill that she
hadn’t noticed while walking, as it was past noon now and the sun was half hidden by the trees
around the yard. She wrapped her arms around her middle and looked at the house. It looked
older now, paint chipping off its sides so that it was more gray than white, the red worn off the
front door, two shutters on the right side gone, giving the house a lopsided effect. She could help
him fix the place up a little, make sure he was okay, find out about her mom, and then head home.
It was a plan, no worse than the previous one, which didn’t go beyond driving from Maine to
West Virginia in one day. She stretched her arms over her head and stood. When her feet met the
ground, she felt like she was home again.

“Dad, the boys and I are going to the store. We’ll be back later,” he heard his daughter
yell before the front door slammed. He was in the computer room again, had watched her while
the boys ate their breakfast. He saw her move around the house and then plop down in the front
yard. He wished he knew what she was thinking then. Of course she hated that word, always
had. But sometimes the truth wasn’t what a person wanted. He knew that, knew it when he’d
kicked her out of the house. He hadn’t wanted to make her leave, but the right thing wasn’t
always what he wanted to do. He’d learned that. It took a long time, but he’d learned it.

After breakfast, Stephen told him he knew how to get Harold online. The boy clicked on
all the right pictures and was in the middle of getting everything started when they realized there wasn’t a phone cord long enough to hook to the computer. He hoped they’d remember to get one at the store. Then, the boys might spend more time up here getting his computer working. He’d liked having them in the room. While Stephen talked his grandfather through each step he took to set up the internet, Dustin told him all about their house in Maine. They were good kids; he could see that his daughter had done a fine job with them. Besides, children were so much easier than adults. He’d never seen these boys before, but somehow he already had their trust.

Once the taillights disappeared on the car, he lifted himself slowly from the chair -- he’d been sitting too long, and his back gave little spasms as he tried to straighten himself. In the end, he settled for being slightly bent at the waist and made his way to the stairs. He walked down slowly, gripping the railing. He was relieved that Marie and the boys weren’t there to watch. If he had a mirror, he knew what he’d see: a gnarled old man hunched over as he crept down a few steps. But seeing, he wouldn’t recognize the man. Somehow, he’d know it was himself, but he’d also push the recognition away. He wasn’t old, only sixty-five, and not in too bad of health if he did say so himself. A few aches and pains, but who doesn’t have that?

He pushed himself to the kitchen for a few aspirin, just so he could straighten up, and then made his way out onto the porch. He didn’t sit but instead pulled himself as straight as he could and held it. The pain was moving up his back, but he tried to ignore it, to pretend it wasn’t there and that he was a young man again. It didn’t work, and he stopped forcing his back into positions it couldn’t hold. He hunched over and held on to the banister. Another pain shot up his back, and he let out a groan without even realizing it. He tried to stand again, but the pain got worse, and he winced.

He took a deep breath and knew what was coming. He hoped Marie would come home soon. He tried to regulate his breathing, to slow it down and make it even, but the pain got
worse, like it had a core and was growing outward and upward from the middle of his back. He never should have sat for that long. He knew his back couldn’t handle it, hadn’t been able to for years. So, he kept his grip on the banister, even though his knuckles were starting to ache, and watched the road. If someone would come up the drive, he could get some help inside where he could lie down and let the pain start to ease out of his system.

He wondered where Marie had gone and if she would hurry to get back. Maybe she’d gone into Mannington for something. If so, she should be back in another few minutes. But, if she’d gone someplace in Fairmont, it’d be a while longer. He continued to stare at the road until he couldn’t see anything, only darkness. Occasionally something moved, probably a deer or fox. He closed his eyes and breathed through his mouth until a spasm passed. When he opened them again, he thought he saw someone moving up the road. Yes, someone was coming toward him. He started to call out and then thought better of it. It could be anyone.

“Hey there,” a woman’s voice called. Harold squinted but couldn’t see her. It was too dark. “Hi,” she said and moved closer.

As she neared the porch, he recognized her, one of those niggers from up the road. He tried to back away, but the pain shot up through his back. He had to grab the banister again.

“I was coming back from Hundred,” she started, but he said, “Go ‘way.”

She was still coming toward him as though she hadn’t heard. “My car landed in a ditch a couple miles back that way,” she said and pointed out past his house. “I was wondering if I could use your phone to call a tow truck.”

“I don’t know you. Get outta here,” he said. His voice was shaking, even though he tried to make it strong. “Get away.”

“I’m your neighbor,” she said as she mounted the stairs. “Alice Graham.” She got closer to him, and he pulled back. But he couldn’t move, couldn’t let go of the banister. The sweat was
pouring down his face now. “You okay, mister?” She peered at his face, and he could hear his breath coming in quick gulps.

“I’m fine. Go on now.” He tried to shoo her away with his hand, but it was shaking, and he needed it to hold himself up.

“You really don’t look too good. Let me get you inside.” She reached for him, and he pulled back and tottered on his heels for a minute before catching his balance. She pulled her hands back. “I’m not gonna hurt you,” she said.

“I don’t need no help from a nigger,” he whispered. He could feel the chills down his back and wanted his gun. Even if he could get it, he didn’t think he’d use it. He was too old for that. But, he could scare her away. He needed help, but not from her, not from anyone like that.

She stood back, her mouth open in a little O. “Well,” she said and rubbed a hand across her forehead. He watched her watching him, and he knew that neither of them knew what to do next.

Marie felt better on her way back from the store. The drive, all the way to Fairmont and back, had cleared her head. On the way there, the boys talked quietly in the back seat, and now they were asleep. The night was full of crickets, and the stars were visible overhead. She missed those things more than she’d realized. And, the trunk was full of paint, enough cans to drag the back of the car down.

When she swung in the drive, her headlights swung onto a strange scene, her father hunched over on the porch, his hands gripping the banister, and a woman a few feet away, watching him. She pulled in beside his truck and jumped out of the car, not bothering to wake the boys.

“Hey,” she called. “Everything okay?”
As she got closer, she could see the white pallor on her dad’s face, the way his shoulder shook. “Dad?” she called, but he didn’t look at her.

The woman turned away from him and walked down the steps. “What’s going on?” Marie asked her.

“It seems your father doesn’t like having me on his porch,” she said. Even in the dark, Marie could see how angry the woman was. She looked back at her father; he was still gripping the banister and shaking. He wouldn’t look at them.

She turned back to the woman. “I’m sorry about him. I’m Marie. Can I help you with anything?”

“Alice,” the woman said and paused before she reached out to shake hands. “I was heading back from Hundred, and my car got hung up a couple miles back. I live up the road a little farther, but I thought I could call a tow truck from your house.”

“Sure,” Marie said. She started toward the house but then stopped. “If you’re in a ditch or something, I could probably pull you out. We have my dad’s truck.” She hooked her thumb toward it.

“I don’t want to cause you any trouble,” Alice said.

“No, no trouble. It’s the least I can do after the way my dad acted.”

Alice nodded.

“Let me get the boys inside first.” She moved toward the car and saw that the backdoor was already open and that Stephen and Dustin were peering out at her with the same questioning gaze they’d had the night before. She wondered how much they’d heard and wished she hadn’t brought them to West Virginia, at least not now. She should have taken care of her relationship with her dad on her own, rather than put them in the middle of it. Now, though, it was too late.

She knelt down in front of them and said, “Everything’s fine. I’m just going to help this
lady get her car out of a ditch, okay?”

Dustin said, “Can we go with you?”

She almost said yes, but both of them needed another good night’s sleep, judging from the circles under their eyes. Besides, who knew what else would happen tonight that might traumatize them? She shook her head and said, “Not this time. You two go to bed, and I’ll be back soon.” It was a testament to how tired they were that neither of them argued. Instead, they started toward the house. She watched them walk past her father with a nod and then into the house.

She turned back to Alice and said, “Let’s go.” They moved toward Harold’s truck.

“Marie,” her dad called from the porch. She continued to walk. “Marie, I hurt my back. I need help inside.”

She looked back at him and saw that he still hadn’t moved. She wondered if he was trying to get her pity, but then she noticed that he didn’t seem normal. He was hunched over, like he couldn’t stand up straight.

“Give me one more minute,” she told the woman and trotted up the steps toward her father.

“Grab hold,” she said and tried to pull him away from the banister. He moved but groaned as he did. Then, he let go of the banister and all his weight fell on her. She didn’t expect such a small man to be so heavy and almost collapsed under his bulk. She tried to take a step but couldn’t move.

She looked out at the woman in the yard. “Can you help me? He’s too heavy. I can’t move him.” The woman hesitated but only for a second before heading toward the porch.

“Not her,” her father hissed.

“Shut up. If you don’t want to stand out here all night, just shut up.”
“Get the boys. They can do it.”

“No,” she said. “They’ve had a long enough day without having to deal with you.”

Alice pulled his arm around her shoulder, and Marie could feel her load lighten. They pulled him slowly, ignoring Harold’s grunts and the way he tried to shift himself toward Marie. When they got inside, Marie pointed at the door off the living room. “We’re not going to get you upstairs, Dad. This will have to be good enough for now.” They lowered him onto the spare bed, and Alice left the room without saying anything.

Her father started to open his mouth, but Marie held her hand up. “Not now. We’ll talk later. And don’t call for the boys. They’re sleeping.” He closed his eyes, and she moved out of the room.

Alice was waiting for her on the porch. “Thanks. And I’m sorry about him.”

The woman waved away her apology as they walked through the yard. When they got in the truck, Marie looked at the woman for the first time. They were about the same age, but Alice looked younger. Her skin was smooth, and her makeup seemed to compliment all her features. Marie looked down at her own shirt covered in crusty sweat splotches from her run earlier. Her hair had been in a ponytail, but she could feel strands falling down her neck and around her face. She must look a mess; she tried to smooth her hair back but gave up. “It’s been a long day,” she said as she put the truck in reverse and pulled onto the road.

Harold closed his eyes but couldn’t sleep. He was still shaking. The nerve of that woman, walking up on his porch like she owned the place. And Marie for asking her help. Her hands were cold on him, and it wasn’t his imagination. They were cold. He could feel them right through his shirt.

The pain was starting to ease now that he was lying down, but he didn’t try to move. He
stayed in the same position the two women had put him in and willed the pain to go away. It eased a little, but he knew moving would make it come back.

He kept his eyes closed and listened for noises outside. He tried to think about something, but his mind returned again and again to the pain and to that woman. So, he cleared his head by listening for noises coming in from outside: the breaking of a branch somewhere, probably caused by a deer; the constant buzz of crickets down by the stream. The wind howled a little as it passed through the cut behind his house. He lulled himself into a stupor by listening and trying to discern which noise belonged to what animal.

Then, a new sound, a far off rumble. He held his breath and tried to figure it out until he realized that it was his truck coming back. And Marie.

He opened his eyes when the headlights moved across his wall but closed them again when he heard her steps on the porch. The front door slammed, and the door to his room opened. He could see the light switch on from behind his eyelids.

“Dad,” she said. He tried to make his breathing even. “I know you’re awake, Dad.”

He didn’t say anything, didn’t move. He tried to make a slight snore come out of his mouth, but it sounded forced. The end of the bed dipped as she sat, and his back twinged with pain. “You know, you really treated Alice like shit. And for what?” She paused; he could hear her let out a long breath of air. “You didn’t gain anything by acting like that.”

She stopped, and he tried to snore again, but his mouth was dry. He lay there and wished she’d go away. “You know,” she began again, “how I’m thinking about leaving my husband? Part of it’s that I fell out of love with him, but the other part is that I met someone else. His name’s Terrence, and he teaches gym at the same school as me.” Harold didn’t respond, knowing that she would tell him more. After a long pause, she continued, “But before I can make any decisions, I want you to tell me what really happened to Mom. I’ve heard a million stories over
the years, usually the one that she ran off with a black man, but there are too many variations. I want to know the truth.” He heard her take a deep breath before saying, “I want to know all about her, because even though I don’t remember her, I’m afraid I might be turning into her. Marvin is a fine man, like I’m sure you were, but I still want to leave him. The only thing is, Terrence is black, and I’m afraid that I’ll end up doing the exact same thing Mom did. You know, like I’d follow in her footsteps, and I’ve hated her long enough to know I don’t want to do that.”

Harold opened his eyes and tried to sit up, but the pain forced him back down. He winced. “Get out of this house,” he whispered.

She stood up and looked down at him on the bed. He knew what he looked like but didn’t care. This was still his house, and he couldn’t look at her the same way anymore. She wasn’t the daughter who had left so many years ago, and she wasn’t his wife either. She was a woman he didn’t know, didn’t understand, and he didn’t want anything to do with her. “You’re a sinner against God.”

She laughed, her mouth open, her eyes wide. “And you know the will of God? You great Christian you?”

“Why do you think He put them all the way over there? All them niggers, He dropped them in the middle of Africa, not here. Oh, I know missy. I know enough to know that we’re not supposed to be with those animals. That much I know. I’ve read books on it, pamphlets. They explained it to me, told me the truth.”

Her eyes drooped, and she looked bored. “I’m going to bed, Dad. I’m tired.”

“No you’re not.” He tried to sit up again but fell back against the pillows. The pain was there, but he gave his attention to the blood pumping in his head. “You’re going to pack your stuff up and get the hell out of my house. I won’t have you here.”

“You’ll have to kick me out, and I really don’t think you’re in the best shape for that
right now. Besides, I’ll have to take the boys with me, and I know you like them.” She looked amused. He wanted her out, and she looked amused. “I’m going to bed. We’ll talk in the morning.”

She stood and walked to the door. As she closed it behind her, Harold yelled, “You’d better be gone by morning, or I’ll call the cops on you. You’re not like your mother, and you never will be. You’re nothing but a sinner.” He stopped but didn’t hear anything besides his own ragged breathing. “You’ll burn for this,” he yelled.

Her footsteps moved across the floor overhead but stopped when she was directly above him, as though she’d collapsed on the bed as soon as she saw it. He tried to picture Sarah in his head, the way she’d acted toward that black man. There had been too many times when he couldn’t find either of them at the same time. Sarah always turned up later, a little winded and flushed, with an excuse about walking through the woods or chasing a feral cat in hopes of saving it. It was her nature to do things that didn’t make complete sense, but he knew the truth even if he pretended not to.

Now, he wondered why he was angrier with his daughter than his wife. If Sarah walked in the house now, he would take her back without a question. If Marie left her husband, he would want to send the man a sympathy card, even though he’d never met him. Maybe it was because he knew what it was like to stand in those shoes, to watch your wife decide that you were a good person but just not good enough, after all.

She woke with the sun, something she hadn’t done since her boys were babies. The house was silent, no stomping or yelling downstairs. She lifted herself out of bed and looked down at her clothes, realizing she hadn’t even changed the night before; she was so tired, she’d laid down and fallen asleep in her grubby t-shirt, now covered in dirt as well as sweat. The boys
were still wearing the same thing as yesterday too, and she was determined that today would be less crazy. Stephen and Dustin needed to understand that this farm was a good place, one where they could explore and dream. She didn’t want them to walk away with pictures of their mother and grandfather at each other’s throats. In fact, she hoped that by the time they left, she and Harold could be on better terms than when she’d left the last time. She doubted they’d be friends, but she wanted to be able to call him on Christmas and watch the boys open birthday presents from him.

Now, her muscles ached, and all she wanted was to lie back down. Alice had said she’d gotten hung up, but she hadn’t said how badly. The car was resting on its axle on the edge of a culvert. She and Marie had been forced to find stones, clumps of dirt, anything solid to put underneath the tire to get it out. It took a while, and once they’d built up a foundation, the car still stuck. The truck’s tires spun, left black marks on the pavement and a burnt odor in the air, but the car didn’t budge one inch. In the end, they’d left it tilted off the road, and Alice said she’d call a tow truck in the morning. They were both too tired to worry about it then.

Now, she stripped down and kicked her clothes into the corner. She slipped on an old nightgown, a little tight now, and a robe. She made her way down the stairs as quietly as possible, but she heard her father yell her name from behind his door. She ignored it and moved toward the kitchen.

She felt guilty for last night, but only a little. Before she got here, she knew she’d tell him about Terrence. Maybe her timing hadn’t been the best, but at least she’d gotten it out into the open.

She found the coffee but no coffee maker, then realized that her father had been boiling his coffee, just like he did when she was a kid. She’d tried to talk him into buying a Mr. Coffee once, but he’d waved her away and claimed that it tasted better when it was boiled. She started a kettle
on the stove and remembered the smell, the way he boiled it a little too long, just until that burnt
smell spread through the air. The coffee, when fixed this way, had a smoky, almost tart, taste.

When the eggs and bacon were on the stove, she found an old serving tray. A cup of
orange juice, slightly burnt coffee, a plate, a knife, and a fork. When the food was done, she
heaped it on too and walked toward her father’s bedroom. His eyes were open and trained on her
face, but he was still lying down.

“Morning,” she said. He didn’t answer. “I brought you breakfast.”

He turned his head and looked out the window. “Dad,” she said, but again he didn’t look
at her. “Well, I’ll just leave it. That way if you get hungry, you’ll have something.”

She set the tray on the night stand, pushing aside an old clock and a lamp that had never
worked. “I’ll be outside if you need anything.” He still didn’t move, so she made her way out
the door, clicking it softly behind her.

Back in the living room, she stopped long enough to take a deep breath and let it out
slowly. Then, she pushed Harold out of her mind and made her way toward the barn to find
some supplies.

Harold heard the back door slam, but he didn’t move. She was a shifty one, and he didn’t
want to get caught. He waited until he heard her move toward the front of the house before
pulling the tray onto the bed. He was starved, hadn’t eaten since lunch the day before. When
Marie left for the store, he’d forgotten all about dinner and sat in front of that damned machine all
night.

The bacon was almost burnt, the way he always cooked it. He pulled a strip from the
plate and shoved it in his mouth, following with another. She hadn’t shaken the orange juice,
but at least she’d had enough sense to boil the coffee all the way. He scooped a piece of egg into
his mouth and wondered why she hadn’t fried it in the bacon grease. That much she should have known.

He didn’t forgive his daughter but realized that maybe it would be best if he left her alone for the day. If he kicked her out now, there would be no one to get his lunch and dinner, and his back was still having little spasms. By tomorrow he’d be fine. Might as well get all he could out of the girl before he sent her packing.

He knew that if worse came to worse, he could call one of the ladies in town to bring him food, but none of them would know how to boil coffee. And they’d probably leave the bacon soft and fatty. Better to keep Marie around another day, just until he could get around on his own. Then he could send her back up to Maine. There, she could sin all she wanted. Besides, that man wasn’t here. And he wouldn’t let her talk about him either. He’d decided that during the night. She could stick around another day, but there was no reason for her to be talking about her damnation; that was business between her and God.

There were the kids too, Stephen and Dustin. They hadn’t done anything wrong, and he didn’t want to punish them for their mother’s stupidity. Besides, given a few days with him, maybe they wouldn’t make the same mistakes all the other people in his family seemed to make.

He mopped the last of the egg up with a corner of toast and put it in his mouth. He gulped the coffee before leaning back and closing his eyes again. Even if his daughter wasn’t good for much, at least she could cook.

The sound started low, but then it got more insistent. Harold pulled himself up on his elbow and listened. It was coming from out front, but he couldn’t tell what it was, like something was grinding on the walls. “Marie,” he called and waited. “Marie.” But she wasn’t going to answer. “Goddammit,” he muttered as he pulled himself into a sitting position. Just what he needed, to get out of bed and hurt his back again. At this rate, he’d be laid up for a month. He
slid his legs over and leaned forward. Slowly, he put his hands under his butt and tried to push himself up without bending his back. He hoped the girl didn’t walk in now, with him standing but bent over at the waist, making a gnarled seven with his body. He crept to the window, letting his feet shuffle forward without leaving the ground. A fall would surely put him up even longer.

He poked his head around the curtains and saw Marie out there, her head bobbing to some music coming through her headphones while she scraped paint from the side of the house. His first thought was to yell, but then he saw the front steps covered in cans of paint.

He watched her a few more minutes, her head swiveling while her arm scraped to the beat, before shuffling back across the room and onto the bed.

Marie could see Stephen and Dustin along with Alice’s boy wandering around the land, pulling at branches and tromping through the undergrowth on the edge of the woods. She shook her head. “I can’t even remember what it was like to have just one.”

“One’s enough,” Alice said and laughed.

They were drinking tea on the porch while the sun started to dip behind the hills. They sat in silence and watched the boys until they went so far into the trees that they were just moving shadows.

Alice had called from Mannington, needing a ride home after having her car towed. The axle was bent, and they needed to order parts before they could even start on it. Marie had needed the break anyway. She could already feel the muscles in her shoulders and back starting to ache from hours spent scraping paint. Besides, the boys were bored. Her father kept no games at the house, and she’d thrown out all her kid stuff when she thought she’d grown up.

“The car okay?”

“Fine, fine. Well, it will be fine when they get the parts.” Marie watched Alice cross and
uncross her legs, her arm waving toward the hills. “Anyway, I wouldn’t mind being stuck out here. Look at all this.”

Marie knew what she was talking about. At night sometimes, she sat in her father’s yard and looked up. All those stars that the lights of Portland blocked out. “Thanks for letting me stop in,” she said. “My dad drives me nuts sometimes.”

“No problem. It’s nice to have someone else out here, especially for Tyson. It’s just been us since we got here a few months ago, and he gets pretty lonely with no one to play with. And what, with my husband always at work, I get pretty lonely out here. Besides, you gave me a ride home. The least I can offer you is a glass of tea.”

“Well, I’m sorry about my dad. I’d do something with him if I could, but he’s been pissed off at me for years.” Alice waved her apology away and looked at the dark spot where the boys had gone. Marie followed her gaze but didn’t see anything, not even their shadows anymore. “Why’d you guys move here?”

“Work. My husband was transferred to Hundred, and he thought a farm might be nice. Here we are, with lots of land and nothing to do with it.”

“You could get some horses, a cow. You know, farm the land as they say.”

“Have you ever bought a horse?” Alice asked, turning toward her.

“No. We’ve always had them here, and I live in a city now, no room.”

“Well, I went to an auction the other night, and you wouldn’t believe what they charge for a horse. We’re doing fine here, but a horse would break the bank right now.” Marie didn’t know what to say. She acted as though she knew what it took to keep a farm, but she realized that she only knew the labor she put into it as a kid. She’d never had to deal with the financial side of it. “Anyway,” Alice said, “I don’t think Tyson would really know what to do with it. Even if I made him help me with it, he’s still going to drive me crazy by the time school starts.”
Marie took a gulp of tea and said, “Do you have a problem with Tyson coming up and playing with Stephen and Dustin sometime?” Alice looked at her. Marie said quickly, “My dad won’t bug him. He can’t even get out of bed right now, and I think it would be good for my boys. They’re bored, and I’m trying to get some work done at my dad’s. I want to paint his house and clean up around the fields -- I don’t think he’s been taking very good care of them -- but it’s going to take me forever to do it. And I could get a lot more done if I wasn’t trying to entertain the boys every minute. What do you think?”

Alice looked away and shook her head slowly. “I don’t know. I’m not sure my boy should be up there.”

“My dad’s an ass. I know. Believe me, I know. But he’s not always like that, and he likes kids. Stephen and Dustin think the world of him for some reason. And maybe if he could see your boy up there, he wouldn’t be so quick to judge.”

“That’s a big risk you’re asking for,” Alice said. “What if your dad does say something? He doesn’t need to be exposed to that. But I’ll promise to think about it.”

Marie knew that eventually Tyson would be exposed to prejudice, if he hadn’t been already. Just by moving to this area, Alice had upped his odds. Now though, she nodded her head, as though their boys’ friendship was a done deal.

The next morning, Marie went to his room after breakfast to help him get up. He’d stood the night before, but she hadn’t let him move around. This morning, the color was back in his face, and he was already sitting up when she walked in.

“Stephen finished getting you online,” she said. She tried to grab his elbow when he put his feet on the ground, but he shooed her away.

“Well, let’s go see it.” He started toward the door, and she followed behind.
wondered if he even realized that he was supporting the bottom of his back with his palm, as though that would hold him up. She could see his whole body strain to get up the stairs and followed behind with both hands up and a firm footing. The last thing she needed was his knocking them both down the stairs. And he wouldn’t let her give him any support.

Stephen sat at the computer, and she could see that he was proud of his accomplishment. Even Dustin, standing next to him, seemed to be sharing in the glory of what they’d accomplished. She knew Stephen didn’t see hooking up the internet connection as a big accomplishment, but she could see that he was proud to have done it for his grandfather.

He smiled at Stephen and said, “Show me.”

Her son jumped up from the chair and said, “You sit. It’ll be easier if I tell you how and you do it.”

He nodded and eased himself into the chair. She could see the effort it was taking him. Stephen stood over his shoulder and she saw that her dad didn’t pull away from his touch.

“Now,” Stephen said, “grab your mouse and click on this picture here.” He tapped a bitten nail against the monitor. “That’s your dial-up connection.”

Harold gripped the mouse like his touch might break it and clicked on one picture after another as Stephen said. Marie stood away from them all and saw how his hair was thinning on top, and his scalp was full of little brown spots. She watched as Stephen showed him how to pull up a web page and how to move around within it.

“Now you try it,” he said.

His hand was hesitant, and the arrow moved in short jerking motions. “Smoothly,” Stephen said and placed his hand on top of his grandfather’s. She knew that if she’d done the same thing, he would have jerked his hand away, but with her son, he let his hand lie under his grandson’s as Stephen pulled him around the page.
“I got it,” he said.

“Okay,” Stephen said. He pulled his hand off the mouse. “What did you want to see on here? I’ll help you.”

“Not necessary,” he said and pulled his glance away from Stephen. “I can handle it.”

She saw that Stephen looked hurt, that he wanted to be his grandfather’s special helper. But she knew that Tyson would come up later, and her son would forget about wanting to spend the afternoon with Harold. Besides, she wasn’t sure she wanted her sons to see whatever it was her dad was so eager to look at.

In the past few days, she noticed that she’d been keeping an ear open whenever her sons visited her dad in bed, just in case he wanted to share his views of the neighbors with them. It was one thing to yell at her, to tell her how horrible Alice was, but her sons were still little, innocent. They were at the age when they still believed what adults told them, no matter how absurd or wrong.

“Come on, guys,” Marie said. “We’ll go do something else.” To her dad, she said, “I’ll be outside if you need anything. And don’t sit there too long.”

He waved her away, and she pulled on the handle of the door. The boys went out first, but as she was halfway out the door, and her father said, “My talking to you doesn’t mean I’m not mad.”

She turned and saw him straightening the edges of a little slip of paper, not meeting her eye. “Well, the same goes for me.”

His head jerked up. “What do you have to be mad about?”

She shook her head and turned back to the door. “Nothing,” she said. “I’ll be outside if you need me.”

Alice and Tyson were making their way up the drive as Marie stepped outside. She
waved and walked down to meet them.

“Are you sure this is okay?” Alice asked. Her head swiveled as though looking for something.

“He won’t be out. The bedroom and computer room are the only two places he can get to. Besides, the boys won’t want to go inside.” And already, they were moving away.

Alice nodded, her lips pressed into a thin line. “I’m still not sure.”

“Come on,” Marie said and grabbed Tyson’s hand. “Let’s go check out the horses.”

As they rounded the house, she peered up to the window in the computer room, but her dad was nowhere in sight. She would force him to tell her the story of her mom, but not yet. Once he wanted her boys to stay here forever, he couldn’t tell her no. He might not tell her everything, but she would get some of it.

The boys stood outside the fence, Dustin and Tyson on tiptoes. “In a couple weeks,” she promised, “we’ll get in there and play with them.”

They weren’t paying attention. Dustin was banging on the fence, trying to lure the colt over. But the horse ignored him and continued munching on grass. Marie knew his banging wouldn’t bring them closer, might even scare them a little, but she didn’t say anything. From afar, she liked her dad’s pets. Up close, not so much. They were too tall, too heavy, and she didn’t trust them. In a few weeks, they wouldn’t get in there. But by then, she hoped she would have the story from her dad and the house done. Then, she and the boys could go back home.

After she realized the boys were too enamored by the horses to be bothered by their mothers, she and Alice moved back toward the front. On the porch, Marie sat on the floor and picked up the scraper.

“Thank you,” Alice said.

“No problem,” she said. “You’re helping me more than I’m helping you. If I had to do
this and keep the boys busy, I’d never get finished. I figure Tyson needs someone to play with, and so do Stephen and Dustin. We’re helping each other out.”

They were quiet while Marie started in on the molding around the bottom. Here, the scraping was more difficult, where the edges were rounded and had been painted over repeatedly without ever being scraped.

She looked up at Alice, who was staring out at the road. A question was locked in the back of her throat, but she didn’t know whether she should ask it. Finally, she blurted, “What’s it like to date a black man?”

Alice looked startled, her gaze jumping to Marie’s face. For a minute, she looked angry; then she said, “What’s it like to date a white man?”

Marie shrugged. “It’s like dating anyone. You know.”

“No,” Alice said, “I don’t.”

Her voice was hard, and Marie said, “I’m sorry. I just thought--” but she let her words trail off. What did she think?

“That dating a black man is so different? That I can speak for all black men?”

“I’m sorry.”

Alice didn’t say anything for a minute, and Marie was afraid she’d lost the only friend she had here, just by opening her mouth with a stupid question. Then, Alice turned to her, her face softened, and opened her mouth to say something. But before she got anything out, they heard Harold yell, “I can tell you,” from the room by the door.

Both Marie and Alice jumped but didn’t say anything. Then her dad peeked his face through the curtains. “Going out with a darky is serious business.” Alice looked at him but didn’t react. “You expect to be cheated on, lied to, anything they can do to you really.” Then he pulled back, and they both heard the bedsprings creak as he lay back down.
Marie turned to Alice, ready to apologize, to tell her once again what a bastard her father was, but Alice said, “Oh, I didn’t know that.” There was a small smile on her lips, but Marie didn’t know how to take it. Then, Alice continued, “You’re only almost right, Harold. They have the biggest dicks on earth and will pound a scrawny man like you in the ground without thinking twice. That’s why we keep them around, protection from assholes.” With that, she got up and said in a lower voice, “Tyson and I are going to go now. I don’t think this is a place he needs to be.” She started down the steps and then turned. “Feel free to bring Stephen and Dustin down anytime.”

Marie nodded and turned back to the house before Alice could see the color creeping into her cheeks. Asking them up here wasn’t a good idea. He could just as well have said that while Tyson was here too. Also, she wasn’t sure where her relationship with Alice stood. Could she call the woman a friend, or had her father’s comments and her questions pushed her away? Marie sighed and started to scrape again. She told herself that she knew what she was doing, or at least thought she did. She told herself that everything would work out fine in the end, that her dad would learn something and that Alice would help her through it.

She began to scrape the wood again. The sound was rhythmic, soothing, a whoosh whoosh that moved through the valley so that it sounded louder than it was. Out back the boys were still playing with the horses -- she could hear them whinny. Half the porch was finished, but she wished it were all done and that she could get back in her car and go home. She pushed the thought away and forced herself to remain seated, to let her arm do the work without her mind. To let the sound calm her.

He sat on the porch and listened as her voice rose and fell on the phone above him. Married -- he just couldn’t imagine her married, with kids too. And he didn’t have a part in it.
Didn’t walk her down the aisle or anything. Of course, he’d kicked her out and didn’t really have a right to be jealous or mad. Just the same. He was her father.

He could hear her shoes clack-clacking above his head as she paced from one end of the room to the other. Following her footsteps, he was pleased that Stephen got him that online thing. Sampson was bragging about ordering t-shirts and signs to hang up, things to keep the niggers away from his house. Harold didn’t have anything to keep them out and had lived in mortal fear that one day they’d just drive up in front of his house and introduce themselves. Until that woman had, and now he wanted to keep them out even more than he had two days ago. And Marie had brought her up on the porch today. He should have kicked her out, told her to go back where she belonged, but he knew her plan. The way she was trying to be the good daughter, to show him that she could help him and that he should accept his neighbors. Of course, she didn’t know what he knew about Sarah. He would tell her and let her see for herself what those people were made of, that they could break up a family and send it spiraling down some road no one imagined. He could see the same thing happening to her, with that man she’d met, the force that niggers had, just like the one his wife had slept with. In one way, he knew it wasn’t Sarah’s fault and that it wasn’t Marie’s either. They couldn’t help themselves, because those men knew the way to pull a woman away from her home, her family. It was the reason God had sat them clear across the world, so they couldn’t mess with other people’s wives.

Part of him wondered if he was using her kids as a barrier between father and daughter, and he knew he was. Stephen and Dustin were good kids who didn’t deserve what was going to happen to them if Marie left her husband. They needed their grandfather right now, to save their family. Another part of him liked how happy Marie was, how his daughter seemed to want to be here for once. And he didn’t know how he felt about that. After all, she was living the wrong way and trying to make him do the same. But her being here, like she used to be, except so much
older now, made him feel younger, more alive.

And she and the kids helped him with the computer. Of course, he hadn’t been able to do too much with that web page. He couldn’t figure out what he wanted to see or how to get there. But next time he’d figure it out. There was always tomorrow.

Standing, he heard the house fall silent and Marie’s footsteps moved out of her room and into the rest of the house. Harold crossed the porch, started to open the door, but decided to give her some time. She’d asked if she could make a long distance call but hadn’t told him who she was calling. He knew it was her husband, that she was telling him something or asking him something that she didn’t want her dad to be a part of. Still, what he wanted was for her to tell him she was sorry, to invite him down here so Harold could have the kind of family he imagined he would have after his daughter grew up, surrounded by grandkids and good times. But right now he knew his grandsons were down at that woman’s house, playing with her son. That wouldn’t work here, wasn’t part of the picture he’d made of his family. Eventually, he would have to talk to the boys about that.

He moved around the side of the house and into the fields behind. He was feeling better, as long as he didn’t sit still too long, made sure to move a little and take it easy when he was on his feet.

The horses grazed quietly, the little one separated from the larger ones. He hated pulling them apart like that, but the colt always seemed to bear the brunt of the fights, coming away with bite marks on its back and hoof marks on its legs. To make up for it, Harold grabbed a handful of oats from the barn and brought them to him. He laid his hand flat and let him eat them from his palm. The hairs around his mouth and nostrils tickled, and his tongue felt like sandpaper against skin.

He felt more than heard Marie join him. She too had a handful of oats, and when the
young horse finished with his handful, he nuzzled his daughter. Marie, always timid around his animals, took a step back.

“It’s okay,” he said. “Just lay your palm flat.” He uncurled the woman’s fingers, and showed her how to do it so she wouldn’t be bitten.

“He’s big.”

“Just a baby.” He watched the horse lick the last bits off her hand as Marie laughed a little, smoothing the lines in her forehead and cooling her cheeks. She patted the horse’s nose lightly and then stepped back again.

“Who’d you call?” he asked.

She sidestepped the question and watched the other horses graze in the larger field. “I missed the horses. I haven’t seen one since I lived here, except the ones you pass in fields on the side of the road. It’s nice here.”

“Good enough,” he said, looking at the hundred acres he owned behind the house. The land visible from where they stood looked fine -- the fields recently dragged, the fences mended, the grass chewed down by constant grazing. But all the land beyond that, well, he didn’t know what it looked like anymore. His back bothered him too much to walk far, and he couldn’t ride at all now. These horses hadn’t had to carry his weight or anyone else’s in over five years, and he was sure all the paths he’d cut through the hills were grown over. “I’ll get rid of it someday I’m sure. Getting to be too much for me,” he said, trying not to sound too old.

“You can’t get rid of it.” She turned to him, the color rising in her cheeks. “This is where I grew up.” Harold didn’t say anything, just kicked at a bunch of grass with the tip of his boot. Marie turned back to the house. “This place could be great.”

“Could be,” he said and gave the horse one last pat before turning and following her.

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When she snapped the lid off the box of oats, the two boys grabbed a handful. “Watch me,” she said and laid her palm out flat as her father had showed her. The bristly hairs poking out of its nostrils tickled her hands, but she tried not to laugh. Then its rough tongue licked her palm clean. “You try,” she said and watched them jostle for position of who would go first.

She stood back and wondered how her boys had grown up so quickly. Here on the farm, she felt young again, almost as if she’d never left. It was strange, with all the tense energy around her father and herself, that she could feel this way. But it was the place, not the people. She’d grown up here and couldn’t bear to think of this place as anything other than her family’s home.

Even her boys seemed to love it here, not asking much about the father, but splitting their time between here and Tyson’s house, always ready for another adventure. Of course, they’d spent their lives in the city, not that Portland was huge, but there wasn’t much wildlife until you were miles outside of it. Here, you needed to drive to Pennsylvania for a real city, and even the towns were nowhere in sight of the farm.

Here, times seemed to stop, and she watched her boys grow, wondering how they were able to here, where nothing seemed to change but the seasons. She handed each of them another handful of oats and watched them laugh, as the horse’s sandpapery tongue moved across their palms.

His daughter hadn’t worked on the house in two days. After breakfast, Harold watched her make her way through the fields and past the barns. Until she disappeared, he kept an eye on her and then made his way upstairs to the computer. He didn’t like that she was looking through everything, but he wanted a little privacy. The house was starting to feel a little cramped, even if it did feel just a little nice to have her around again. Though the boys weren’t here much, their presence filled the whole house when they were. That’s what he missed about kids, the way the
world was centered around their own happiness. Even though he didn’t like where they were going, it was good to have them gone for a bit, to feel the old bones of the house settling into what they’d been before his family had arrived. He’d lived alone too long and now found himself wondering how long they would be staying. Not that he wanted them gone, but he didn’t really want them here either. He just wanted to know that they were out there, somewhere near him but not too close, a place where he could call up to chat without any expectations. That’s what he’d never gotten with Sarah, word that she was doing all right. He didn’t know, not really, what had happened to her once she’d stepped off the farm. It was as though she’d disappeared into thin air.

But with his daughter, they hadn’t been talking much anyway. After the little chat about the horses, nothing. He didn’t really know what to say to her, and she seemed to be avoiding him, always glancing at him but never opening her mouth. It was starting to bother him, the way she acted like she owned the place and he was just some old man wandering around lost.

He sat at the computer and clicked everything like Stephen had shown him. Again, he pulled the slip of paper from his pocket and smoothed the edges. Sampson had given it to him, told him he could order things to keep the heathens and half-breeds off his land. Slowly, he found the letters on the keyboard and punched them into the white space at the top. The page came up slowly, the song playing first, a tinny version of “God Bless America” with a banner across the top of the screen that read “Proclaiming a Message of Hope and Deliverance for White Christian America!” There were too many boxes, too many little pictures. He’d click on one and a bunch of others would pop up.

He didn’t like the looks of this and knew his daughter wouldn’t either. He remembered men running around in white robes, burning crosses and houses. Hurting people wasn’t what he wanted; he only wanted what they said on the top of every page -- a White Christian America.
He had nothing against those people if they kept to themselves, but they didn’t. Was it too much to ask, that he keep his family together without someone meddling and breaking his world apart?

On the left side of the screen, he found what he wanted, their mission statement. Harold had heard that the KKK had gone through some changes, that they didn’t run around terrorizing people anymore, but he wanted to be reassured, to believe that it was true. And if it was, he wouldn’t have to watch his daughter’s and grandsons’ every move when he was on the computer. It took him a few minutes to click on the right spot. The pictures were too close together, and his hands wouldn’t stay still long enough. But he got it open and read. His lips moved silently as he examined it and in the end, was satisfied. They were a political group, not a bunch of drunk white guys wearing robes. For now, that would be enough. Just to know that he was in the right, that his fear was real.

The trails had completely grown over, and Marie had to find a stick to hold her up as she stumbled through the undergrowth. From the house, the farm seemed to be in good shape, but after watching her father move so carefully, she figured the rest of the farm didn’t look as good as what she’d seen. And she was right. Some of the buildings past the lower pasture hadn’t been opened in a long time, and none of the other fields had felt human feet in years. The animals moved freely even when she came close, and the trees were growing on top of one another because he hadn’t thinned them out for timber.

Satisfied, she turned back toward the house. She reached the backdoor when the phone began to ring. “Got it,” she called to her father, wondering why he wasn’t online. She knew that was where he spent most of his time when she was out of the house. “Hello,” she said, breathless after a short sprint through the house.
“Marie?”

“Hey.” Her stomach dropped a little at the sound of Marvin’s voice, wondering how her father would have acted if he’d picked up the phone, what he would have said. “Everything okay?”

“Fine, fine,” he said. “I wanted to say hi. To see how you and the boys were doing.”

His voice sounded stiff, and she remembered the conversation she’d had with him the other day where she’d said she wasn’t sure when she’d be back. He claimed that the boys were his too, but she told him that they were on vacation, that they’d be back soon. She hadn’t expected to hear from him again, and here he was, acting like everything was fine.

“Everything’s okay here.”

“Do you know yet when you’ll be back? Have you given it any thought?”

She didn’t answer.

“I’ll take that as a no.”

“I’m thinking, Marvin. I’m just a little confused right now. But I’m trying to figure things out. I really am.”

“Whether or not you want to be married to me.”

Her breath came out in a whoosh, as this was the first time either of them had said anything. “Yes,” she whispered.

“Well, your friend Terrence called. I told him you were in West Virginia, but I guess he already knew that.”

She couldn’t speak, didn’t know what to say. Marvin didn’t sound mad. Instead, his voice was deadpan.

“Listen,” he said, “we’ll talk when you get back, okay?”

“Yeah,” she said, but he’d already hung up.
She put the phone down slowly, her hands shaking, though she didn’t really know why. If someone had told her Marvin would act like this a month ago, she would have been elated. Now, his calm was unnerving, and that she still didn’t know where she stood was bothering her. This visit was meant for her to get her head together, and at this point, she felt further from an answer than she had before she left. Shaking, she leaned against the wall and closed her eyes.

Harold slowed his steps as he made his way through the living room. As soon as she put the phone down, he moved into the doorway. She was leaning against the wall, her face pale, and her eyes closed. For a minute, he felt pity but pushed that away. What was happening was both of their fault, and he didn’t want to keep her in the dark anymore.

“I’m going to tell you about Sarah.” Her eyes opened but she didn’t move. She looked tired, her eyelids drooped, but he could see that she was listening. “I should have told you when I kicked you out, but I didn’t. So, you want the story and you’re going to get it, at least what I know of it.”

She didn’t say anything, so he turned and walked into the kitchen. He stood at the window and looked over the fields, wondering how bad they looked. Marie knew; he was sure of that. And he wished she hadn’t seen.

He listened, but no sound came from the dining room. Then, a creak of floorboards that was growing louder. He turned and saw Marie lowering herself into a chair at the kitchen table. He pulled out the one across from her and began to speak. He told her about Sarah going off with that man, coming back disheveled, how he knew they were sleeping together. He told her everything that had happened, all that he had seen and heard. Then, when he got to her disappearance, he said, “The rest of this is just my own thoughts. I don’t know what happened, but I figure it was one of two things. Either she wanted to leave with him, was bored with me, so
she just up and went. Never looked back and set up a new life somewhere else. My other idea is that she didn’t leave with him because she wanted to but that he did something to her, something bad.”

“But you said she was sleeping with him.”

“And I know how much you meant to her. I don’t know that she would have left you.”

He stopped here and took a deep breath. What he was about to say, she wouldn’t agree with and would probably argue. “But in the end, I think she probably did leave with him on her own, that she wanted to go. That’s what I’ve been trying to tell you, Marie. Those niggers, they got something that most of us don’t understand. They draw you in, and you can’t stop yourself, no matter what you’re losing. That’s why I don’t like them, why I know they don’t belong here. There’s an evil in them, something that can break up families even when everything seems fine.”

“You think that’s why mom left? You don’t think it was because of you? Maybe she didn’t love you anymore. Maybe this guy treated her better than you. You don’t know.” Her voice was rising, the anger mounting, but Harold held her gaze. “You think everything’s fine, but you didn’t realize you were killing her inside, that she wanted more than you, something bigger in life that you’d never had or that you lost.”

Harold wondered if she was talking about him and Sarah or herself and her husband. He didn’t ask. Instead, he said, “You were the light of her life. She loved you to pieces, and then she left without even saying goodbye to you. Is that normal?”

She looked down at the table, and he could sense the wheels turning in her head. “I’d never leave Stephen and Dustin,” she said quietly, but he didn’t answer.

He watched as she stared down at the plastic table cloth covered in flowers for a few more minutes. Then, she raised her head, and he could see that this conversation was over, that whatever she’d been looking for, he’d given her. Her eyes cleared and she said, “The farm looks
like shit. Trees are down, the fences are gone, the paths are completely grown over. How long
since you’ve been out there?”

He shrugged and didn’t say years. She knew that much.

“I’m going to go back to Maine, but I want to make sure we’re all okay before I leave. The house will be scraped and painted, and your land will be cleared. I’m working my ass off, and I’m going to get it done. It’ll take me a little while, but I want to do it. It gives me time to think. Until then, the boys will be back and forth between here and Alice’s house. No one will show up here, so you won’t have anything to complain about. When they’re here, you give them all the love you want, make them your little buddies. I don’t care. Just let me do what I need to do. Okay?”

Dark was close, but Marie scraped away at the house, sometimes letting the blade bite into the wood and take out chunks. She didn’t care. Her mind was running through the story her dad had told her. Most of it was the same she’d heard in town. Only the end was different, the why. According to Harold, she was her mother’s angel, and she’d still left.

Now, there were too many questions that she needed to have answered, and she knew that without her mom, they never would be. Marie knew a lot of husbands who thought their married lives were normal, but their wives would disagree. They would say their husbands were verbally, emotionally abusive. Maybe her dad had been the same way. Or maybe Sarah had just fallen out of love with him. Maybe the man she left with really was that wonderful.

Still, she needed to know why she’d been left behind. Did her mom not love her as much as her father thought, or did her father’s story hold a grain of truth? She couldn’t see him being all the way right, that an entire race made you forget about all the things you loved. But maybe that one man had made her crazy, made her not worry about what would happen to Marie. It
was hard to imagine, but she had to concede that her father might have a small point.

She was gouging at a particularly difficult spot of paint when her boys called at her from the steps. Turning, she saw that they were excited, that their day with Tyson had been a good one. Besides that, she could see scratches across their legs and arms, a ring of purple around their lips. Laughing, she said, “You found the blue berry patch.”

They both nodded and then ran into the house, their whoops and hollers echoing through the rooms. At home, sometimes their noises drove her nuts, but tonight they were music. Even her father had to love it. She looked at the patch of paint she’d been working on but didn’t pick up the scraper. Instead, she stared and smiled.

Early in the morning, before Marie woke up, he ordered a few signs. They were nothing spectacular, none of those hooded guys or burning crosses, just a few tasteful messages to let his neighbors know not to come too close. Sampson had bought more, lots of shirts and pictures of men in white hoods, but to tell the truth, Harold was a little afraid of those. If those people down the road knew where their place was, well, then they could all live in peace.

“Dad.”

Harold turned around and half stood at the sight of his daughter in the doorway. He hadn’t even known she was up, never mind that she’d come upstairs to spy on him. Half standing, he tried to block the screen with his body, but she didn’t even look at it.

“I’ll be back later,” she said. “I have to run to Fairmont for a few more supplies. I’m going to drop the boys off at Alice’s.”

She turned and walked out. He sat and wondered whether she’d seen the computer or not. For all he knew, she’d been standing behind him for ten minutes, watching him and listening to the tinny music coming through the speakers. But she would have said something. Of course,
she could have been spying and wondering whether she should leave the boys with him or not. If she saw what he was looking at, he knew she’d never leave them with him again. But there was nothing he could do about that now.

He turned back to the computer and clicked a few buttons, hitting the wrong one a couple times and bringing up screens he didn’t want, but then he was off-line. He stood and looked out the window where Marie stepped into the driver’s seat and pulled out.

The curtain fell back into place as he turned away from the window and made his way out of the room. Downstairs, he cooked up a little breakfast and made sure to leave some extra for Marie. She’d be hungry when she got back. He ate with gusto, enjoying the silent house and the thought that pretty soon he could put that gun back where it belonged and live like he used to. Maybe he could even try to fix some of those back fields and tell Marie to leave well enough alone. His body wasn’t in the condition it used to be, but if he took it slow, he could make it just fine.

He poured the last of the coffee in a cup and made his way onto the porch. He looked over the front yard and across the road to more of his fields that he rented out. Everything was in good shape here. He liked the looks of it, the way the grass was almost three feet tall, high enough that the cows would be grazing soon. But now, it was empty except for the birds that flew in and out, picking at things he couldn’t see.

Though Marie had only been gone for an hour, he already heard the boys laughing out back. They must have gotten sick of their friend and decided to spend a day with their grandpa. He smiled at this thought and stood. As he moved around the house, he could see Dustin on tiptoes, laughing as the colt nipped at his fingers. Walking closer, he saw Stephen at his side and that little nigger boy beside him. He stopped for a minute and wondered if he should let it slide. After all, he was only a kid. Then he thought of his talk with Marie last night, the one he should
have had when she was just a girl.

So, he stepped closer and called out to the boys. They all turned around and looked at him. The black one shrunk back, and Harold knew the kid’s parents had told him not to come up here. “You,” he said, pointing at the kid, “you need to go home now. Your parents don’t want you here, and I don’t want none of your kind here.”

He stood watching Harold for a minute before looking at Stephen and Dustin. But they were looking at Harold in surprise, both their mouths open a little. “You boys, come inside with me. We need to have a talk.”

They both looked at the other kid, but he was already shrinking away, toward the far side of the house. Harold could see his face screwed up, tears on the ready. Then, Harold took a step forward, and off the boy ran. Stephen and Dustin came toward him slowly, the kind of kids who always listened to what they were told. “Let’s go inside,” he said. “I’m going to tell you the way the world works.”

Again, Marie’s trunk was full. She thought about stopping at Alice’s to get the boys but decided against it. She was getting antsy now and was almost ready to go back to Maine. There was a lot of work ahead of her, and if she could get started right away, she might get most of it done.

The boys sat on the steps, close together and whispering, when she pulled up. As she opened the door, they were already on their feet and moving toward her. She closed the door behind her but let them cover the ground between them. Dustin’s face was streaked with tears, and Stephen looked confused.

“Why can’t we play with Tyson?” Stephen asked, hands on hips.

“What do you mean? I thought you were with him now.”
“Granddad made him go home. He told us we couldn’t play with him anymore.”

Her mind went blank for a minute, and she didn’t know how to answer. Then, she asked, “What exactly did he say?”

Dustin scrunched up his face and tried to talk, but more tears leaked from his eyes. Marie pulled him to her, and he wrapped his arms around her waist, hiding his face in her shirt. Stephen was more composed and said, “That he was a dirty breed and we shouldn’t get too close. He said a bunch of other stuff too, about you and your mom, but I don’t know what he was talking about. You’re not leaving us, are you?”

She bent down and took his face in her hands. “I’m not leaving you. I’ll never leave you. Understand?”

He shook his head, and Dustin pulled his face away from her. “Promise?”

She nodded and then stood looking at the house. She turned to the boys and said, “Why don’t you go upstairs and pack up your suitcases? When you’re done, come down here and we’ll go see Tyson, okay?” They nodded and ran toward the house. She looked after them and then stepped onto the porch and kicked her tools to the side before opening the door and seeing her dad sitting in his recliner. “You need to come out here,” she said, her voice quiet, controlled. “I don’t want to have this conversation where the boys can hear.”

He looked at her and stood, his back straighter than it had been in days. She noticed that he looked younger too, his face not so lost. They made it to the middle of the yard, and she stopped and turned.

Before she could say anything, he held up his hand and said, “I did it for their own good. If I’d told you the story about Sarah when you were a kid, you wouldn’t be in the spot you’re in now.”

“And where is that?” she asked, her voice loud now, no longer controlled.
“Letting your family fall apart. Being drawn in by some dumb nigger, that’s where.”

She slapped him then, without even meaning to. Her hand moved up to his face and then back down to her side without thought. They stood looking at each other, and she didn’t know what to say. It was like the night when she’d found her father and Alice standing together, neither sure what to say. And like that night, a car was moving up the driveway, and she hoped it was someone who would know what needed to be said.

She didn’t look away from her father as Stephen and Dustin came out of the house or as the car doors slammed. She knew it was Alice and hoped that this time she would have the answers.

Her father’s gaze moved toward the car first, and she followed. Standing there was Alice and a man Marie assumed to be her husband. They stood watching Marie and her father, but Tyson was already edging his way toward Stephen and Dustin.

She thought everything stood still for a moment, but then things were moving too fast. Alice and the man were walking toward her, both their faces alight with anger. “How dare you,” Alice was yelling. The man’s finger was already pointed in her father’s face, his own voice drowning out that of his wife.

No one was paying attention to Marie, so she stepped back. This was not her battle. For what she knew would be the last time, she looked up at the house. The porch appeared half naked, but the rest of it looked just as it hand when she’d arrived. She knew no one would finish what she’d started, or at least tried to begin. Her father might try, but he was too old and the job was too large for him alone.

Then, she looked back at her father who was backing away from Alice and her husband, his hands up, looking old again. She saw the fear in his eyes but didn’t try to stop the lecture he was receiving. Again, she moved her eyes away from the scene that had nothing to do with her
and toward the boys. Oblivious of what their families were doing, the three of them were running around the house, away from the chaos, out back where the horses would appreciate their gifts.