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Mothers

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MOTHERS

by

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ABSTRACT

The following is a collection of fiction creative writing, including five short stories and one novella. The stories center around themes of gender and Southern culture. The novella is a work of historical fiction based loosely on an early twentieth century case of clan violence and anti-Semitism.

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CHAPTER 1:

REAPING

Before Wesley, Malachi wonders what his occasional lovers think of the shadow box that hangs above his bed. Perhaps they just don't notice it in the late evening and early morning light. Or, more likely, assume that it is merely a remnant of a past life, one inhabited by wife and children. Even after forty years, there isn't a hint of yellowing in the bleached cotton; Esther's unworn christening gown. Ezra insists that Malachi not remove the sole memento of her stillborn twin sister from its place in the master bedroom. He complies, knowing that the eggshell paint behind the frame is brighter than the rest of the wall by now anyway.

"I like that you don't have a TV in here," Wesley says.

"Why is that?" Malachi asks. He places the breakfast tray over Wesley and eases himself onto the edge of the bed beside him, mindful not to bounce the plate of biscuits and two steaming coffee cups off the tray. Malachi is clean shaven and dressed for the day, minus shoes; he gets up long before Wesley to prepare breakfast. The corners of Wesley's eyes are crusty with sleep and he squirms to a comfortable sitting position, maintaining the snug wrapping of covers across his chest.

"Mindless entertainment," Wesley says. He empties a packet of sweetener into each coffee cup. "The bedroom is best used for more thoughtful pleasures."

Malachi picks up the only biscuit with slightly blackened edges. "Like reading?"

"Exactly."

Ezra hand washes their mother's blue willow china plates every night, though Malachi buys paper products for outdoor dining. He can fit four biscuits on a plate and leave enough room to let the willow design peek through, though tomato juice inevitably drips from the biscuits and distort the pattern's geometric figures. The tomatoes have seen better years, but Malachi still plucks the more resilient ones from the wire stands in his garden, skins off the bruises and caked dirt, and layers basil leaves between the tender flesh of the fruit and the biscuit.

"What are those spots?" Malachi sweeps his hand across Wesley's clavicle, grazing marks below the surface of his skin.

"Battle scars from my fourth grade bout with chicken pox.." Wesley reaches for the largest biscuit. "Apparently, you aren't supposed to scratch."

He still resembles a sick kid, his pasty complexion and the way his voice travels through a pinched nose and oversized Adam's apple.

"Scars are distinguished," Malachi says. He presses against one scar until he feels Wesley flinch beneath the pressure. He pictures him as a boy sitting alone in a tepid oatmeal bath, alternating between picking soap scum off tile and puss filled bumps off his body.

The house creaks, the way houses do when they're old and every entrance and exit makes them shudder. Malachi counts the stairs as Ezra bounds them two at a time. He doesn't move when she pushes the door open.

"Who wants honey?"

She marches in with a quart sized jar filled to the brim and covered with checkered cheesecloth. One of her many hobbies that occupy her days, bee keeping. She keeps hives by the hay fields and tends to them before the morning dew evaporates.

"Ez, you're tracking," Malachi says, more just to make the observation than to reprimand his sister as her muddy sneakers leave prints on the hardwood.

She kicks off her shoes and rolls across the bed toward them, keeping the honey jar level.

"Try it," she says, setting the jar on Wesley's tray. "This may be their best."

Wesley seems fond of Ezra, strange creature that she is. A rare instance of someone whose body matches her age, keeping up like it does with her energy and undaunted by heat, rain, stairs, and bee stings. He spoons honey onto his plate and licks some off his pinky. The fragile webbing of a bee's wing is visible when Wesley removes the cheesecloth, splayed wide over the top of the honey and hovering in an air bubble, but no one acknowledges its presence in the room.

Ten years ago, the secrecy is still important to Malachi. He meets Jackson Vanderlip, an upperclassman and self-proclaimed Deistic Southern gentleman, in a Civil War history class. They become study partners and spend late nights together in the bowels of the library, pouring over notes on Bull Run and Antietam. The night before the first exam, Jackson pulls a sterling flask from his trouser pocket.

"Graduation gift from my grandfather," he says. He holds it out in front of Malachi and shakes it gently, the liquid contents sloshing around inside.

"No, thank you," Malachi replies. He presses against his temples gingerly; he has an undiagnosed astigmatism in his left eye and the combination of tiny print and dim lighting aggravates it.

Jackson tilts back his head and pours brown liquor into his open mouth, the flask never touching his lips.

"Know what I like about you, Mal? You're your own man. I respect the hell out of that."

Malachi remembers his fifteenth birthday present from his father, a decanter of aged scotch. Drinking it in gulps under his father's beaming gaze. Ezra's pudgy little hands rubbing his back while he heaves into the toilet later that night. Even as a child, she doesn't give him away. They have too much between them.

"How good are you at keeping secrets?" Jackson asks.

The society meets in the attic of the oldest building on the campus. Busts of revered statesmen guard the podium and oil paintings of Confederate generals adorn the walls. They call themselves a literary society, but Malachi never sees a book. Donning heavy black robes, they pass candles around the room while muttering Latin words in unison. Malachi learns that the society gets its name from Euphrades the Stoic and most of its funding from esteemed alumni, men whose names are recorded in history books as staunch opponents of the Civil Rights Movement. The weekly orations revolve around politics mainly, though some dabble in literature, history, Southern culture. Malachi speaks of the peculiar role of the land heir, his father.

He isn't anything like the farmer, who nurtures and turns the earth between his own hands. The farmer takes life, but always returns it by spring. The land heir knows only to take away.

Malachi stays involved with the society through college, accepting their praise with a gracious smile but inwardly disappointed that they reduce his orations to an exploration of agrarian economics. The "secret" part of the "secret society" is eventually just nominal. They have a website and a newsletter and alumni banquets in the university union. Malachi attends one after he receives an invitation in the mail with cordial greetings from the society's current president, Wesley Harmon.

Wesley possesses none of Jackson Vanderlip's natural charisma. He pales the moment he takes the microphone and stumbles through an introduction of himself. He is a senior Faulkner fanatic, and graduating next August with plans to immediately pursue graduate studies.

The society's membership demographic, even the alumni, is evolved from Malachi's days. He doesn't recognize a face. Jackson lives in the Midwest these days, some sort of investment banker. Being one of the older members in attendance, Malachi is seated at the front table with Wesley and the two other executive student officers. The ribeye steak before him is the traditional menu item for society gatherings, perhaps because the deliberate chewing required in its consumption makes the whole room quiet.

"Malachi, huh?" Wesley gestures at his nametag when he returns from the podium. "I take it your parents are god-fearin' folk?"

Church every Sunday, no question. A Psalm 23 engraving on Esther's eerily small stone in the cemetery. Blessing before every meal. But also, his father's uneasy shifting in the pew when the preacher denounces drunkenness and debauchery.

"You could say that," Malachi says. He trims a line of fat off his steak with precision.

"Are you?" Wesley asks. His manner at the table is more confident, his voice steadier, than his podium demeanor. "Do you fear God?"

After Sunday school class once, Ezra tells him that she doesn't want to go to Heaven and be stuck floating around in an angel body because what happens to your legs?

Malachi tries to use the tender meat as a sponge to soak up the unappetizing red liquid it swims in. "Among other things, yes."

Malachi most looks forward to the weekends when Wesley brings nothing but a toothbrush. Wesley says he belongs in a house like this. They swing between the pillars on the porch until the humid air becomes unbearably sticky and they have to retreat to the cool darkness of the canning cellar by the kitchen. The walls lined with glass jars, they sit on the damp cement and Malachi tells him the trick to pickling this and jellifying that. They emerge with fingers smelling of vinegar and nutmeg.

The garden stays thirsty in July. They carry water out in buckets until Wesley insists on attaching a spigot to the side of the house and returns the next weekend with a long green hose wound into a tight spiral around a plastic wheel. After a few days of dutifully spinning the hose neatly back into the wheel after use, they decide instead to let

it remain freely strewn about the garden. It weaves through the paths, starting at the herbs and ending by the melon patch. Ezra calls it their pet snake.

The weekends when Wesley steps out of the car with his book bag, they scarcely see each other save for supper and in bed. Wesley locks himself in the study and Malachi leaves a tray of lunch at the door. He is just another ghost in a house that is already too full of them.

"Where is he going to graduate school?" Ezra plops a basket of raw green beans beside the porch swing where Malachi sits, knees drawn to his chin.

"St. Andrews, he hopes."

"What happens when he leaves?"

"Nothing happens. He's just gone." Malachi snaps a bean and discovers it is just a shell, the pods inside long rotted.

"Do you wait for him?"

"He's very young."

"You're not old, brother," says Ezra. She props herself up against a side column and lets one leg dangle off the porch and into the shrubs. "I can see you in Scotland."

He comes home for the summer after he gets Ezra's letter, turns down Jackson's offer to spend the holiday with him and his family in Virginia. He notices a caravan of logging trucks driving up to the property's wood line as he pulls into the driveway and he cringes.

Malachi's father, a businessman first and foremost, carries on the tradition of his father before him. He has a contract with a paper plant that allows them to clear a portion

of trees from the woods every few years. Malachi finds their presence unnerving, the idea of strangers ravaging his land. Ezra is six when she experiences her first clearing and she cries as soon as she sees the desolate mess the loggers leave behind, nothing left but splintered remains of her beloved trees.

Malachi finds her bent over a bowl, mixing dough in the kitchen.

"Loggers are in the woods," he says.

"I know. Bastards."

"Are we alone?"

"Yes," she says. "They're helping at the church fundraiser."

He stands at the window with his hands on either side of the pane. All the trucks have disappeared from sight, but now the sounds of the trees falling have begun.

"Whose is it?" he finally asks.

Neither Ezra's hands nor her eyes leave the bowl, intent as they are on kneading.

"Doesn't matter."

"I guess not." Malachi replies. "You tell Mama and Daddy yet?"

"No. They're gonnamake me keep it. And marry him," she says.

He turns toward Ezra, her face covered in flour and her hands almost violently twisting knots of dough together. "Don't ask me to do this," he says. "You realize what you're asking me to do?"

She does, of course. They both do. Malachi has long been resigned to the fact that he will never marry and thus the burden of an heir falls to Ezra.

"I'm sorry," she sighs. "But I can't go through with it, Mal. I'll claw it out of me with my own hands, if I have to. If you don't help me."

He believes her. Given the option, she would sooner burn the woods down herself than let the loggers take her trees.

They cook the beans in a pot with a quartered vidalia onion for flavor. Dessert is honey biscuits and cantaloupe, the fruit sliced into crescent shaped slivers. Wesley emerges from the study and the three of them eat together at the dining room table. When Malachi and Ezra are children, the dining room is reserved for Christmas dinner. A kinsman's saber is displayed on the mantle, his portrait above it on the wall. Their father's oak liquor cabinet in the corner, still locked and the keys nowhere to be found.

"Hey, Mal," says Ezra. "Remember when I up and decide to trim Mama's rose bushes with that damn saber?"

"I take it your father doesn't like that," says Wesley. The only drinks on the table are glasses of iced tea. It occurs to Malachi that he's never asked Wesley if he drinks.

"Right so," Ezra continues with her story. "Mal knows that I'm as good as dead, so he says he's gonna take the blame for me. Tells Daddy it's his idea."

"Whenever I picture him coming after you that day, I see him carrying an apple tree in his hands." She laughs. "Probably just a regular switch though."

"No, I think you're right," says Malachi. "Definitely hanging fruit on that one."

The worst part of his father's whippings isn't the physical pain of the switch landing repeatedly against bare bottom. Rather, when his father sends him out in the yard to cut his own switch. Malachi always chooses his branch carefully. "*Choose one too small, and I'll come out there and get one to my own liking!*"

"That's fucked up," Wesley whistles under his breath. "I mean corporeal punishment is one thing, but shit. That's like...like Jesus carrying his own cross to the crucifixion."

Ezra nods. "Mal does have a few characteristics of Savior, now that you mention it."

Malachi knows every inch of his land. He knows all the seasons of bloom. He knows the significance of the once lucrative crop; the cotton boll. While preparing for his orations, he studies the history of the plant and in doing so comes to know a few things about the people responsible for its harvest.

He comes from a line of good slave owners, his father always assures him. Malachi learns as a child that good means minimal whippings. Good means well fed and medical treatment when necessary.

Most of his library findings at the university yield first hand narratives that make similar assertions, with the exception of one document. He finds the paper crammed in a squeaky file cabinet in the archive room. The unpublished dissertation of one Trudy Caruthers, the title page dated 1969. In it, Trudy details the plight of the female slave.

She is a crucial cog in the industry wheel because she is the only one capable of producing more slaves. This happens at times voluntarily, but it is not uncommon for her to be impregnated by a master or overseer. Regardless of bloodline, her baby's blackness alone determines its fate. After a century, she learns how to spare it. The solution is induced miscarriage, and its potion grows in the ground below the soft white wisps, the cotton's root bark. Dangerous business, taking from the master. But husbands and

fathers and brothers are brave. They're clever, tucking pieces into their pants in cautious handfuls when the foreman's eyes are turned. The results of her brew are either effective or fatal.

Malachi's father keeps one acre of cotton, for the sake of tradition more than profit. Malachi and Ezra walk to the field in silence. When the bulbs are in bloom, they give the illusion of a field blanketed in snow. But the plants aren't ready yet, though the leaves appear healthy and promising.

"One root should do," says Malachi. He lets Ezra choose and she selects the shortest in the row. The bulb is a delicate pink, the same color of the walls in Esther and Ezra's nursery.

"Do you believe in curses?" Ezra asks.

Malachi puts his weight onto the shovel head and digs into the parched soil, careful not to scrape the precious roots with the shovel's serrated teeth.

"No."

Returning to the house, they pass the grisly, silent remains of their woods. The animals within that create the comforting noises of rustling and humming and howling are gone, either dead or just elsewhere. The trees are on highways and rivers and train tracks, bound for textiles. Malachi hears Ezra snuffle.

He pats her shoulder and says, "They'll grow back."

"Let me carry it," she says, and takes the stalk of cotton plant from his hands.

As she quickens her pace and leaves Malachi behind, he reminds her to be mindful of snakes. For this reason, she's wearing a pair of their father's work boots and they swallow her spindly calves almost to her knees. Malachi thinks she resembles a

child clunking along in the boots, but then her slight frame appears to lengthen with the distance between them.

She brings it to him late one night in a washcloth, the one with the embroidered silhouettes of four goslings trailing behind a mother goose. He is by the window reading when she raps at the door. He can see the deep red stains oozing through the cloth from across the room.

Ezra says, "I didn't think I should just flush it."

Malachi sets his book down and approaches her with an outreached arm. She hesitantly releases the balled up cloth from her clenched fist. The blood spots are already dry to the touch. Lifting the corner where the last gosling waddles, Malachi examines it. Still bloody, but a distinctly gray color and definitively round shape. No bigger than a spider's egg sack and somehow it appears more delicate, like if he just squeezes hard enough it may disappear completely.

"I know what we'll do with it," he says.

He folds the cloth back over and returns it to Ezra, then rummages through the top drawer of his dresser. He's had the seeds buried beneath his underwear for months-tomatoes, squash, and rosemary. A birthday present from Jackson. The clearing by the lattices is perfect because it catches shade during the most brutal hours of the day, but is in the open enough to catch moderate sunshine and rain.

They tiptoe past the master bedroom and hear their father's snores, slip out the screen door behind the kitchen. They don't want to risk a trip to the tool shed in darkness, so instead they scoop away dirt in handfuls and scatter seeds into the six inch

holes. Before they smooth the mounds, Ezra unwraps the washcloth and lets the gray sack roll out onto the seeds. She steps back and Malachi finishes filling in the holes. Their father is pleased with their work and commends Malachi for the dirt caked beneath his fingernails.

It comes as no surprise to Malachi or Ezra when their father's will reveals that the estate is in Malachi's name, though Ezra gets a sizable monetary inheritance. Nothing changes in the house or between the siblings, except Malachi moves to his parents' former bedroom. Ezra is thrilled to gain access to their father's library. She pores over books about beekeeping and takes to it when she learns that in ancient cultures, the honey bees are tended by priestesses of the gods. She carves comb hives out of cedar and sells their nectar by the quart. Malachi ends the contract with the paper plant and instead makes a profit by cutting his tall grass into hay. The night before it's baled, he and Ezra roll in the sweet scented loose piles until they itch from head to toe. The tractor crosses back and forth over the field all day and then by sunset, the bales are dots spotting the horizon.

In the fall, when the last of the plants crumple and every living thing surrenders to the changing season, Malachi turns the soil in the fields and backyard garden to prepare for winter. They fertilize, and in the process cover nearly twenty acres with turkey shit. The odor permeates the air for miles around, but it doesn't bother Malachi or Ezra. They sit on the porch overlooking the garden, waiting for the air to cool so they can watch it die and come back to life again.

CHAPTER 2

BEASTS OF PREY

The day of Gussy and Nell's fondue party, theirs was the only house in town with running air conditioning. Though the weather was uncharacteristically balmy for February and fireplaces had been dormant since Christmas, this was the one time of year when no one priced window units from Sears catalogues.

Gussy had installed theirs in the master bedroom weeks prior, but flipped the *on* switch for the first time while Nell showered that morning. Nell emerged towel clad from the bathroom to find dime sized drops of condensation rolling off the box.

"It's freezing in here, Gus," Nell called to the kitchen.

"I can't hear you."

The air unit's incessant hum squelched out any noise or voice that tried to drift through the bedroom door. Gussy appeared in the doorway wearing an apron soiled by the juices of strawberries, honeydew, apples. All the fruit that had been neatly arranged in the refrigerator for two days before meeting a violent end on Gussy's cutting board. "You slice fruit more savagely than I could ever gut a fish," Nell once said. Gussy hadn't responded, for the remark wasn't playful and the accusation buried within it still haunted them.

"I said it's cold in here," Nell repeated, stepping into a pair of underwear, letting the towel come undone and fall to the floor. "We don't need that thing on today. Probably don't need it on for a few months."

“Do you think anyone wants to come to a fondue party when it’s nearly 70 degrees outside?”

“I wouldn’t know. I’ve never been to one. Have you?”

“It’s just chilly enough to be cozy,” said Gussy. “Between the wine and the dips and my afghans, everyone will be happy. Trust me.”

Nell suspected the afghans were to blame for both the party and the obnoxious air conditioning unit. Gussy draped the hideous knitted pieces over all their furniture and claimed half of Nell’s tackle boxes for yarn containers. Their dinner party guests rarely went to the trouble of unfolding the afghans for use, much less stretching them out to reveal the intricacy of their colorful designs and hours of Gussy’s labor. “They’re the most underappreciated blanket,” Gussy once said with a proud sniff. “Quilts had their day.”

As Nell dressed, Gussy watched with eyes that fell short of lustful but were not yet so disenchanted as to be critical. The body had changed little over the years, yet sometimes when Gussy gazed upon it there seemed to be new appendages growing or at least some that had previously gone unnoticed. The tan lines and fishing scars a reminder that this body belonged only to the sea, sex with Nell felt simultaneously irreverent and all consuming.

“You know, we could fuck in here later during dinner and no one would even hear us,” Gussy suggested with a sly grin, pointing toward the humming window.

“Who would oversee the fondue with you gone?” Nell grabbed a well worn baseball hat off the dresser and adjusted it over plastered, wet hair. “I’ll be back by four to help you set up.”

Oli never missed a Family Circus, while Mule was partial to Heathcliff the Cat. Though their cat was named Barnabus, Mule called it "Heathcliff" on occasion and always scribbled "Barnabus" over the head of the wisecracking cartoon cat when the strip was especially relevant. It was their morning ritual, Mule and Oli sitting around the breakfast table and taking turns cutting their respective strips with Oli's sewing scissors. Oli chuckled over the subtle insinuations of Daddy's latent alcoholism and Jeffy's existential crises. Mule didn't look up to ask for explanations of the chuckles, instead reaching below the table and rubbing Barnabus' ears. The cat purred and licked Mule's fingers, the saliva then traveling from Mule's fingertips to the edges of the newspaper and smudging the sports or the weather.

Oli snipped at the Sunday paper, careful not to cut apart Mule's crossword puzzle in the process.

"Just a nice dinner party," said Oli. "Some gherkins followed by pork chops and cherry pie. How hard would that be?"

Mule held out an expectant hand and accepted the scissors from Oli, blade first. "Hard enough for Gussy."

Everyone knew, but no one voiced aloud. Beneath the extravagantly themed parties with their exotic or otherwise boastfully modern menus, Gussy was inept in the kitchen. Nell spoke of their early years together as being punctuated by the most catastrophic of endeavors that inevitably ended with Gussy crumpling to the linoleum. Nell now quietly prepared their nightly meals (consisting mostly of seasonal

ocean fare) and let Gussy submit recipes to the Chamber of Commerce's annual town cookbook.

"What was the last one?" Oli asked. "The Jell-O ham?"

"Gelatin. And that one wouldn't have been so bad except I'm pretty sure it came out of a Weight Watchers cookbook."

Of all Gussy's phases, the worst by far had been the three month diet binge, the actual health merits of which were still in question. Gelatin was all the rage, Gussy said. The translucent cooking aid sold on the notion that it could turn cottage cheese and food dye into an indistinguishable substitution for chocolate cheesecake. This was tolerable, at least compared to the ham salad mould. Gussy considered it a great triumph, based primarily on the fact that the finished product looked identical to the cookbook photo and maintained its perfectly round shape throughout the night. Chunks of tinned ham, frozen peas, and hardboiled egg floated around the congealed mass like ancient fossils preserved in amber stone.

"You gonna hang that one?" Oli asked. Neither of them ever moved toward the stove to prepare breakfast until both had the chance to do with their comic what they would. Half went to the fridge collection, secured by magnets from their various travels. An Indian chief head from the Grand Canyon, a copper colored Lady Liberty from Ellis Island. The other half were dropped in the trash bin face up, exposed and good for more chuckles until someone dumped leftover cabbage or spaghetti Bolognese on top of it. They both dutifully tucked leftovers away in the fridge, but usually agreed upon starting fresh with a new dish by the next evening.

“Yeah, this one can hang,” said Mule. Oli pinned their comics with a Mardi Gras mask magnet. Heathcliff sled down a precarious hill, Daddy undermined Mommy’s parental authority.

Like a child, Roman stood on the edge of the grocery cart while Mick pushed it through the aisles of Winn-Dixie. Mick had to press hard against the steering handle to keep all four wheels grounded while Roman hunched over in an effort to distribute body weight. Some years before, Mick had found the habit charming.

“So what are we supposed to bring?” Roman asked. Mick pulled to a halt in front of the wine and beer shelves.

“Just white wine. Gussy didn’t specify what kind,” said Mick, scanning the inventory. “Chard?”

Roman hopped off the cart and landed dramatically like an Olympic gymnast. “You know I hate when you say it like that.”

“Chardonnay then.” Mick deliberated between a discount bottle and a better known brand, settling on the pricier wine and placing two bottles gently in the shopping cart atop a package of toilet paper.

“Good,” said Roman. “We shall bring the Chardonnay. And I shall drink so much that I’ll actually be good and pleasant company for all.”

“Don’t say anything about Nell’s mermaid.”

“Tell Nell not to say anything about Nell’s mermaid,” Roman retorted cheerfully. “I’m tired of hearing about it.”

"I mean don't make any sort of political statement," said Mick. "Animal cruelty and the like. Fishing is a way of life around here. We aren't going to have all our friends calling us the asshole Yankees."

"But we are asshole Yankees, my darling."

"Roman?" Mick kicked the cart's squeaky wheel. "Please promise."

Roman and Mick were both born and raised in Richmond, but quickly discovered upon moving two states south that as far as their new neighbors were concerned, they were veritable Damn Yankees.

"I'll be on my best behavior," Roman said, offering a half bow before mounting the grocery cart again. "Thank Gussy for the plastic ham, congratulate Nell on the latest deep sea carnage, whatever you like."

Roman was the charismatic one, everyone always said. "*Hard not to like Roman.*" Their cities and social circles changed so often, Mick felt pieces of former self slip through bodily holes and crevices until there was nothing left but reinvention. Roman didn't seem to have this problem, only stuffing all the colors of their new lives into place beside the relics preserved from the old ones. Like from every march for equality and rights the decade prior, Roman stored a stomp and a lion's roar for justice. Mick had only spoken and softly so, and now found nothing where the words had been.

The two approached the counter and found the white headed cashier clutching a radio, listening to baseball highlights.

"Hey now, haven't met any Yankees fans around these parts," said Roman. Mick unloaded their meager pile of groceries beside the register.

The cashier grinned. “It’s my guilty little secret. Stays between us.”

Roman pretended to whisper through a cupped hand. “I’m with you. Stottlemeyer is unstoppable.”

Mick wondered what it must feel like, to be so fluent.

“These too,” Roman said, dropping a pack of Virginia Slims onto their pile and explaining to Mick’s raised eyebrow, “A gift for our hosts.” Mick handed the cashier exact change.

Gussy ushered everyone into the foyer and noticed, with satisfaction, that Mick and Oli made shivering motions and muttered, “Brrr” when they each came in. The house, originally Gussy’s childhood home, bore the marks of a house split between the decades of its previous and current owners. Gussy kept a select few original fixtures in pristine condition. The wood stove in the kitchen, the sideboard in the living room, and the crystal chandelier in the dining room which Gussy’s father had bought to celebrate the end of the war and new dawn of American prosperity. Besides these pieces, the house was a reflection of contemporary style. Wood paneling covered the living room walls, giving the room the illusion of a ski lodge, according to Gussy. After much debate between Gussy and Nell, the old record player stayed in its corner, though Nell placed a console television set on the opposite side of the room and rearranged the furniture to indicate the dominant new form of entertainment. Gussy swore the room smelled like pine, to which Nell responded, “Most of the wood in here is oak.”

Fishing nets stretched over the wood panels; conch shells and oyster shells and miniature decorative anchors nailed into the net gaps. A stuffed mackerel, that Nell

caught, and a swordfish replica, that Oli and Mule brought back as a souvenir gift from Key West, arranged in between the family portraits above the couch. Then Nell's most beloved trophy, the mermaid fin, hanging over the sideboard.

Neighbors labeled Nell a fishing enthusiast. Their little town, situated just off the Intercoastal waterway that connected them to the Atlantic and the world beyond, was historically more agrarian in its chief economic pursuits. Recreational fishers generally were content sticking poles on the edge of home docks and dropping only an occasional net during summer months. Nell was on the water every day, ignoring the legality of various fishing seasons and adhering only to the whims of Neptune and the turning of the tides. The fish caught and cooked in their home held any number of exotic names, animals on the brink of extinction. The mermaid was no exception. Nell had to keep it in the deep freezer for a month before alerting the marine community when the season opened in May. A scientist team from Philadelphia came down to interview Nell, as most research indicated that all the schools had moved to the Gulf Coast seven years prior. "It was just a chance encounter," Nell told them with the practiced flippancy that all hunters use when speaking of their greatest conquest.

In those days, most spray painted the fins a metallic gold or silver or fluorescent blue. Rare was this one, with its nakedness. Gussy often longed to know enough words, sophisticated and eloquent words, to name them all, the colors of each scale reflecting rainbow prisms off the ceiling. The fin itself was a modest size, Nell's taxidermist exhibiting a humility not common in the trade. The fins tended to take on the appearance of swollen rigor mortis after stuffing. Nell claimed to prefer the unmolested slenderness

of this one, the uneven curves of the left and right hips accentuated by the lopsided placement above the hutch which portrayed the creature in mid swim.

“Close your eyes!” Gussy accepted two wine bottles and a cigarette pack from Roman and then shouted over the hellos and how are yous. “Link hands, and make your way to the living room.” Holding Mick’s hand, Gussy guided the group through the narrow hallway. Mule caught the edge of a door frame’s plaster rim and cursed.

“On the count of three, open your eyes,” said Gussy. “One, two, three! Ta-da!” During the reveal, Nell was on the other end of the room facing the mermaid. For a moment, everyone just stared at the display, the coffee table adorned by a mint green pot and silver platters buried beneath square cuts of crusty French bread, halved carrots, and cauliflower florets.

“Oh my God,” Roman at last exclaimed. “Fondue? This is a fondue party? That’s the surprise?”

Gussy nodded and set the wine and cigarettes by the fondue pot. “Isn’t it fabulous?”

“How fun,” said Mick.

“Very nice,” said Oli, nudging Mule’s forearm and prompting an unemphatic, “Yes, very nice.”

“First, we’ll do cocktails,” said Gussy. “Nell, honey, will you open the wine?” Nell reached in the sideboard cabinet beneath the mermaid and withdrew two bottles of rum. Gussy frowned. “Sweetheart, I think tonight we are just drinking wine.”

“A little variety never hurt anybody, right?” said Roman. “I prefer rum myself. Heavy pour please, Nell.”

Mick, Oli, and Mule looked uncomfortably between Gussy and Nell, who had already popped open one bottle of rum and was lining up glasses on the sideboard. Mule shrugged and said, “I’ll have a glass of both. I’m not driving.”

The six of them clinked seven glasses together, toasting to the grape and sugarcane planters.

“This is a good year,” said Nell, reading the rum bottle’s label.

“You know,” said Roman. “I think there’s something sensual about a rum bottle. What with its curves and all. This is a pirates’ drink. Wine is just for Jesus and Europeans.” Nell laughed.

“Good white,” said Oli, raising the glass toward Gussy and Mick.

“Excellent pairing, Mick,” Gussy said, then added, “What do you think, Mule?”

Mule sipped from the wine glass and chased it with a swig of rum. “It all tastes about the same to me. Tell them, Oli. My palate is far from refined.”

“That’s true!” Oli said. “We can be in the finest restaurant in the finest city and Mule won’t ask for more than Coca Cola.”

The rum and wine dissent between Gussy and Nell stifled much further group conversation. When Oli and Mule spoke, try as they might to make it commentary accessible to a larger group, it tended to just be inside jokes passed between the two of them that the others couldn’t breach. Nell suggested everyone take one shot of rum, which Gussy conceded to with an eye roll. They did two rounds and refilled their wine glasses.

"Now," Gussy said with a clap. "If you'll all just grab your plates. Be sure you have a dipping fork and a regular fork." The uniform clank of silverware overpowered the hesitant silence from all. The dipping forks were two pronged, thus ensuring they could only ever serve this singular purpose.

Gussy continued with instructions. "We're going to move in a clockwise, or maybe...Counterclockwise. We're going to move around the table in a counterclockwise motion. That's it. Everyone has to try everything at least once."

Lifting the pot lid, Gussy said "Ta-da" again and let the guests inspect the contents. The cheese on top had a skin like quality to it, curdled and swimming in either oil or wine. Plates were filled with bread and raw vegetables, dipping forks plunged into the spongy bread hunks and wedged forcefully into the rigid vegetable stems.

"Did you know this cheese is an aphrodisiac?" Gussy questioned the group.

"Dairy can't be an aphrodisiac," said Mule. "Only shellfish. Eh, Nell?"

Gussy beamed, delighted to have received this response from at least one guest. "It can though! It's been used as such for thousands of years in Italy. Or...France. Well, all over Europe really. It's been used for thousands of years all over Europe."

"I think this is just wonderful, Gus," said Roman. "We haven't had fondue since we left D.C."

"Gussy?" Nell interrupted. "Is there something wrong with the little heater? I think the cheese is cooling." The cheese throughout the pot bubbled, but the top skin layer refused to sink to the bottom and melt.

"It can't be," said Gussy, the statement sounding more like a plea. "It's just a bit...thick. Needs more wine. Mick, honey, can you pass the wine?"

The liquid splattered against the hardened cheese and pooled around it. Everyone politely attempted to stir the mixture with their dipping forks.

“This is why I asked Roman and Mick to choose the wine,” said Gussy. “Their intuition is impeccable.”

“What kind of cheese is this?” Mule asked, dunking a carrot into the pot.

“Gruyere and Swiss and also parmesan. Nell, for God's sakes, don't eat with your dipping fork. No one should be eating directly off their dipping fork. That's disgusting.”

They caroused around the table four slow circuits, everyone taking turns pouring more wine into the pot until the bottle was nearly empty.

“We still have dessert!” Gussy announced.

“It's cold in here,” said Oli. Gussy offered everyone an afghan and replaced the platter of bread crumbs and remaining carrots on the coffee table with a bowl of sliced fruit and bag of campfire marshmallows.

“Say, I'd love to check out your air conditioning unit, if you don't mind,” said Roman. “Been thinking about getting one ourselves.”

“Sure,” said Nell. “Just let us know when dessert's ready.”

Roman whistled, following Nell to the master bedroom. Gussy finished off the bottle of wine, pouring three fingers into two glasses and handing one to Mick. As Mick and Gussy drank, Mule carried the fondue pot to the kitchen and methodically raked the cheese remnants into the garbage.

“We need music,” said Gussy. With the wine, rum, and cheese settling heavy on queasy stomachs, the record player crackled to life. Oli slipped down the hallway toward the guest bathroom, but decided instead to follow the deafening call of the air

conditioner. Focusing on breathing slowly and not inhaling the lingering odor of wine soaked cheese, the thought of pressing against the chilled box promised feelings of ecstasy.

Their forms appeared through the slightly cracked door. Perhaps the circulating air had undone the latch and propped it open. It was like watching an old movie, black and white and silent. Familiar, this image. The bodies, long and stooped over, like they were forced to fit into the lens of Oli's limited view through the doorframe. Not quite naked, but their limbs escaped their clothes nonetheless. Roman's mouth opened, but Oli couldn't hear the cry escaping from it. They were mimes and Oli was their audience, laughing on cue. Lightly, so it couldn't have been the noise of it that alerted Nell to look upwards, just the awareness of presence. Oli imagined the words above their heads and left the door open.

Returning to the living room, Oli found Mule, Mick, and Gussy pushing the coffee table up against the record player and making a floor pallet with Gussy's safghans. The mustard yellow, forest green, and lavender colored spread reminded Oli of a fertility blanket they'd brought home from Cherokee country. "Don't think they actually used this," Mule had said. "But it may still bring us good luck. Like Joseph's coat."

"Sit down, Oli," said Mick. "Gussy was just about to tell a ghost story." A maroon ashtray, Roman's box of Virginia Slims, and the remaining unopened bottle of Chardonnay marked the center of the pallet. They gathered around in a circle and sat upright with their knees touching; all except Mule, whose bad knee prohibited such posture. Mick inhaled a Slim and passed it to Mule.

“It’s not a ghost story,” said Gussy, reaching for the wine bottle. “It’s true. We’re being watched. I’m always being watched.”

“You been smoking one of Roman’s special cigarettes there, Gus?” Mule asked. Oli joined the circle and took the cigarette out of Mule’s mouth, touching the lit end.

Gussy uncorked the wine bottle and took a swig, then set it down and picked up a used dipping fork. “Let’s look at the faces, everyone.”

“Why don’t we just get the chocolate going?” Oli asked. Mule licked the tips of burnt fingers that tasted of ash.

“No no, we will wait until Nell and Roman get back to have our dessert,” Gussy said firmly. “We have plenty of time. Don’t we, Oli? All the time in the world.”

“The faces are in the wood,” said Gussy, sucking intently on the prongs of the dipping fork. “See them?” They all surveyed the wood panels that surrounded and outnumbered them. The knots in the wood, the streaks in the stain, even the scratches where Nell had been careless in hanging net. They did indeed bear some semblance of eyes, mouths, smiles, frowns, raised eyebrows, crooked noses. Mick caught one menacing smile with jagged teeth and wondered if anyone else saw it too.

“They all look like clowns to me,” said Mule.

“And then there’s her,” said Gussy, pointing toward the mermaid with the dipping fork. “She talks to me all the time.”

Mick lay across the mustard afghan, eyes rolled backward to look at the mermaid and escape the gaze of the smiling clown. “You’re drunk, Gussy.”

“Nell touches her,” Gussy replied. “I know it. I can smell her in my own bed.” Gussy rose and approached the creature on tiptoe. “She’s sleeping now.”

The movement was so swift, no one realized what was happening until it was over and the wooden end of the dipping fork protruded from the fin. The record, a collection of folk songs, spun into its next track. Gussy stretched, yawned, and collapsed onto the floor by Mick. Mick pulled the corner of the lavender afghan to their chins just as Nell and Roman walked in.

“What the hell is this?” Nell yanked the fork from the mermaid and whirled around to face them.

“Oli, your hands are freezing,” said Mule, squeezing each finger. Oli wished the mermaid’s puncture holes, barely visible beneath the scales, would spurt blood.

“Let’s melt that chocolate,” Gussy said, biting Mick’s ear before rising from the afghan pile.

The chocolate chips melted quicker than the cheese had. Dipping forks penetrated the marshmallows with ease, but the fruit had gone soggy and each piercing only made the coffee table stickier with their juices. Nell sulked and tried to persuade Gussy to leave their guests for a private conversation. Outside, the temperature dropped below sixty and Mule began to cough. Mick finished a second cigarette and put it out in the fondue pot. No one wanted to stay any longer, but no one wanted to be the first to leave either.

“Let me, uh, help you clean, Gus,” said Oli. Mule had already begun to stack the dirty plates before Gussy responded.

“There’s not all that much to the clean up,” Gussy said, waving away their efforts and snatching the plates from Mule. “Besides, if you clean the pot, you lose the magic of the fondue experience. Fondue is best set up and cleaned up behind the curtain.”

On their drive home, Mule and Oli contemplated the magic of the fondue experience. Mule was behind the wheel, having insisted that the effects of the wine and the rum were long gone. They ranked the evening as the worst yet of Gussy’s parties. Oli kept the secret of Roman and Nell. It seemed like a conversation they should have the next morning over coffee instead, with scraps of Heathwood and the Nutmegs and the Keanes between them.

CHAPTER 3

DISPLAYED

Nellie talked about cheating men like they were bacterial viruses that traveled through stagnant swamp waters. An affliction carried through generational bloodlines, she said the women in her family had long been plagued by divorce and high cholesterol. “Nothing to be done about it,” she would say. “All men ramble eventually, even the good ones. Best to know if you want to be the kind of woman to put up with it or not.”

Rett wore Ann Taylor to the interview. A Tiffany blue pantsuit paired with a chunky necklace she found in her favorite boutique, The Morning Glory. The suit would’ve fit her perfectly at 35 on her and Edwin's anniversary cruise to Jamaica, would’ve been snug at 38 when she memorized his passwords and searched his pockets every time she did laundry, would’ve actually been loose in the hips at 40 when she dieted with Slim Fast and tried Singles Disco Night at the Holiday Inn. But at 45, after the novelty of being a divorcee wore off and both boys made her birthday call a day late, she needed to have the suit tailored before meeting Nellie Cotton and applying for the associate’s position at Cotton’s Jewelers.

Rett fidgeted as Nellie scanned her resume, nearly the entirety of which was comprised of volunteer and committee work. Her last actual job experience was bagging groceries at the Piggly Wiggly when she was seventeen.

“No ring?” Nellie asked without looking at Rett’s hands.

Rett instinctively flexed her fingers. "I'm divorced. Recently. I'm recently divorced."

"I see," said Nellie. "Henrietta Taylor. Your maiden name, I presume?"

"Just Rett works. And no. I kept my married name." Rett felt her face flush with the admittance.

"Oh? And what was your maiden name?" Nellie looked up from the resume that Rett had printed on a piece of Tiffany blue cardstock. She hoped the subtlety of her suit/resume ensemble wasn't lost on Nellie.

"Mills."

"Henrietta Mills. Now that's a fine sounding name. Bet you hated to lose a name like that."

They sat in burgundy upholstered arm chairs that were arranged like a parlor room in the back of the shop. Even for a used jewelry store, the furnishings and decor of Cotton's struck Rett as peculiar, or at least as being nothing like the inside of a Zales or Kay or any of the shopping mall franchises. She couldn't recall ever seeing a seating area in another jewelry store, and throughout the interview, she'd been pondering why exactly one needed full length dressing mirrors to try on jewelry.

"Well, it sounds like you're a woman with a few different lives under her belt now," said Nellie. "I've got a couple of those myself."

The walls of the shop boasted framed black and white photos of a young Nellie posing with beloved stars of classic sitcoms-Rick Nelson, Patty Duke, Barbara Eden. One frame held a newspaper clipping dated November 1964, the headline reading, "Homecoming Queen Makes it Big in Hollywood". Big was relative, of course. From

what Rett could gather, Nellie's first life consisted of a spattering of extra roles on some shows, her second life being a return home with enough cash in her pocket to become the first female jeweler in town history. Though decades removed from the platinum blonde in the wall photos, Rett thought Nellie had something even more striking in her appearance as an older woman. She didn't hold onto scraps of her former self like most did. She'd let her hair gray and her skin sag and even sallow on her hands. Sitting across from her, Rett felt uneasily conscious of the taut skin around her own neck and the lack of gray hairs atop her head.

“Well, I’ve gotta tell you, Rett,” said Nellie. “I sure would rather hire a woman with some real life experience over a teenager looking for a part-time.”

Rett had found the ad for her position at Cotton's in the newspaper employment listings. Edwin still sent her a generous check every month, one which exceeded his court mandated alimony by a significant amount. He was a good man like that, Edwin was. Many months, Rett cashed the check and sent the boys some walking around money. Fifty dollars for Zach at the University of South Carolina, to buy beer for his fraternity brothers. Eighty dollars for Danny in Charleston, since he had a little girlfriend who carried Michael Kors, the one detail about her that Rett could coax from her memory of their one brief meeting. Rett didn't really need a job any more then than she had for the previous twenty seven years, but she desperately needed to get out of the house, their house.

It didn't take long after the separation for her to realize that the friends of "theirs" that she'd acquired over the years were in fact "his" and that "hers" were nonexistent. Not

that Edwin tried to vilify her. On the contrary, she believed it was at his pleading that the occasional female friend would call her up and ask if she wanted to join a girls' night, wine and tapas or something equally easy to turn down. The truth was, she'd always much preferred the company of their husbands, only tolerating the wives when they inevitably accompanied them to couples' gatherings.

"They're insufferable," she told Edwin on the way home after a particularly draining bridge game, during which Kelcy Wilson mispronounced *comprehensive*. Twice.

"They've never been anything but nice to you," Edwin said with only a tinge of exasperation in his voice. "And if you want to insult them, you couldn't possibly pick a less pretentious word to do it with? Insufferable? Really, Rett?"

"All they talk about is what they baked today and my God, don't get me started on the great Rotary Gala gown debacle."

"And what are you doing that's so much better?"

Rett was silent as they pulled into the Exxon station and Edwin backed the car into the available front pump, leaving room for someone to drive up to the back one.

"Do you want an Almond Joy?" Edwin cautiously opened his driver door, minding the tight space between it and the gas pump. They'd only recently had to have the paint touched up after Rett parked too close to an uninsured Honda at the grocery store.

"No."

Edwin returned to the car with two candy bars and one bottle of Diet Coke in his hands. "I figured we could share."

The shop was situated on a corner downtown and had endured through years of downtown gentrification projects, which generally just amounted to neighborhood store closings and extensive renovations on the buildings surrounding it. The character of the town used to be defined as "quaint", but developers found that quaint was boring and did not attract customers and young crowds. The dusty antique store that was Cotton's next door neighbor for fifteen years had been replaced by a French bakery. They ripped out the raggedy, frayed carpet and covered the floor with marble tile, scattering round top cafe tables across it where shelves of old cassette tapes, kitchen ware, and soda bottles once stood.

The district spiked up Nellie's shop rent in hopes that she would leave and take her junky collection of old jewelry with her, but she mailed in the required rent check the first month it doubled with a shop coupon enclosed in the envelope. While the city planted dogwood trees and repaved the sidewalk lining Cotton's front door, the interior remained untouched by any move to "clean up" the city. Nellie resented the term "cleanup" being used interchangeably with "modernize", maintaining that no one who entered her shop could accuse it of being anything short of spotless. Even at seventy, she frequently climbed a step ladder to polish the bulbs in the chandeliers that illuminated the shop with a light far less severe than that of fluorescents.

Dolly Hepner Myers was the first. Suiting, since she was one of Nellie's most faithful customers. She bought silver charms every Christmas to mail to her four nieces in Louisiana, blissfully unaware as she was that their wrists had outgrown the bracelets sometime in the late '90s. Dolly's amethyst brooch crossed Cotton's glass counter for a

cleaning twice a year, though Rett could tell from a glance at the gleaming purple stone that Dolly had long employed the practice of cleaning her jewelry at home with toothpaste. Rett once made the mistake of telling a customer about the toothpaste trick within earshot of Nellie. Nellie was adamant in her claim that toothpaste and baking soda and other home remedies contained abrasives that damaged the jewel. Rett had to watch her steam clean four pieces and listen to a lengthy lecture for the slip-up.

Dolly described it as her husband Steve up and deciding to stick his hand back in the cookie jar after thirty years of marriage. She came in with a music box full of the gold, silver, and brass remnants of their marriage and shoved it across the counter toward Rett and Nellie with a dramatic wave of her hand.

“Lord knows I don’t need it anymore,” she sniffled into a monogrammed handkerchief. “I’ll take whatever your offer is, Nellie. Truly. I was damn near throwing it all away.”

“I’m certainly glad you didn’t,” Nellie said cheerfully. She carefully lifted a locket necklace from the pile and assessed it under the soft light of the chandelier.

“These are some lovely pieces. Too pretty for the trash.”

Every few minutes, Dolly’s open music box croaked a line of melody that may have at some point resembled the sound of piano keys, but to Rett, only sounded like a sick animal. Rett mimicked Nellie’s precise motions and removed each necklace, bracelet, ring, and pair of earrings from the box one by one. She lined them up along the counter while Nellie went to the storeroom to retrieve her magnifying glass that she used for inspection. Rett suspected this was more for the customers’ comfort rather any kind of visual necessity. Nellie could get a sense of a piece with just a glance. She knew

where to look for the chip in the gold, the broken link in the chain, the missing gem. She could spot anything faux or inauthentic from ten paces. Even the newly popular white gold was, in her mind, nothing short of an abomination.

"I'll write you a check, honey," Nellie said to Dolly, after she'd complimented each of her pieces individually. "You go cash it this instant and stop by the Belk on your way home. Get yourself that sweet red pea coat they've got hanging in the window."

When Dolly left, Rett helped Nellie tie price tags to every piece. Nellie priced the engagement stone last, turning it over and over in her palm. Then she told Rett to fill the front window with Dolly's collection. While Rett arranged the jewelry strategically with the larger pieces prominently placed in the center, Nellie wrote on the promotional sign with steady hands. It wasn't until Rett passed by the window on her way out that evening that she saw it. *Fine Jewelry! Previous Owner: Miss Dolly Hepner, New Woman.*

After Dolly, they featured a different New Woman display every month. Some women had seen Dolly's display and wanted in on the game. They would bring a ring from a first marriage or a relic from a past relationship so long dissolved that it didn't bear any sort of sentimental value for them anymore. These were the women who would laugh with Nellie while she inspected their (usually worthless) wares. They didn't care about whatever two digit figure Nellie would scrawl in her checkbook. Rett thought these women undeserving of the window space. Though she didn't vocalize it to Nellie, Rett wished they would save the display for the women who had to be persuaded to part with their rings. The ones who came through the door looking timid and shaky, but would afterward stand on the sidewalk to gaze at their display (however humble an

offering it was) and their sign and their maiden name and leave with a look on their face that Nellie called "triumphant".

Rett saw him through the window before he came in. He'd paused to look at Olivia Schmidt Adler's display, a simple but elegant string of pearls draped around an ivory colored neck bust. Rett contemplated ducking into the back room, but Nellie was assisting a customer by the full length mirror. Scrambling below the counter, Rett found the satin cloth they used to rub tarnish off wedding bands. They kept a box full of dirty rings stored away and only opened it when there was nothing else to be done in the shop. Rett was vigorously rubbing her third band by the time Edwin approached the counter.

"Little birdie told me they saw you working here," he said. Rett noticed he hadn't shaved in one, no, two days, though the collar rising above his suit jacket was disappointingly starched and free of wrinkles. "Had to come see it for myself."

Rett knew just the loudmouthed birdie. Jessica Ingles, with whom Rett had served throughout the boys' school years on the PTA, had come in just days earlier and perused Nellie's inventory in search of a graduation present for her youngest daughter. She left empty handed after offering Rett a sympathetic wrist pat and inviting her to the April book club meeting.

"You came all the way down here just to see me?"

"Well, yeah I did," he answered tentatively. "Honestly, I'm worried about you. Why are you working?"

"You shouldn't worry about me."

"Do you need something?"

"I'm really busy here, Ed." Rett concentrated on the ring in her hands. She could see an inscription on the inside, the words blurred beneath the tarnish.

"I mean, are you...are you hurting? Do you need money?"

"Why would I need more money? I have a job."

Edwin looked to the back of the store where Nellie appeared to be completely focused on the customer who was trying to decide between a silver and gold earring.

"Do the boys know about this?"

"No. I'm sure you'll fill them in."

"They're not calling you?"

"Oh, Zach gives a pity call about once a month."

"I'm sorry, Rett. I've told them...I mean, I just told them that you know. You're still their mother. And that they should call you."

"Do they really need a reminder that I'm still their mother?" Rett read the inscription as she spoke. *3/22/75 Forever Yours -Glenn*

"I only meant that...I just want you to know, I would never try to turn them against you."

He said nothing after that, and Rett realized he was waiting for an answer. She sighed. "I know that."

"Ok. Good." Edwin stared at the gold band in Rett's hands, then looked down at the one that was still wrapped snugly around his left ring finger. With some effort and wiggling, he removed his wedding band and placed it gently on the countertop. "Mine could use a cleaning too."

“Rett, honey?” Nellie said sweetly. “The gentleman that was in here a while ago? He put his hand on the glass over the birthstones.”

“I’ll get it.”

“Thanks! I’m gonna run get some lunch, would you like something?”

Rett mumbled a “no, thank you” and grabbed the Windex spray bottle and rag under the cash register. She sprayed the glass countertop three times and wiped away the smudge of Edwin’s fingerprints that dangled over a pair of ruby stud earrings. She never understood how a man so invested in cleanliness and hygiene could have such perpetually greasy fingertips. He diligently rinsed his coffee cup before leaving for work in the morning, and Rett couldn't ever complain about dirty underwear littering their bathroom floor. Yet it was those grease stains, the ones Edwin inadvertently pressed with the tips of his neatly clipped and moisturized fingers onto the steering wheel and the sink faucet. Those were what she found maddening.

The bell on the door jingled, signaling Nellie's return, but Rett was busy spraying her way down the length of the counter and didn't look up. Nellie called her name and told her to follow her to the back room. Pulling up a chair at the card table that doubled as a working and eating space, Rett noticed that the bag in Nellie's arms was stamped with the logo of the French bakery next door. Nellie had initially been reluctant to be a patron of the business which had driven out her friends at the antique store. She only started bringing in a pastry or a sandwich a few times a week after the bakery manager bought Miss Rachel McNair's anniversary jacket ring from the front display.

Rett thanked Nellie for the food and they each ate quietly, Nellie nibbling delicate bites and Rett attempting to discreetly pick the unwanted items off her sandwich. The

bakery served their chicken salad chunky, with dice sized chunks of apple, pecan, and celery mixed in it. Rett had grown accustomed to preparing hers plain and creamy, just a dollop of mayonnaise and a sprinkle of salt. Zach had a nut allergy and Danny, she was convinced, agreed with his father out of habit more than anything and Edwin claimed that celery strings would stay wedged between his teeth for days.

"That was your ex earlier?" Nellie asked. Rett nodded and flicked a sliver of celery onto her napkin.

"Did he leave?"

"Yes," said Rett. "But it was me. I made him leave I mean."

"He cheated?" Nellie pressed. It made sense to Rett that she would assume so. Middle age had been kind to Edwin, his hairline refusing to recede and his suit size unchanged. She'd observed their supposedly mutual female friends swooning over him right under their husbands' noses on multiple occasions.

"No. I thought so. For a while. But no." In fairness to Edwin, he'd never given her a tangible reason to think so. She'd heard women talk about a "feeling". Some sort of feminine intuition about infidelity. It was a far-fetched notion for her to cling to, in retrospect. Edwin was a courteous lover, but not an exceptionally passionate one. The idea that he would leave her and the boys for a wilder romp in the hay was absurd. But she felt something when she shuffled through his emails, texts, looked on the backs of receipts and business cards in his pockets. At the time, she thought that must be it, the feeling. The gnawing intuition. The moment everything changed was when she finally recognized the feeling as being one of hope rather than dread. Hope that she would find something, anything. Anticipating the relief of it.

"You know how I got that gig?" Nellie gestured with her free hand at a framed photo on the wall behind them, a vintage ad for a coconut scented perfume. Staring at the image closely, Rett recognized the tanned, oily model beneath the retro font. Nellie wore a high waisted, sailor striped bathing suit and held a beach ball above her head.

Rett shrugged. "No idea."

"I was sleeping with an agent." Nellie said. "He got me a few of those TV jobs, then when those got fewer and further between, he said I should try modeling."

"Huh," Rett grunted. She had concocted similar theories about Nellie since she started working and expected that Nellie was going to enjoy telling her story, how she was the victim of some Old Hollywood misogyny and career blackmailing. Nellie with her beautiful, sallow hands and her window shrine.

"He cheat on you? Some younger model?" Rett humored her, her language familiar from Nellie's shared bits of wisdom.

"Oh, goodness no," Nellie laughed and dabbed at the corners of her mouth with a napkin. "Asked me to marry him."

Rett crunched on a mouthful of chicken and celery. It was easier to just eat the sandwich than to try to pull it apart. "You didn't want to?"

"No," said Nellie. She looked up at Coconut Nellie and clicked her fingernails against the table. "He was a good man. A decent man. But I didn't want to marry him. And I was young. Thought California wasn't big enough for the both of us."

"It probably wasn't," Rett replied. She wanted to reach over the table and cover Nellie's hand with her own, but the contrast of their skin would've been too devastating.

"What about you?" Nellie asked. "Why aren't you still married to him?"

“Because,” Rett said. She looked for a better reason and found none. “Because I didn’t want to be anymore.”

After Edwin's visit, the window display became solely Rett's responsibility. Neither she nor Nellie acknowledged as much, but at closing time, Nellie would stand quietly at the counter and do paperwork while Rett meticulously arranged and rearranged the variations of jewelry in the window. She spent her days off in craft stores, buying clearance rolls of tulle and strips of velvet that she used to upholster cushions and boxes. The New Woman window display had gained notoriety in town, the fad trickling down to the younger adolescent girls who wanted to sell their cheap lockets for \$4 and have their name up for all to see. Some only wanted to bring shame to the men more than they wanted a means of affirmation for themselves.

Rett looked at hands everywhere. She learned to differentiate between a ring that was cherished and polished regularly and one which was adored and well worn and then those which were dull and discarded at every opportunity. Bare hands she became quick to clasp, uttering words of encouragement and making a generous monetary offer to take the ring and anything else they wanted rid of.

The week before Mother’s Day, she found a gift wrapped package on her front porch as she headed to work in the morning. There was no return address on it, just a Hallmark card with a watercolor print of lilies and a note inside saying, “Happy Mother’s Day, Mom! Love, Danny”. She’d seen the necklace advertised on TV. One of the seasonal heart shaped diamond necklaces made by Zales or Kay or one of the shopping mall franchises. Nothing distinctive or meaningful about the junk they sold. That was so

typical of Edwin though, well-meaning but incapable of distinguishing between the worthwhile and the worthless. It was possible he'd at least gone to the effort of obtaining Danny's signature somehow, but that was hard to tell. Danny learned to write by copying the notes Edwin scribbled on legal pads, so their handwriting styles were indistinguishable.

Rett stopped by the bakery on her way to the shop and ordered two scones from the chilled display case that also held Napoleons and crème brulee, noting with satisfaction that the glass covering the pastries was free from any marks or handprints. After she opened Cotton's, she dropped her and Nellie's scones on the table beneath Coconut Nellie who was a "Beachtastic Babe". She lay the shopping mall diamond against a royal blue velvet, and then against a sheer lace curtain, tried to determine which was most flattering for the cut and color. The window needed a Mother's Day feature, and she was, after all, a mother, both in her past life and the new one.

CHAPTER 4

MOTHERS

They never seem to know quite what to make of the garter. Not the placing of it so much. Libby actually finds the girls to be alarmingly unaffected by adults touching and undressing them, like they have no reason to question the authority of a grown up or at least a grown up woman. But the garter itself they think strange.

"What is that? Is it a bracelet?" The more precocious ones ask.

The quiet ones just stare, sometimes at Libby and sometimes at themselves in the vanity mirror. The girl, perched on the edge of the bathroom counter, and Libby kneeling before her with the lacy white garter in her hands. Libby rolls it up their bare thighs, twisting and doubling it over for the petite ones and letting it fit snugly around the softer flesh of the chubby ones. She knows that when it's removed later, there will be a ring of red, irritated skin where the lace left its imprint. The mothers enjoy this part, pulling out bright orange Kodak cameras and telling their daughters (and Libby) to smile. This is why the bathing suits are necessary, Fran says. No one minds a bunch of little girls running around in their bathing suits, but half naked would eliminate the picture taking and what was their business without that?

After the garter comes hair. Libby wonders sometimes if Fran knows she lied about passing her cosmetology boards. She supposes it doesn't make much of a difference either way. One hardly needs certification to yank on tender heads.

"Do you want a French braid, a bun, or curled?" Libby repeats the words countless times for each bride and bridesmaid. Some ask for her to repeat it, others give her the blank stare until she says it again with practiced patience. Most of their mothers answer for them.

"We do ballet, so we're about tired of the bun," says one. Her laugh is a screeching pitch. She wears a pink t-shirt with the words *Ballet Mom* pasted across the chest in glittery letters that Libby saw featured once on a late night infomercial. "Kaylee, wouldn't you like Miss Libby to curl it for you like we did on Easter?"

Usually, the pretty girls have pretty mothers. These are the Karens, Susans, Mistys, and Angelas. They wear matching white capris and stand a courteous distance behind Libby while she works, but close enough to intervene on their daughters' behalves should she misplace a curl or get the braid off center. Libby rarely observes the bride and her bridesmaids interacting with one another, and assumes the mother of the bride composes the guest list based solely upon her own friends and PTA companions.

Libby pleads with Fran after every party. "We have to start capping at five. Either that or we need to bring in someone to help me do their nails."

"I know, honey," Fran says. "You handled it beautifully though. Next time. I promise. No more than five or six."

The bride has eleven wedding dresses to choose from, while the bridesmaids have at least thirty gowns ranging in color, size, and era. The Marcias and the Glorias push for the '80s gowns that resemble their own.

"God, what was I thinking with those shoulder pads!"

Some girls squabble over the dresses with metallic sheen and sequins. Libby cringes when they try on dress after dress before settling on one, in the process turning the floor of the bridal suite into a mountain of tulle that must be hung later. The same is true of the jewelry; they pick through the velvet lined boxes and clutter every dresser top with the strands of fake pearls, gaudy costume diamonds, and clip on earrings. The bride, whose mother is a Stephanie or a Chrissy, fully asserts her position of dominance about the time they select high heels. She tells the bridesmaids that their shoe color has to match their dress color. Most are happy enough to oblige, but sometimes one of the bridesmaids is a former bride and doesn't care for the shift in power. She cries to her mother, who is a Tracy or a Jessica, and says she really wanted to wear the turquoise with her red dress. The mothers' cameras start flashing when the girls take their first uneasy steps in the heels. Their feet slide down the arches and leave the back halves of the shoes empty, so they have to walk with their weight on their toes.

Once the hair, nails, and dressing is done, Libby's primary job for the remainder of the party is to make sure no one steps on a dress train or stumbles over their oversized gowns and shoes. The girls go downstairs for their etiquette lesson with Fran while Libby sets the table with china plates and pastry platters full of ham and cheese sandwiches (cut precisely into crustless triangles), strawberries, grapes, and shortbread cookies. She can hear Fran in the parlor, showing them how to fold their napkins in their lap and then how to dab daintily at their mouths without smearing their imaginary lipstick.

At first, Fran just had a wardrobe full of her old cotillion gowns and the two bridesmaid dresses she wore when her cousins Lucy and Ruth got married. Her own wedding dress she gave to her daughter Marion. Told her she would like to see her granddaughter play dress up with it one day. She supposed Marion kept it in a moth riddled attic box now, though she made a point not to ask on the rare occasion that Marion called. Fran accepted their infrequent communication as the terms of their relationship; Marion had always been closer to her father anyways.

After Richard died, Fran hesitated to go to the estate sales without him. It had never interested her when he was alive. She went with him for appearance's sake a few times a year, but mostly just complained about the assorted junk pieces he brought home. A rusted railroad lantern here, a broken radio there. Pieces he bought with his own money. They had a joint account, from which they drew the funds to cover the mortgage, bills, groceries, and the like. But Fran determined early in their marriage that separate accounts would be necessary to keep the peace. She ran a private seamstress business out of their parlor, and Richard was an attorney. Despite the contrast in their paychecks, her personal account grew larger than his over the years. Her meager deposits added up; she only withdrew for Christmas presents or a new household appliance. Richard's money burned a hole in his pocket, Fran liked to tell him.

She didn't buy anything at the first sale, but returned for a second and third. It felt wrong to her somehow, pillaging the possessions of the deceased. She'd already given Marion most all of Richard's junk collection and couldn't imagine she would ever part with any of it. Marion had been sentimental as a child, pressing leaves into books just to keep them from being raked away when fall came.

The fourth sale took Fran sixty miles out of town. She found an old two story farmhouse with red, white, and blue bunting draped across the porch railing. From the looks of the inside, the previous owners had only just passed. Open magazines lay sprawled across the coffee table and Fran noticed an ashtray full of cigarette butts in the study. Yet among these signs of recent inhabitation, there were price tags on every item. \$10 for a set of Tupperware. \$200 for a dusty sideboard. \$50 for a box of retro formal gowns, which Fran purchased after five minutes deliberation. She wasn't entirely sure what she would do with them, but she took each out when she got home and ironed them. Revved up her recently retired sewing machine to patch up the holes that either wear or rodents had caused.

She mentioned the dresses to Marion when she called one Sunday afternoon, and Marion responded with the tone of polite but distant interest that Fran was accustomed to hearing from her daughter. She didn't know why she had expected or wanted something different. Regardless, she kept her newfound hobby to herself from then on. That was what she called it, her hobby. She tracked down bridal boutiques that were going out of business and having major sales. She looked in thrift stores for anything with a satin sheen. Soon, she'd amassed more than she had space for in the house. That's when she made her biggest purchase to date, out of the personal account that she'd kept active after Richard died.

The house was advertised as an old manor home, and had previously been used for dinners, parties, and most notably weddings. Fran could picture her future business as she walked through the parlor doors-A birthday party venue for little girls, where they

could play little brides and bridesmaids and debutantes. Just until Marion gave her some granddaughters of her own, which had to happen any time.

The amber alert for Libby didn't go out for several hours after she'd been taken. In truth, no one, including her mother, had noticed her missing until it was time for her to blow out the six candles on her birthday cake. The adult attendees of the party had all been gathered under the picnic shelter, glancing in the direction of the park's swing set and jungle gym periodically and seeing no cause for alarm there. Libby's mother had busied herself all morning with setting out bowls of potato chips and making sure the hamburger patties that Uncle Clark had going on the charcoal grill didn't blacken. When all the children circled around the cake in song, the adults looked back and forth, searching first for someone to blame.

Libby remembered her father, though she hadn't seen him in years. His hairline had started to recede and the stubble on his chin was gray, belying his 28 year old frame. He approached her behind the women's bathroom where she was sipping tepid water from the fountain.

"Hey, Libs. Happy birthday."

As she later told the detective in charge of the case, he didn't force her to get in his truck. He merely suggested, asked even, if she wanted to go for a ride with him. Let him buy her a birthday ice cream cone. Looking back on the ordeal, Libby suspected that was his intention, at least initially. After all, he drove them straight to Dairy Queen and they shared a chocolate sundae on the patio. It wasn't until they got back in the truck cab that he said, "Court's got no business keeping a daddy from his kid. Ain't fair to neither one of us."

Libby watched the park go by through the passenger window. The sun reflected off the gleaming metal slide that had earlier left heat blisters on the backs of her thighs

and calves. She could spot her mother across the sandbox, her freshly bleached perm even more pronounced than usual from the humidity. The story was that Libby's father had attempted to set her mother's hair on fire during an argument. Sometimes her mother would say that he actually lit the match and chased her around the kitchen table. Libby often imagined what it would feel like to light her mother's hair on fire. Not because she wanted to hurt her, she just liked the idea of those blonde wisps being ablaze and her mother being untouched by the flames.

They pulled up to a CVS once they were out of the town limits. Libby's father ran inside and returned with a bag full of items. He tossed Libby a candy bar, ignoring her when she inquired about the bag's contents. When the amber alert blared through the radio speakers, Libby caught her name and felt the truck accelerate as her father said, "Shit."

The motel he chose wasn't far off the highway, but perhaps he thought that by parking behind the dumpster and disguising Libby, he could keep them hidden in plain sight. He checked them in, not noticing the way the clerk eyed Libby in his arms.

Once in their room, he deadlocked the door and said to Libby, "We're going to play a fun game. A make believe game. We're going to dress you up."

He emptied the contents of the CVS bag on the bed- a pair of scissors and a bottle of men's gray concealer. He tried to cut off all of Libby's hair in one fluid sheer, like one might cut through a yard of wrapping paper. He lifted the strands up by the roots and shushed her when she cried out. Quickly realizing this method was ineffective, he took to frantically snipping at random ends until all that remained was a mess of chopped sprigs and exposed pieces of scalp.

“Okbaby, that was the hard part. You’ll like this though.”

Libby had to stand on tiptoe to reach the counter. Bending her head over the bathroom sink, her father lathered the black dye through what little hair was left. Careless with the application, both the sink and the counter surrounding it were drenched with the inky liquid by the time he finished. He was satisfied with the outcome, having made her thoroughly unrecognizable from the blonde haired girl whose photo was the top story on the evening news.

While he showered, Libby methodically removed her dye stained Hello Kitty shirt and matching shorts, placing them in the sink like her mother did when she thought a stain needed a Clorox soak. She was standing by the bathroom door, waiting for her father to emerge so he could turn on the faucet for her, when the police team busted down the door and stepped into the room with their guns pointed.

The officer in charge spoke gently to her, asking her why her clothes were off and what happened to her hair. Libby answered them matter-of-factly, making sure to include the details about Dairy Queen and Clorox, since they seemed interested in details. He wrapped a blanket around her shoulders and carried her out to the car while the other officers with their vests and their guns moved toward the bathroom where the shower had abruptly ended.

Though she had only been gone for a few hours, the Baptist church downtown had already made arrangements for her prayer vigil. They went so far as to line the sidewalks of the town square with white paper bags, which were meant to hold burning candles by nightfall. In the midst of the joyful celebrations for Libby’s safe return, no

one bothered to clean them up for a week. Libby watched them every day, being torn apart by the wind and the weight of the candles inside.

The parties are over by lunchtime. Fran can remember the days of being a young mother when Saturdays were precious. Of course, her Saturdays with Marion were considerably less busy than those of her clients. There seems to be an unspoken rule among the young mothers that parties start between 10 and 11 a.m. to ensure their afternoons are free to fill with games, recitals, and aerobics classes. After she sees off the bride and her mother, Fran leaves Libby with the task of the clean up.

She initially perceived Libby as sulky, but later decided she was just quiet. Marion was quiet too, even as a baby. She came out of the womb silently, making Fran's first moment of motherhood one defined by a sense of alarm. The doctor assured her this was relatively normal, that sometimes it takes a few seconds before the newborn can squeal. The night they took Marion home, Fran slipped out of bed after Richard had been snoring soundly for an hour. She hovered over Marion's cradle and rocked it a bit, trying to wake the baby. When this proved futile, she reached down and pinched Marion's shoulder, softly and then harder and harder until Marion relented and woke with a shrill scream.

Fran leaves the manor house and drives to a truck stop diner. It's a franchise restaurant, she's visited other locations before but never this one, which is important. Best not to get repeat waitresses. Some days she likes to have four grandsons, other days two granddaughters. She forgets names when asked to recall them from visit to visit, so she's learned to just start fresh with a new diner and a new waitress.

Fran is seated parallel to the hallway that holds the establishment's solitary restroom. To their credit, the overwhelming smell of Lysol that mingles with the equally dense aroma of bacon grease and creamer indicates that perhaps the toilet porcelain is cleaner than the grimy floors. The waitress who approaches Fran's table has a willowy figure, but an unfortunately pimpled face. The nametag hanging lopsided on her chest reads Briana in the diner's signature yellow scrawl.

"Have you decided?"

Fran scans the laminated menu that serves a dual role as a placemat, sticky with syrup. "Hmm which would you recommend? The red velvet pancakes or the original?"

"We don't have the red velvet anymore, ma'am."

"Oh no?"

Briana shakes her head.

"Huh. I could've sworn I just saw the commercial," says Fran. "That's disappointing."

"That's really the only reason I stopped here." Briana offers her a tight smile and a shrug. Fran keeps talking. "I'm not from around here. I'm on my way to visit my grandkids."

"How fun."

"Well, I'll have my hands full with them. Three kids under six. My daughter and son-in-law are going on a cruise to Mexico. I figure they deserve a break. They work so hard."

"Yeah," Briana says. She glances in the direction of the other occupied table where a glassy eyed trucker sits nursing a cup of coffee. "I apologize about the red velvet, ma'am. Corporate came in last week. Made us dump the batter out."

"That's absurd. I'm sure there are plenty of soup kitchens in the area that would've been glad to have that."

Briana taps her pen against the order pad. "Can I get you something else?"

Fran sighs. "The pot roast. No gravy."

Fran had asked Richard once if he thought Marion could possibly be a lesbian. She laid her argument out for him: Marion has a college degree, they invested \$5,000 in her orthodontic care. Yet she's never married, never shown any interest in marriage. She's no spring chicken now, what is she waiting for?

Richard considered this briefly then said, "No. If she was, she would've told me."

It takes Libby the better half of an hour to get the bridal suite cleaned back up, the dress inventory tucked away in standing wardrobes, closets, and hope chests. She organizes the bottles of nail polish by color, then texture (glossy or matte). The hardwood floors have to be swept, the heavy rugs in the parlor room vacuumed. Libby finds a pair of stilettos underneath an armchair; one of the day's more silent bridesmaids must have kicked them off during the dancing portion of the party. Instead of carrying them back to the bedroom closet, she crams her feet into them and listens to the bottoms click against the hardwood. In the bedroom, she swings open the door of the oak armoire and plucks a yellow silk gown from the rack. Slipping it on, she assesses herself in the mirror, mentally likening her appearance to an unripe banana. She makes her way to the kitchen, attempting to walk gracefully and keep her balance on the heels. The remnants of the bridal brunch, plus Libby's personal snacks in the pantry, amount to a sleeve of shortbread cookies, half a baggie of deli sliced honey ham, and a jar of peanut butter. She dips the cookies into the peanut butter until the crumbs speckle the jar, then she turns to the ham. She eats every piece from the baggie, licks her fingers, and brings Fran's linen to her puckered lips.

CHAPTER 5

HOLLOW

The first few years my aunt Dody was a witch were years steeped in ritual and tradition. They became a beneficial distraction for me, being newly orphaned and the new girl in town. Two years my senior, Dody's daughter Widget was in the third grade then, mastering cursive writing well ahead of her classmates. She wanted to show off her skill when she made Dody's signs. She scrawled her barely legible loop letters all over the wooden boards that Dody collected from the home improvement store on clearance. Dody never made new signs and she never removed Widget's from where she staked them in the ground at the end of our driveway and beside the stop sign on Reid Road. They weathered four seasons a year, but somehow remained relatively intact, save for the eventual fading of the black paint that formed the words: Witch's Hollow Ahead. I noted the signs' absence as I pulled onto Reid, bitterly assuming that they were too juvenile for whatever it was Widget had going on now.

It was almost five o'clock when I arrived at the house, wincing as I counted seven strange cars parked around the yard. I never liked the sight of cars parked in our yard, even during the Hollow's busy years when cars meant guests. Cars, especially the kind you generally saw around our town, detracted from the elegance of Dody's two hundred year old plantation house.

Carrying with me a suitcase and a grocery bag, I entered through the kitchen door, wondering briefly why it had yet to occur to Widget to start locking doors. I called her

name and peeked around the downstairs rooms to no avail. My previous visit home had been for Dody's wake, several years earlier. I found comfort and a sense of normalcy in the empty rooms surrounding me, much more so than when they were filled wall to wall with soft speaking mourners and casserole dishes.

From the looks of the empty sink and the stack of frozen TV dinners in the freezer, the kitchen had not been used in quite some time. I was grateful for my foresight in bringing the groceries, knowing that if Widget had taken anything from Dody's book she wouldn't have enough in the kitchen to make dinner for two. October was always the one month of the year when Widget and I had to smear our peanut butter on stale pieces of bread and scrape the bottom of the oatmeal canister for a cup's worth of oats. Dody would pass through the kitchen on her way to the Hollow every morning and glide her fingers along the surface of her neglected countertop, making remarks to herself about needing to get milk later that day. None of us minded the temporarily empty pantry shelves. Our annual trip to the grocery store the day after Halloween was an anticipated treat. Dody, her purse bulging with what I now assume was at least a quarter of the Hollow's cash earnings, would tell us to get anything we wanted. I filled the grocery cart with chocolate milk, instant Jell-O packets, Fruit Loops, and bags of leftover Halloween candy. Widget preferred to stroll the aisles leisurely, reading the labels on foods she'd never heard of before. She'd toss produce in her basket and balance it atop her head like Carmen Miranda. She said she liked the sound of the word *persimmon* and the way the extra fuzzy kiwis felt like a ball of flesh in her hands.

I set a pot of noodles on to boil, opened myself a bottle of wine and looked for other excuses to postpone my visit to Widget's new Hollow.

In contrast to the all-consuming month of October, November and December were our lazy months. We observed those holidays with minimal ritual, just the three of us. Dody cooked a turkey and gave us our Christmas gifts directly from herself, not Santa Claus. They were usually books or else new supplies for the Hollow.

We always referred to Dody as my aunt, but she was actually a distant cousin of my mother's. Dody mentioned my mother to me on occasion, offering anecdotal stories about her and their summers spent playing together on the coast. She scarcely mentioned my father. I liked to think she hated him, either because he'd made my mother marry below her station or perhaps because their ill-fated anniversary beach getaway was his idea.

"Was it a forbidden romance?" I asked her once as we wrapped the Hollow trees in twinkling light bulbs.

Dody gave me a confused look and shook her head, winding the cord around a branch. "No. Nobody was stopping them."

Dody called it our college fund. Said it was either this or she had to pick up some lunch lady shifts at the school. Even as a kid, I had some inkling that Dody had not wanted a day in her life, in spite of the fact that she seemed to earnestly see herself as a middle class sort of benefactress to me and single mother to Widget. When your money goes as far back as Dody's did in lines of Southern aristocratic blood, I'm not even entirely sure you're aware of your own economic status on a day to day basis anyway. I never saw a bill envelope lying around our house. I know she had them, but her worry over finances was of the theatrical variety. She bought generic brands of sour cream and bemoaned the spiking gas prices with her church friends. She thought those were the

things people with real jobs and unpaid mortgages lost sleep over.

“Sim, I won’t go through with this unless I have your and Widget’s full cooperation,” she told me. She had come in my room late one night and woken me to discuss the prospect of the Hollow. I remember thinking the next morning that perhaps I’d dreamed the whole conversation, even Dody in her night gown with a head full of curlers. “Witches don’t do well when they work alone, you know.”

“Well, what will we have to do?” I asked.

“It will be just like dressing up,” she replied. “Playing make believe. You girls can do whatever you want really.” She patted the covers down and added, “Like I said, it’s up to you. I have no problem taking the cafeteria gig instead.” To her credit, Dody always had a way of treating me and Widget like adults, like her equals.

I considered telling her to take the lunch lady job and keep our property free of strangers and neighbors. But the idea of Dody having to stuff her Marilyn bleached hair into a hairnet and dump scoops of mashed potatoes onto cafeteria trays with her manicured hands pained me for some reason.

I yawned. “The witch thing sounds fun.”

In the dim light emanating from the hallway, I saw her wink.

“I promise we will only be good witches.”

I had the table set to perfection and still no sign of Widget. I scooted the plates of spaghetti and swished my wine around the glass absentmindedly. Finally, I took two generous sips from it, smoothed the tablecloth, and headed out the side door to the backyard.

The Hollow was just an old storage barn nestled beneath some oak trees about a quarter mile from our back door. Spanish moss hung heavy from the trees and unless you were looking for it, the barn seemed to eerily appear out of nowhere. The loft used to hold hay, but we'd swept it away that first year. Dody thought it'd be a fire hazard with all the candles.

September was our cleaning month. The barn had to be rid of its dust and mice, the floor cleared to make room for Dody's cauldron of dyed green water. Her version of "witch" was a hybrid melding of various supernatural myths, occasionally borrowing from the figures of Grimm and Disney. She had a crystal ball in one corner of the barn, along with a cracked fun-house style mirror, an apothecary shelf with jars labeled "Tortoise Brain" and "Troll Hair", and carved pumpkins filled with gooey foods representing a wide array of human organs.

The Hollow was the most well attended community event in town, ultimately superseding the various church fall festivals. The second year, we built a maze out of hay bales in the clearing beside the Hollow. Widget drew it out like a map and kept it taped to our ticket table by the barn, just in case anyone ever got lost running it. Everyone pretended that they couldn't actually see over the tops of the bales if they just stood on tiptoe.

I walked past the spot in the clearing where the maze used to be, but it was now just a ring of dead grass. Widget had apparently also not seen fit to leave the twinkling light bulbs hanging in the oak trees. Just as the barn came into my sight, Widget stepped out from behind a clump of trees and blocked my path. Dody never did strike an intimidating figure in her witch garb. Her pointed black hat with its faux velvet lining

and accompanying black dress clearly came straight from the costume aisle of K-Mart, along with her cotton candy colored eye makeup. Widget on the other hand, emerging from the shadows in her form fitting, ankle length black dress with its long sleeves and plunging neckline, made me gasp.

“I’ve been waiting for you,” she said, smiling triumphantly at my response. Then she used the voice we used to practice to mimic Vincent Price, adding, “Come in. If you dare” and walked toward the barn.

Widget was my first kiss. We were 14 and 16, sitting in the loft of the Hollow’s barn with our backs against ceiling beams. We’d managed to get drunk on a bottle of grape schnapps that Widget had somehow hustled from one of the older teenage guests that night. She had just finished giving me the definition of a blow job.

I scrunched up my face in disgust. “But why? That’s so gross.”

“It’s a funny thing,” Widget responded slowly, the cheap liquor weighing on her tongue. She pushed the empty bottle away from us and let it roll precariously close to the edge of the loft. It wobbled, but didn’t tip over the edge.

We never explicitly discussed the loss of Widget’s virginity as one particular event. Of course I knew it had to have occurred at some point that way. But nothing about Widget had ever felt virginal. Her own sexuality didn’t seem like a great mystery to her like it did to myself and other girls, sprouting overnight.

“You need to know things, Sim,” she said. Her slur would’ve been laughable had it not been offset by the harshness of her tone and the way she abruptly straightened her body against the ceiling beam. “It’s important that you know things. And then you’re the

one that knows them. You. Not them.” As she spoke, she reached forward and gripped my chin firmly between her hands and tilted it toward her. I smelled the grape on her breath and then her tongue was in my mouth, taking up all the space so I couldn’t even move my own. She pulled away within seconds, but in my drunken haze, it felt more like minutes.

“There,” she said like she’d accomplished some necessary chore and felt satisfied with its completion.

When the motel maid found my parents, they were laying on their backs with two bottles of Coke and a bag of Bugles beside the bed. That’s what Dody told me anyway, when I asked. She thought letting me know all the stupid small details would give me closure. Widget and I liked to keep bags of Bugles between us when we ran the ticket table at the Hollow. We’d stick them on our fingertips so it looked like we had greasy yellow claws or decaying nails and pretend to be bad witches for a change.

For years, I didn’t believe Dody when she told me it was a carbon monoxide leak in the motel room. Just a tragic accident. Could’ve happened to anybody. I spent my youth conjuring images of them strung out on heroine in that dirty room. I passed by the motel accidentally during a beach trip Widget and I took to celebrate her high school graduation. Dody kept the last photo ever taken of my parents framed in our living room—a smudged Polaroid of them standing in the motel parking lot. Driving by, I immediately recognized the voluptuous neon mermaid from the photo as it beckoned underage and adulterous guests to her perpetually vacant rooms. It was the kind of motel that people would bring their own sheets to. That is, assuming they had extra clean sheets, which my

parents certainly didn't.

I asked Widget to pull the car over to the mermaid motel so I could pee. An outdated sign boasted "Color TV!" in rainbow letters and the pungent smell of chlorine permeating the breezeway promised a pool that I imagine had used Band-Aids floating on the surface of the water. I tried to get a soda from the vending machine, but my dollar was either too wet from humidity and sweat or too crumpled. I walked the length of the two story building twice until Widget impatiently honked the horn and I hopped back in her car with a full bladder and the gnawing feeling that my parents' deaths really were just the result of an accident.

On the beach that week, Widget was doing some light pleasure reading about the Salem witch trials. She plopped her open book between us in the sand and told me they used to bind the accused to rocks and toss them in the river. Supposedly, a real witch could stay afloat. The innocent were doomed to drown.

Sinking to the bottom of a river. Asphyxiating to death in your sleep. Just slipping into nothingness by losing your breath.

"Witches always either drown or burn," Widget said. She dog-eared a page with a drawing of a naked woman tied to a stake.

I pressed my finger to the witch's breast. "I think I'd rather burn."

Nightmare on 9 opened its doors the fall that I left for college. The haunted house was created to be a seasonal section of the theme park that was situated 40 miles out of town. You could see the outline of the roller coasters against the horizon as you drove down Highway 9. Dody didn't seem worried at first. The day she moved me into my

dorm, she unloaded my hamper full of linens and towels and joked about what a shame it was that we never had a free night in October. Said she'd like to see what all the fuss was about. She pressed a twenty dollar bill into my hand and kissed my cheek before she left and reminded me to please try to make it home by mid-September at least to help prep the Hollow.

Like me, the children that were once content running through the hay maze and taking turns stirring Dody's cauldron were nearing the end of adolescence. They crammed in the backseats of their used Hondas and drove the 40 miles to walk through the house filled with costumed monsters, bloody zombies, and synthetic cobwebs. Cheap thrills, Dody called it all.

Widget left home that winter, after she and Dody sat alone in the Hollow for the whole month of October. She'd even tried to darken the place up a bit, incorporating tarot card readings into the barn games. Only a handful of neighbors came to pay a courtesy visit on Halloween night. Widget tried her hand at art school, but it didn't stick. I don't think she had an address or home to her name for any substantial length of time during those years. I realized I wasn't the only one between us avoiding Dody and her pleas that we return home for Hollow season when I started getting envelopes in my student mailbox addressed to Widget. It was junk mail, mostly. But she would call me sometimes, give me a temporary address and ask me to send her any important mail. We didn't acknowledge that we both felt guilty about Dody and saddened by the loss of our Hollow. Widget told me she'd found work as a street performer, one of the silent ones.

Long gone were Dody's cauldron and mirror and apothecary jars. The whole barn

was only illuminated by candles in the corners. Widget told me to sit on what appeared to be an audience seat, a hay bale covered in black sheets. The hay bale benches faced “the stage”, a clearing in the floor cluttered with black boxes. The people scurrying around inside the barn rolling out the black sheets and rearranging the placement of the black boxes weren’t in costume. They, three men and one woman, wore black pants and tight v-neck shirts, revealing patches of chest hair and soft mid-sections.

“I left two plates of spaghetti on the table,” I said to break the silence.

“It’s fine. I already ate,” Widget said.

I saw a strand of hay sticking out beneath the sheets and picked it up, breaking it off piece by piece.

“You seeing anyone?” Widget asked. She didn’t divert her eyes from the set-up going on at the front of the barn.

“There is this one,” I thought of my go-to, the history PhD. “He’s a gentleman type.”

"Really?"

"I mean. You know. Self-proclaimed."

"Yeah, I know the type," Widget smirked. "The type that thinks he’s more evolved because he opens a door for you when it’s raining?"

"Something like that."

"You damn sure can't trust that type."

"I don't."

The actors moved around the space, mouthing their lines silently. Their movements with the boxes and one another were as fluid as a dance.

“Not exactly what Dody had in mind,” I murmured.

“I’m bringing in 30 people a week. From all over the state.”

“Oh for God’s sakes, Widget. She didn’t care about the money. I don’t think she even half counted it.”

“It isn’t about the money. It’s about the audience. There has to be an audience.”

Covered in hay and polyester, the barn would go up like a matchbox if one of the corner candles fell over. “We should’ve come back earlier,” I said. “For her.”

Widget cut me off, calling out an order to the only female stage hand. When she returned her attention to me, she just said, “She wouldn’t have wanted us here to witness death. It had to be like this.”

I’d expected a similar sort of morbid response from her, a feeble attempt at conveying actual sentiment and simultaneously removing us of any blame or guilt. I was prepared to lecture her about accepting responsibility for our part in the Hollow’s failure and maybe even to some extent in Dody’s sudden death. Yet somehow, it felt so good to be told that things had worked out for the best, I tacitly complied.

She gestured toward one of the guys in the corner. Of all the cotton clad silhouettes darting through the candle shadows, he looked the most squeezed into his tight stage attire.

“That’s Elijah. You should take him back to the house later.”

“Where are you gonna be?”

She raised her hands toward the ceiling of the barn like a preacher giving a benediction. “Here.”

“You’re sleeping in here now?”

“We spend most nights here after shows. Just drinking. Talking. Whatever we feel like.”

“Don’t see the Sunday School crowd much these days, I guess.”

Widget expelled a breath that she may have intended to be a laugh.

“Yeah,” she said. “Damn shame they’re missing tonight’s show too. Right up their alley. Missing the chance to watch me burn.”

I went back to school after Dody’s funeral and Widget went wherever it was Widget went. We didn’t leave on bad terms, but I stopped getting her junk mail. She called me once while I was at a Labor Day party, my first semester of graduate school. She asked if I wanted to come home. Maybe we could re-open the Hollow in October. I told her October wasn’t good for me, and suggested we maybe try to meet up for Christmas instead. She’d scoffed at this and hurried me off the phone.

Though the college town I lived in was four hours north of our town, I heard about the Hollow that year. Widget even made the Lifestyle section of a widely circulated state paper. They wrote of a “local actress” bringing in an amateur troupe for the revitalization of a small town haunted attraction, giving mediocre reviews of the troupe’s dabbling in minimalist drama and readings of witch tales and poems.

At a department cocktail hour, I overheard two of my classmates talking about the Hollow over a crudités platter.

“I mean, I don’t know,” the first guy said. He wore a sports jacket and had a muddled accent, reflecting many years of continued education and travel. “I guess it has a slight edge in sophistication over those campus ghost tours the undergrads do, but it

was a bit...overreaching. Trying to turn a podunk town like that into a Savannah or New Orleans. Gimme a break.”

“Yeah, I agree,” said his companion. He was a bit underdressed for the event in a polo and khakis. “The presentation was pretentious too. Like, we get it, you've read a Southern gothic.”

“Exactly,” said the sports coat. “That main witch though. Bet you she’s pretty freaky.”

I didn’t expect Widget and the troupe to show up again the next year, thinking surely they would have moved on to bigger and better towns. Then, she called me the next September and asked if I had any nights free in October.

“What’s that?”

Elijah sat on a hay bale stirring a punch bowl filled to the brim with red liquid. He dipped the ladle until it was full and held it out to me.

“We call that witch’s brew,” he gave me a lopsided grin. “Don’t ask what’s in there.”

I sputtered, but managed to get the drink down in a few swallows. Whatever it was had a trace of fruit in it. The alcohol and citric acid coated my throat and left it burning long after I’d finished drinking it, but I still visited Elijah for two more ladles as the night went on.

This was their glamorous post-show after party. A successful night with an audience of 10 from out of town. Two story readings, one poetry recitation, and then a scene in which Widget stood on a black box while an executioner mimed touching it with

a lit torch. Her bloodcurdling scream reached and echoed off of the rafters.

Widget was sitting on a hay bale beside the witch named Gin and the poet named Laurent and the executioner with a bad case of eczema peeking through his beard. She was smiling, but didn't appear engaged in their banter. Catching my gaze, she stopped smiling. She looked at Elijah with a grave stare then returned it to me with the slightest nod of her head. When I went to get my fourth drink of witch's brew, I grabbed Elijah by the nape of his neck and kissed him until I heard the drink spill out of the bowl on his lap and splash onto the hay covered floor. We stumbled home through the Hollow, dodging the trees and tree shadows with moderate success.

I listened to Elijah's feet pad down the hallway, the opening of the bathroom door, and then immediately, the turn of the sink faucet. The water ran for ten seconds before I heard the tell-tale squeak of the nearly empty soap bottle. He must have waited for it to get steaming hot. I wondered if he felt the need to rigorously wash his hands after he had sex with Widget too.

He cursed when he came back in the room and caught his toe on the bedpost, but he had apparently learned from Widget not to flip lights on without permission. He limped back to bed and flopped on his stomach, draping his doughy arm across me.

I pulled the sheets tighter over my chest. Just as his breathing slowed to an almost snore, I shook him awake. He grunted in response.

"Squeeze my arm." I held my forearm out in the darkness before him.

"What?" His voice muffled into the pillow.

"Squeeze my arm as hard as you can."

"Why?"

"Just do it." I shoved it under his nose and shook it a little.

"No, weirdo," he laughed uncomfortably. "I don't want to hurt you."

"You can't hurt me."

"Look, I'm not into weird shit, ok?" His mouth was free of the pillow now.

"This has been fun. Let's just call it a night now, huh?" He patted my extended arm and flipped over, scooting inches away from me in a way that would've almost been subtle if the bed hadn't creaked under his weight with each movement.

I lay there until his snores replaced the silence. Then I slid out from under the sheets and walked to the window. Pressing my nose against the glass, I breathed hot against it until a cloud of vapor appeared, but I didn't have anything worth writing or doodling in it. I wiped it away with one motion of my hand and looked through the foggy pane toward the Hollow and squinted to see if there was a candlelight flickering somewhere in that direction. Seeing nothing, I realized how much I missed the twinkling bulbs in the oak trees.

CHAPTER 6

WORSHIP

In what felt like her final hours, Sawyer questioned her lifelong disbelief in both God and her great grandmother's storied curse.

It had taken her only four days after landing in Thailand to contract a virus and be bedridden in a Bangkok hospital. The doctor who admitted her asked what foods she'd eaten and frowned when she admitted to buying sticky rice and mangoes from a street vendor. Her family physician back home in Warren had warned her about the dangers of street food before he signed her vaccine papers, but she'd assumed he only said so because he was a xenophobe. To Sawyer's knowledge, she had traveled further away than any of Warren's native children ever had before.

As the nurse repeatedly poked her arm with the IV needle, Sawyer wondered if she could convince the doctor on call to send her body home with "Massive Head Trauma" listed as cause of death. Heart attack maybe. Anything except food poisoning or something bacteria related which would lend itself to Letta shaking her head and saying "Leave it to Sawyer" and the xenophobe doctor puffing up his chest and continuing to run his mouth about the unavoidable dangers of leaving Warren to anybody that thought about trying. She had been so proud when she landed that she'd been successful in doing so against all odds. Now she was going to die here, further away than anyone else had ever lived, without even the benefit of an exciting, exotic death outside the pristine hospital walls.

Sawyer could smell her own sour, sickly odor, but didn't want to pester the nurse to change the sheets again. She'd already made a mess on them twice. Laying in the sweaty gurney, slipping in and out of restless sleep, Sawyer pictured the face of Joseph Weaverman. She knew it only from description, yet seeing it in her mind felt real and familiar and frightening. She thought about her great grandmother Mags and wondered why she had to offend the man's god so much that he would carry a grudge through four generations

In the early days of their marriage, Mags could not determine her new husband Tom's opinion of her. She knew herself she wasn't pretty, and that didn't bother her. Whether or not he noticed as much didn't bother her either. The Bolton women were known for their hulking frames. Even being the smallest of her four sisters, Mags stood eye level with Tom and often slunk sideways through narrow doorways as if unaware of her full wingspan from shoulder blade to fingertip. She was a decent cook. Enough so to trick him into thinking she was a good one on occasion. The scorched meats and shriveled vegetables Mags reserved for her plate, ensuring Tom's was always empty when he left the table. She kept a tidy house, fed the chickens and milked the cows, and didn't ever pretend to be asleep when he reached through the darkness and tentatively lifted her nightgown by the hem.

Their conversations were pleasant. He asked how the hens were laying and what their account balance was at the grocery. She told him, apologetically, when the flour ran low and he'd make a mark of it in the ledger he kept on the living room secretary.

Mags hovered over the secretary on Sunday afternoons and wrote letters to her paternal grandparents, aunts, and cousins, all of whom hailed from the North Carolina mountains. Tom said on one such occasion, "Your penmanship is...something." Unsure of the intention of his remark and self-conscious of his gaze, Mags thanked him and hurriedly finished Aunt Ida's letter that was primarily concerned with weather and bone health. Tom waited until she'd written "Affectionately yours," before he turned his attention back to the newspaper. Mags was the only Bolton girl to graduate high school, with Lou Lou, Janey, Sara, and Evie all dropping out between eighth and eleventh grades.

She'd received high marks in penmanship and in fact wrote her weekly letters more to exercise her cursive script than to fill her mountain relatives in on the details of newlywed domesticity which she'd discovered were, in writing at least, quite mundane.

After six months of marriage, Mags thought it possible that her husband found her foolish and dull. Still, he was not unkind. He had never reprimanded her, raised his voice or a hand. "Nothing wrong with a quiet man," her mother had said as she situated her bridal veil in Mags' braided hair. Tom was a quiet man, and perhaps he was a good man too. This was enough for Mags, regardless of his opinion of her.

The day Mags met Joseph Weaverman, she was sweeping the front porch when she heard the distinct "ding" of Ellie's bicycle bell. Before her figure even appeared rising from the sloping dirt road that snaked to Mags and Tom's door, Ellie's singsong voice drifted phantom like through the sticky afternoon air, "Margaret darling, I've come to see you."

Mags glanced toward the field, relieved that Tom and his plow mule were out of sight. Though he would never directly articulate his feelings toward Ellie, Mags had long observed the way his back stiffened slightly in her presence. She'd asked him once if he didn't like her coming to the house, to which he'd responded, "Your company is no business of mine. Is there more coffee?"

The bicycle rolled to a stop just inches shy of the porch steps, its rider flushed and panting. Ellie dismounted and retrieved a bundle of daisies from the straw basket strapped to the handle bars. "For you, my lady," she said, curtsying and handing the flowers to Mags.

"These are lovely," Mags said cautiously. "What are they for?"

Ellie grinned and snatched the broom Mags had propped against the porch rail. She straddled the broomstick and pretended to fly it into the house, a playful habit she'd picked up after seeing *The Wizard of Oz* in a Charlotte movie theatre. "You'll see. Why don't you offer your tuckered guest some refreshment first?"

The house was what brought Mags and Tom together. Harry Bolton heard from a neighboring farmer about how Tom Young had bought the old Simmons homestead on the eve of his father's funeral and was sinking his inheritance into its renovation. Harry saw the opportunity to marry his youngest daughter off without surrendering any of his own acreage as he'd been compelled to do when his other four girls married poor, landless young men who were more eager to see battle in Europe than till soil. Tom was invited to three family dinners, then, wordlessly, took a seat in the pew beside Mags on Sunday morning. A month later, he proposed and they were married in a small church ceremony.

Mags was overwhelmed by the suburban style luxury of her new home. The Bolton farmhouse she was raised in wasn't unlike all the other farmhouses that dotted the rural border of Warren. They were built to be functional, with few frills. Tom's house boasted indoor plumbing, a rug in the living room, and electrical outlets in every room, plus a ceiling fan in the master bedroom. Some said the house was a waste of money. Certainly, it exhausted Tom's inheritance; he and Mags had to live frugally on the fruits of the farm. Yet others argued, with a chuckle, that the house had earned the Young boy his bride, homely though she may be.

Ellie scarcely attempted to conceal her disdain for Tom, or anyone for that matter. The house he provided Mags, with all its finery, only seemed to repel her more. "Don't you feel as if you've been lured into a trap?" She asked Mags upon hearing of her and Tom's courtship. "I'm surprised at you, Margaret Bolton. I never thought you could be bought so cheaply."

Mags had learned as a child to suppress any feelings of defensiveness her best friend prodded within her. In arguments, Ellie never lost, the measure of her winning being her ability to say any number of hurtful things and still position herself as the victim deserving of an apology.

By the time Mags had placed her daisies in a vase and returned to the living room with two glasses of lemonade, Ellie was curled in the corner of the couch, bare feet tucked beneath her billowing yellow sundress.

"I have a grand surprise for you," Ellie said as Mags set the lemonade glasses on the coffee table. "I was riding through town earlier and I saw a strange car, a beautiful car, parked by the drugstore. So I went inside and there was a strange man sitting at the counter."

Mags longed to grab a polishing rag and continue her chores while Ellie talked, but she knew better. Ellie liked an attentive audience, so instead she sat on the opposite end of the couch.

"I go up to the counter and order a soda from Mr. Good, and of course the stranger notices me and smiles. Introduces himself as one Joseph Weaverman. Turns out he's one of those traveling vacuum cleaner salesmen. From somewhere in Pennsylvania.

Isn't that funny? Traveling vacuum cleaner salesman from Pennsylvania ends up two stools down from me in Good's Pharmacy of all places."

Mags smiled weakly, suddenly uncomfortable with the direction of the story and the glimmer in Ellie's eye.

"Now here comes the exciting part," said Ellie, taking a swig of lemonade before continuing. "I've invited him to come over to your house this afternoon to give you his sales pitch."

Mags cleared her throat. "Why would you do that?"

"Oh, it's alright," Ellie waved her hand with exaggerated nonchalance. "I already told him you and Tom could never afford one. He just wants to get some practice giving the pitch. He apparently hasn't had much luck selling yet."

Mags felt blood pooling in her face. "It has nothing to do with whether we can afford one or not. I'm not dressed for company. I have chores to do, and my husband will be along soon. You best get back to town and tell him not to bother driving all the way out here. Not today."

Ellie glared at the pale liquid in her glass, Mags gnawed furiously on a dirty fingernail.

"It's selfish for you to act this way, you know," Ellie sniffed. "Cruel even. Here you are in your perfect home, married. Probably about to have a baby. I'll be an old maid before my fiancé even gets back from the war. I mean, *if* he even gets back. I may not see him again. I may never marry. You have no idea what it's like in my shoes. And you're going to deprive me of an afternoon of enjoyment all because.."

"I'm not about to have a baby. I'm beginning to wonder if I'll ever get pregnant," Mags offered a distraction and hoped it would end Ellie's tirade.

"Still," Ellie said carefully. She reached out and touched Mags' forearm with her soft, plump little hand. "It really would mean the world to me, Mags. And I would consider it a favor."

Since they were girls, Ellie had held her "favors" close to her breast and dispensed of them like they were precious acts of generosity. She did not keep track of her debts, nor did she make any efforts to square up with those she owed. This was to some degree how all the Mitchells conducted their business. For centuries, the Mitchell family had built a fortune on the backs of others.

"I'm going to put on a clean dress," said Mags.

His arrival was signaled by the low purr of a car engine and the crunch of gravel under tires. Ellie leapt from the couch to the window and Mags stood behind her, able to peer easily over the top of her head. The stranger climbed out of his vehicle, his lanky body unfolding like accordion pleats. He straightened his tie and looked around. Mags ducked behind the sheer curtain. From the car trunk the man removed, with apparent ease, the vacuum cleaner. He held it from the base and let the handle fall limp against his shoulder.

"Do you see what I'm seeing?" Ellie's hands were clasped in prayer, and tapping the tip of her nose.

Mags shrugged. "He's tall."

"He's handsome," Ellie drew the word out into three syllables. "When's the last time you saw a man dressed like that around here?"

Ellie skipped to the front door, opening it just as Weaverman raised his hand in a fist to knock.

"Good afternoon, ladies," he said, tipping the brim of his hat.

His suit matched the hat and the gleaming black shoes peeking from beneath the legs of his tailored slacks. Mags had seen the whole outfit in one of the department store catalogs Ellie enjoyed flipping through before Christmas. The Mitchells did their Christmas shopping in Charlotte where such stores and superfluous hats were housed.

"May I take your hat? Your coat?" Mags extended an open hand.

The man seemed grateful, shedding both simultaneously. His hair was black, freshly cut and combed smooth. Mags remembered reading that the hat's material was real wool, the trim and inner lining satin. Wool was a ridiculous material for any garment this time of year, but especially for a tight fitting hat. Carrying it brim side up to the coat rack, Mags caught a whiff of the sour, sweat soaked satin.

"Now then," Weaverman stood the vacuum cleaner upright and clapped his hands together. "Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Joseph Weaverman and I am the Southeastern Regional Sales Associate for the Kirby Company."

"You needn't be so formal, Joseph," Ellie said, flopping back into her position on the couch and stretching her legs across the coffee table. "Consider this good practice. I wager Mags and I will be your easiest audience in Warren."

"Oh, well I have no doubt of that," he said, winking at Mags. She kept her eyes fixed on the appliance by his side. "Everyone's so serious in this town. And unbelievably suspicious of strangers."

Ellie patted the cushion beside her. "Won't you sit a spell?"

"Actually," said Mags. "My husband will be home soon and I really need to get supper on. Will your presentation take long?"

"Mags is married to an old man," Ellie said, cupping her hand as if she was telling Weaverman confidentially. "She could use a bit of fun with people her own age."

Tom was thirty two years old. He went completely gray at twenty eight and had a forehead lined with marks of either worry or contemplation, Mags couldn't decide which. Physically, he was lean and as capable as any of arduous labor, in spite of his limp from a childhood riding accident. Mags knew it wasn't his age that Ellie found offensive. Rather, his serious nature and more importantly, the way he ignored her attempts to engage him in flirtatious banter.

"Not to worry, ma'am," said Weaverman. "Mrs. Young, is it? I promise this won't consume your whole afternoon."

Mags nodded reluctantly. He had a peculiar way of speaking. His accent was unfamiliar yet somehow she could detect a muddled characteristic about it. Like he'd stolen words from every home he entered with his hefty vacuum.

"If you don't mind Mrs. Young, might you have a bit of baking soda I could borrow?"

"Of course she does!" said Ellie. "Go get him some, Mags. And can you get me more lemonade while you're in there? You know I love your lemonade."

“Where did you say you’re from, Mr. Weaverman?” Mags called from the kitchen. She poured the last of the lemonade into Ellie’s glass and eyed the nearly empty box of baking soda.

“Philadelphia,” he said. “That’s where my folks are anyway. I’m all over.”

Taking her refilled glass, Ellie sat at Weaverman’s feet and ordered Mags to join her.

“The soda will represent the lighter, oft invisible, surface messes,” said Weaverman. “Think hair, dandruff, dust. All that which drifts through the air and settles on your exquisite rug.” As he spoke, he shook the box of baking soda and sprinkled a pile of the white powder onto the rug. He rubbed the pile until it smeared flat against the woven threads. Ellie leaned down and blew out smoky white tendrils.

"If you'll inspect the bottom of my shoe with me, ladies."

Clutching the side of Tom’s upholstered chair, Weaverman balanced on his left leg and turned his right foot upward.

"You'll notice it is caked with remnants of your driveway, Mrs. Young. Some of that trusty Carolina red dirt. Let's say this represents every day grime. You, your husband, your delightful guests," he gestured toward Ellie and she cackled. "Everyone who steps through that door is tracking in dust, mud, grass, and other particles found on a farm. That's going to go deep in this rug, see. Now, how do you clean this rug, Mrs. Young?"

"I beat it outside," Mags said sheepishly, then added, "Every week."

"I'm sure you're a fine housekeeper, and I mean no offense. But the truth is, no amount of beating will rid this rug of the tiniest grains of sand and soil that are embedded deep in here."

Ellie nodded vigorously, the motion sending a splash of her drink to the floor. Weaverman pointed at the oval shaped blot the liquid left on the burgundy colored rug. "My point exactly. The Kirby is an ideal companion for the modern day hostess."

He released his foot and stamped it on the rug. Mags jumped and Ellie said, "No, let me!" She peeled his shoe off from the heel and was slamming it mercilessly upon the soiled rug when Tom came in the front door.

Spreading his arms wide, Weaverman resembled the ringmaster Mags saw once at a traveling circus. "Ah, the man of the house!" He said. "Excellent. You're just in time for the show."

Mags tried, unsuccessfully, to read her husband's face.

"I wasn't expecting you home so early," she said. His work clothes were filthy, but Mags usually enjoyed the way he brought in the earth with his musty odor. She noticed he'd left his boots on the porch.

"Don't let me interrupt you," Tom said. "I'll just get cleaned up."

"Nonsense," said Weaverman. He reached in his pocket and produced a box of cigarettes. "Care for a smoke?"

"Not in the house."

"Sit down, you're about to see some magic."

Tom didn't sit, but stood behind Mags. He rested his hand on her shoulder, so softly she wondered if she'd only imagined it there.

Ellie scrunched her face and pinched her nose. “Maybe he should bathe first.”

Mags felt his grip on her shoulder tighten briefly and then it was gone.

“Before I make this mess disappear,” said Weaverman. “I want you to look with me at the mechanism.” He flipped the vacuum on its side and pointed at the bottom where its insides were exposed. Mags wanted to turn from the perverse display. Weaverman tapped a spherical piece. “The trick is in this cylinder here. We call it the Agitator.”

“What’s that?” Ellie touched the vacuum with her toe.

“That’s the belt. But I’m sure Tom and I are boring you ladies with these mechanics. Let’s show some results. Miss Ellie, if you wouldn’t mind plugging this cord to the wall.”

The vacuum whirred to life and Weaverman glided it over the dirt and the baking soda marks as smoothly as a dance. Ellie squealed and applauded him, the marks disappearing with each step. She let out a cry of disappointment when the cord came loose from the wall and the room went silent again.

“It’s impressive,” said Tom. “I’ll tell you what your problem’s gonna be with selling it around here though.”

“What’s that, Mr. Young?” Weaverman wrapped the cord back into its tight spool.

“In Warren, we tend to believe our industrial efforts are better spent in sending weapons to the boys overseas.”

“Indeed, sir,” said Weaverman. He smirked and added, “And you, no doubt, have made grievous sacrifices toward the war yourself. I can tell a patriot when I see one.”

Mags felt the iron grip on her shoulder again. Tom was the youngest man left in Warren. His bad knee hindered his acceptance to the forces on Parris Island, but some blamed cowardice anyway.

“Right then,” said Weaverman. “Say, Miss Ellie, how would you like a ride home?”

Ellie kissed Mags on the cheek as she slipped into her shoes and took Weaverman’s free arm. Weaverman thanked the Youngs for their hospitality and they were gone.

“I’ll uh, have dinner in about an hour,” said Mags. She rubbed her foot over the disturbed area of rug, trying to turn the threads back in their old direction. “Anything you want?”

Tom shook his head. He padded down the hallway and Mags heard the squeak of their bathroom faucet. Her back was turned to the stove when he slipped out the front door and mumbled that he’d be back later.

Mags didn’t leave the stovetop all evening. She willed herself not to look at the clock or count its ticks. When the sunlight drained out of the house, she chewed her thumbnail to the quick. For an hour, she sat at the table with two full plates before giving up and storing the food in the icebox. “Men aren’t up to anything good after dark,” her mother always said.

He came back in the house as discreetly as he’d left it. Mags had dosed off on the couch and awoke to him in front of her, staring at the rug.

"I wanted to apologize," said Mags. "For earlier. I mean, the mess and Ellie and..."

She paused, waiting for a response. He looked nervous.

"I've got something for you," he said. "Why don't you uh, close your eyes there and I'll bring it in."

Mags complied, heard the front door creak open and back closed again. Tom grunted and her eyes fluttered. The Kirby was cleaner than Weaverman's model. The company's logo shone glossy in the hallway light.

"How did you?" Mags gasped. "Can we afford it?"

Tom scratched the side of his neck. "You don't need to worry about it. Weaverman got me on a payment plan."

Mags approached the machine. Greeted as a guest rather than an intruder, its upright posture didn't offend her as it had hours prior.

"Do you like him?" Tom asked. "The Weaverman fella?"

"He's fine," said Mags. She bent down on her knees and traced the Kirby lettering. "I don't enjoy him in the way that Ellie does."

Tom nodded and expelled a held breath. "Listen, I know Ellie is your friend. And that's right by me. But I don't want you in the middle of 'em when it all comes out."

"Comes out?"

"Ralph Mitchell won't have it. And Frank he, he may not be the sharpest tool in the shed, but if Ellie keeps flaunting that Abie around... Well, it won't be good for either of them. And I don't want you in the middle of it, is all."

"I understand," said Mags. "I know Ellie, though. This is just her way. She's bored and Ralph doesn't respond to her letters as often as she'd like. Mr. Weaverman will sell a few more of these contraptions and be on his way."

They ate cold chicken on the porch and didn't mention Weaverman or Ellie again that night. Tom asked how Aunt Ida was doing and Mags told him that her father's family lived in a valley and not on a mountaintop like some people thought; not that it made much of a difference.

When Sawyer woke in the Bangkok hospital after what felt to her like days of drifting consciousness, a frizzy haired man with an American accent was laying on the gurney beside her.

“You know how much that’s going to cost you?” He had a tablet in his lap with a video playing, but he didn’t hit pause as he turned his attention to Sawyer and pointed at the bag of fluid dripping intravenously into her body.

“No idea,” she responded weakly.

“Less than a fucking latte would back home,” he said. “Healthcare in the States is an absolute joke.”

Over the two day duration of her hospital stay, Sawyer listened to him rant at length about the unethical practices of Western medicine. She learned that he was originally from Idaho and that the top of his patient file read “Isaac Hughes”, a name he resented for its Biblical origins, and he preferred to be called Izzy. The doctors had yet to determine a cause of his illness, the symptoms of which had already started to subside.

“Tropical fever, most likely,” he said. “Could be mono. Hopefully not HIV.”

“That’s a bad joke,” Sawyer replied.

“I wasn’t joking,” he said. “Anyway, I’m really just killing some time here in Thailand before I met up with my friends in Bali.”

After her hospital release and then Izzy’s a day later, Sawyer had a week before she had to report for work at the international school where she’d been given an English teacher post. Izzy gave her tours of the city temples that’d he’d already explored on his own. He knew the names of all the gods guarding the temple doors, and pointed out the various gems adorning the gilded statues inside. They walked barefoot through the

garden courtyard. Sawyer took photos of the especially exotic looking flowers to send to Letta while Izzy knelt reverently and bowed his head before marble statues.

“I’m spiritual,” he explained. “Just not much into organized religion.”

Sawyer spent nights with him at his hostel instead of returning to her cramped apartment the school had given her and a fellow teacher to share. They squeezed together in Izzy's narrow bunk, ignoring the musty odor of the room and each other.

The first night, he slipped his hands under the thin polyester blanket that covered them and traced the curve of Sawyer's elbow until he reached her inner forearm where the nurse had, after extensive searching, found a vein plump enough to stick with the IV. Izzy unwrapped the tape that held a gauze patch in place over the sore area and tossed it to the floor. He pressed his thumb firmly against the puncture wound, still slick with antibiotic cream. Sawyer whimpered and he made a shushing sound, pulling her arm in front of him and licking the trail of fresh blood rolling across it.

He shook loose the hair plastered in sweat against his forehead and whispered, "You haven't seen enough of the world."

Gilly chilled her sunscreen in the stock room mini fridge and slathered it over her arms and legs every half hour until the whole store smelled like chemical coconut. She'd heard somebody fried an egg on the sidewalk the day before. The shop sold out of battery operated, handheld fans by noon. A bachelorette party purchased a stack of "I Heart Miami" tank tops on their way to the beach, but after that the customers were too sluggish to do anything except aimlessly peruse the aisles and fan their arm pits by the heaving window unit. A few of them just bought soda cans from the vending machine and joined Gilly in lazily watching the storm coverage on the small screen TV.

"Finally!" Gilly said when Rosa came to relieve her at 4. "Been cooking alive in here."

Rosa was young and beautiful, and a mother. Some days, she brought her son, Luis, to work with her and he played in the wind chimes while she worked the register.

"Careful out there, Gilly," Rosa called as Gilly shoved the glass door open and shielded her eyes from the sun. "People get crazy when it's this hot."

Gilly wore flip flops, but she could feel the heat of the sidewalk seeping through the cheap rubber. The tourists were in overpriced bars or on the beach; few would attempt strolling the strip until the sun went down. She considered stopping by The Chatty Parrot for a drink herself, settling instead for a lukewarm swig from her water bottle.

She lengthened her stride and quickly closed the gap between the shop where she worked and the \$55.99 a night motel where Charlie did. He was waiting for her at the pool gate and whistled as she approached, shedding her sundress.

“Am I too old for bikinis?” Gilly asked. She allowed her boyfriend a quick kiss before hurriedly kicking off her flip flops and taking her first steps into the pool.

“Nah. You’re sexier than all of them,” said Charlie. He pointed at the three college aged girls dangling their legs into the deep end. They glared at him, assessed Gilly, and continued talking. “They’re saying this storm is gonna be pretty rough. If you get too scared, you should call me.”

“If I get scared, I’m calling 911,” said Gilly. She walked across the pool floor, the cement picking at her heels with each step. Charlie checked the skimmer box, pulling out a bloated bullfrog. Gilly noticed that he rarely went to the trouble of bending over, even at work. He always found a way to complete his tasks while standing up and keeping his gaze on her. She liked knowing he was looking at her and being able to ignore him anyway.

“Can you believe they make me wear long pants in this weather?” He looked down at his janitorial uniform; khaki pants, a button up tan colored shirt with his nametag sewn to the pocket. He shook his head. “It’s inhumane.”

“Go inside, why don’t ya,” said Gilly. She dipped her hair into the water, its top layer filmy from her melting sunscreen. “Pretend to clean the lobby and harass some other woman.”

For the remainder of his shift, he prodded her with the net, relenting only when she dove to the bottom of the six foot and laid flat on her back. The chlorine in the water burned her eyes, but she kept them open so she could so she could ensure Charlie’s blurry figure remained looming over her.

Gilly's first view of Miami was in grainy pixels; the ocean's blue tinted a sickly green and the dramatic opening music muffled through console speakers. Her Grandpa Tom had an uncharacteristic affinity for late night detective dramas. They'd share a bowl of canned peaches and watch the mystery unfold over the course of an hour, exchanging theories on the outcome during commercials. The Miami episode began with a prostitute's bodyfloating in a motel pool. It seemed such a cliché narrative, Gilly wondered if she'd perhaps constructed the memory as an adult, conjuring up images of Latino night clubs and streets filled with muscular, oily half naked bodies. But as best as she could recall, the show had depicted Miami as exactly the sort of grimy, crime ridden beehive that would set the stage for a gruesome hooker homicide.

The colors were certainly more vivid than her memory, but Gilly's experience living in the city had thus far been languid in comparison to the pulsing urban heartbeat she'd expected. She worked in the tourist hub, lived in a neighborhood that was at one point probably on its way to being dilapidated but had maintained enough charm to now be considered quaint. Tourists ate in its ethnic restaurants when they wanted to feel local.

The shop was her third job, discovered after two unsuccessful waitressing stints. In Warren, she'd worked the front desk of a dental office. Desk jobs felt dangerous because they enticed and suffocated all at once. Gilly didn't want roots here. She'd originally intended to be in Miami for ten days. Sometimes, she still sent postcards to Sawyer as if her absence was only an extended vacation.

"Are you worried?" asked Gilly. She and Rosa stood behind the shop counter, watching the television mounted against the far wall. They leaned over the glass display case that held mood rings and shark teeth.

Rosa shrugged. "I've seen worse."

Gilly had never seen Rosa visibly upset. Her expression remained calm watching the incoming storm move as a cartoonish frosty cloud across the weather channel's map, but she had spent the morning plucking her eyebrows until they looked like stray pencil marks and they revealed a more worrisome arch than her unkempt brows usually did.

"Me too," said Gilly. The storms she'd endured during her two years in Miami hadn't been record breaking in their devastation, but she'd found that discussing hurricanes with an air of nonchalance was the quickest way to ingratiate herself with Floridians. "Although, they say the female hurricanes tend to be the deadliest."

"Of course they are. Men are the ones naming them," said Rosa.

After the governor declared a preemptive state of emergency and evacuations were underway, the beach shop was one of only three establishments left open on the strip. The owner, Van, told Gilly it was imperative there still be a few places for the remaining tourists to buy essentials. Gilly sardonically relayed his message to Rosa while surveying the inventory crammed in the narrow store space. Wind chimes, bumper stickers, postcards, tacky jewelry, sand shovels and bucket sets, airbrushed t-shirts and towels.

"Go home," said Gilly. "It's bullshit Van wants one of us here, much less two. I can handle it alone."

"I need the hours," said Rosa, her eyes drifting to Luis. He was curled in a display beach chair with his Lion King coloring book. "Besides, it'll end up just being rain. You'll see."

The weatherman upped the storm category as a chopper cam panned the bumper to bumper traffic of Interstate 75. Gilly felt a motion beside her and turned to see Rosa making the sign of the cross over her face.

“My mother was superstitious,” she said, quickly placing her hands back on the counter.

“Ah,” said Gilly. She returned her attention to the weatherman. He was new, probably a rookie covering his first major storm. His trembling voice belied his seemingly confident posturing of his hands across the storm board. “You’re not?”

“No. I’m just cautious.”

Gilly suspected Charlie had a family. Children, at least. It didn’t seem likely that he’d have a wife, though that wasn’t out of the question either. She’d never been to his house. He hadn’t offered and she hadn’t asked. They hung out in their favorite dive bars, taking turns buying pitchers of weak beer and chicken wings. His friends became her friends. Bar friends anyway. No one she’d call with a flat tire, but friendly acquaintances, which was more than what she’d had in Warren. Gilly observed Charlie’s body during sex and hoped to find marks, scars or tattoos; something that would offer a reading of the man he’d been. They didn’t share enough life to have any true arguments, so he hadn’t ever demonstrated a propensity for violence. Yet she sensed this lurked beneath the surface of his breezy demeanor and she longed to lure it out.

He told her he would give her a ride home if things got hairy with the weather. When the power flickered out, Gilly gathered her purse and rain jacket and stood by the door waiting for his arrival.

“You gonna ride it out?” she asked Rosa.

Rosa nodded. “No chance I’m catching a bus in this. We’ll stay in the back, away from the windows.” She took Luis’s hand and had almost disappeared into the black hallway when she called over her shoulder, “You’re welcome to stay with us.”

Gilly resented her pitying tone. “I’m going to walk to the motel. If the street’s flooded, Charlie will be having a hard time of it getting his car here.”

Her rain coat proved a futile effort to stay dry. She couldn’t determine the origin of the rainfall and had she not known better would have thought it sprouted from the ground, spraying her face as it did with painful, stinging force. She slogged ankle deep down the sidewalk and kept her bearings by the familiar street art and neon signage. The palm trees lining the strip were bent and their leaves splayed in such a comical way, they reminded her of the Dr. Seuss book Sawyer used to make her read every night. She’d read that storms such as this sounded like moving trains, but she couldn’t distinguish any whistling or rumbling amidst the various noises of the water itself. The rain, the flooded street, even the ocean all formed together to create the roar.

Ahead, she made out the outline of a news van and beside it, a foolish reporter and cameraman. She wondered if the reporter was from a national news station and pictured Letta fixed on her living room TV screen. Whenever they talked, Letta consistently warned her of two things: to evacuate in the case of a hurricane and to go straight to the police should she get inadvertently entangled in the cartel. Gilly braced against the east wind and turned to face the camera. She knew from the viewer’s angle she would look like nothing more than a doll perched on the reporter’s shoulder. She hated feeling so small and considered for a moment throwing up her middle finger or

even lifting her top as the spring break kids were prone to do. Instead, she waved and blew a kiss to her mother.

At the intersection by the motel, her path was blocked by a fallen telephone pole. Sparks danced off the wires and hissed at the downpour. Gilly scanned the nearly empty motel parking lot and saw no sign of Charlie's navy Buick.

"Son of a bitch," she muttered. Then realizing how alone she was in the street, she shouted at the motel, "Son of a bitch!" and felt the words get lost in the wind before they'd escaped her throat.

The reporter, the cameraman, and their van were gone by the time she got back to her street. She took twice as long getting to the shop as she had leaving it. When she slunk down the hallway to the stock room, she found it partially illuminated by candlelight.

"We're camping!" said Luis. He and Rose sat on a pallet of beach towels with a jar of peanut butter, a loaf of bread, a plate of sandwiches, and a six pack of Coke cans between them.

Rosa gestured at their spread. "Help yourself. Figured we might be in here a while."

"I'm alright," said Gilly. She fumbled through the darkness to her cubby by the microwave, reached to the back and felt the slick skin of a potato chip bag. They ate in silence; Gilly crunching on her chips while Rosa and Luis washed down their peanut butter sandwiches with multiple cans of Coke. Gilly caught Rosa sneaking glances down the hallway as the pitch of the howling wind got higher and the glass panes rattled. Eventually, Luis laid his head in Rosa's lap and dozed off.

“When my daughter was his age, she was afraid of storms,” said Gilly. “Didn’t even like rain.”

“I didn’t know you had a daughter,” said Rosa.

“Yeah. Well she’s, she’s back home. With my mom. Been a couple years since I’ve seen her. She probably likes storms now for all I know.”

Rosa pushed the last soda can toward Gilly and asked, “Is she...trouble?”

“No, no. She’s great. Really smart, funny kid. She just, through no fault of her own, got stuck with a bad family name and an even worse mother. And that’s not fishing.”

“Fishing?”

“Yeah,” Gilly laughed. “Something my grandmother used to say. Like, if ever you’re being self-deprecating, you’re just fishing for a compliment.”

“Oh, I see,” said Rosa. “Well, I wasn’t going to compliment you.”

“Good,” said Gilly. “I’m woman enough to admit that I left for entirely selfish reasons. But still, I genuinely believe she’s going to be better off without me.”

Rosa brushed a sweaty strand of hair from Luis’ forehead. “You trust your mother?”

“Do I trust her?”

“I don’t judge you, Gilly. I thought about it plenty of times, especially in the beginning. Leaving. Some days I probably would have too, only I didn’t have anyone I trusted around to take Luis.”

Gilly took a sip of Coke, its carbonation tingling and burning her throat. “I trust that she’ll be exactly what she’s always been. I trust she’ll keep doing exactly what she’s always done.”

“What’s that?”

“Oh, you know,” said Gilly. “What we all do. Suffering for the sins of our mothers. I’m just trying to spare Sawyer from mine.”

“There you go again, making yourself sound noble.”

“You’re right. I’m a piece of shit,” said Gilly. “I’m sure she’ll grow up and hate me. Or maybe she hates me already. I don’t know.”

At some point in the night, Gilly considered the possibility that she was going to die in a kitschy beach shop with a woman and child who were near strangers to her. How would she look in the newspapers? *Area Woman Found Dead with Single Mother and Child. Their bodies were recovered from a collapsed building. It appears they were all tragically crushed by store’s supply of boogie boards.*

The wind died down by morning, but the rain did not. The whole store reeked of mildew as water dripped through various ceiling spots and the floor became undeniably slick, in spite of Rosa and Gilly’s best efforts to catch the falling drops with sand buckets and layer the floor with towels. Their bread was gone and they had a dwindling supply of water bottles. Luis was over the novelty of camping and grew fussy around midday. In better circumstances, Charlie’s rescue mission may have seemed less heroic than it did.

He pulled up to the door in his borrowed pickup truck, the wheels riding the swampy sidewalk instead of the road.

“The Cavalry’s here!” he shouted out the window.

Gilly glared at him, prepared to tell him to go to hell, then caught Rosa's pleading gaze. The three of them piled into the cab and Gilly tensed, but did not reject Charlie's firm grip around her thigh.

Jacob Morgan was the first sent home with head lice, then Connor Russo, and by the time Mrs. Langston's class was short six students, the parents had formed a committee of which the singular purpose was tracking down the culprit. They posted up flyers about the "public health crisis" and demanded that parents be vigilant about hair hygiene and watchful for the slightest head scratch.

"It's a damn witch hunt," Gilly said with an eye roll. She shoved her dinner tray aside and hit the mute button on the evening news. "Come here, kid. Let me check you again. They're going to be digging their hands into your scalp first thing tomorrow, mark my words."

Sawyer rolled off the couch and sat on the tile floor between her mother's legs. "They've already checked me twice. Why do they think it's me?"

"Because your mother works for a living, that's why." Gilly inspected Sawyer's hair by the handful, then parted it down the middle and began twisting braids.

"You mean we're poor," said Sawyer. She watched the next news story and tried to read the lips of the broadcaster through the muted screen.

"Nobody has cleaner hair than you," said Gilly.

"The nurse said the bugs actually like clean hair, Mom," said Sawyer. "Easier for them to move through." It was a story about a house fire. Three fatalities, plus a missing dog. Yet the anchor's perky face had fooled her in to thinking it was going to be uplifting.

"Well, your hair is the perfect mixture of clean and dirty, how about that?" Gilly tugged the braids until Sawyer's head rolled backward onto her lap.

Sawyer looked at the ceiling above Gilly's head. Their landlord claimed to prefer the popcorn style over the more modern alternatives. No matter how much the three of them, Letta, Gilly, and Sawyer, cleaned their rental home, it always felt dirty to Sawyer because of the popcorn ceiling. Letta said to think of it like snowflakes, but Sawyer only saw a pimpled face threatening to crumble.

Gilly was twelve years old when she wandered into Ellie Mitchell's gentlemen's club. The activities of the club were rumored, but quietly and respectfully so. Miss Ellie was a lady, no one disputed that. She reminded Gilly of Miss Kitty, the brassy saloon mistress on her father's favorite Western. Still, behind her jovial demeanor, Gilly sensed that Ellie lacked Miss Kitty's kindness. "Gilly is an intuitive child," Letta always said.

Officially, Ellie's business was a family affair. The Mitchells operated as one body in all of their endeavors, where one limb moved another followed. The Millstone Plantation had been a Mitchell owned property for generations, but the house had been uninhabited since the Depression and become a dilapidated structure. Ellie suggested the renovation, which her father funded. Then it was Ellie whose photo appeared on the front page story about the restaurant project. They photographed her sitting between the columns lining the porch and wearing a billowing debutante gown that seemed almost too poignantly reminiscent of *Gone with the Wind*.

The ribbon cutting and inaugural dinner was an invitation only event, attended by Warren's elite. Gilly observed Letta's thrashing about the kitchen that night, and heard a rare obscenity fly from her mother's mouth when she carelessly splashed scalding skillet grease on her wrist. As Gilly and her father chewed burnt pieces of pork chop, Letta sat with her knees pulled to her chin and her injured wrist flush against her mouth. She licked her wound like a cat until Jack muttered, "Honey, please. Just eat your dinner."

After the opening night, even the lesser families of Warren visited Millwood. Only Jack refused to splurge senselessly.

"We'll go for your birthday," he said. It had become the topic of all their closed door conversations. Gilly listened through the walls and counted Letta's pacing steps.

"My birthday isn't until June," Letta replied. "By then, everyone will have already gone two or three times."

"We owe them, Letta," said Jack. "We owe all of them. Our neighbors. And they've given us credit in good faith. Dr. Chapel for setting Sadie's leg, Henry Wheeler for the new lumber."

Whether it was for lack of talent or will, Gilly wasn't sure, but for whatever reason, her father was not successful in farming like her Grandpa Tom. The acreage Tom gave them that had always yielded a worthy crop under his hands was at best unreliably fruitful for Jack. In moments of anger, Letta told him he deserved it for his drunken, sinful ways. Gilly knew it wasn't his drinking that bothered her so much as it was his refusal to attend church with them, which she saw as more insulting to her than to God.

"I probably won't be able to pay them all back until we cut the hay," Jack said quietly. "So tell me, how can we in good conscience go up in Ellie Mitchell's snooty little restaurant and shell out those dollars we owe them right in front of their eyes? And for what?"

Gilly heard Letta pace across the room once more, then a hard thud as her knees hit the hardwood.

"It isn't fair!" She cried. "I never ask you for anything, Jack McCarter."

Jack sighed and repeated, "We'll go for your birthday."

The next weekend, Jack left for his annual fishing trip in the North Carolina mountains. Usually, this was one of the family's more celebrated occasions. He would return with a cooler stocked with brim, catfish, and crappie. Most of it, they cleaned and

packed in the deep freezer, but a generous portion was for their fish fry. They invited neighbors over; the men laughed and drank beer over bubbling pots of grease while Letta and the other wives set the table with bowls of buttery potatoes and biscuits.

Gilly knew there would be no fish fry when her father returned by the silence in his and Letta's bedroom the night before he left. Since childhood, Gilly had found comfort in the repetitive scrape of her parents' bed frame against the wall and the squeak of the mattress springs, her mother's occasional muffled moan. All sounds had been absent since Millwood opened.

By the time Gilly came downstairs for breakfast, Jack was gone. She found her mother in cheerful spirits, humming as she flipped pancakes by the stove. Gilly spotted the chicory can beside her on the counter, and imagined the circle of dust that must have been left behind when Letta removed it from its place in the top cabinet. The can, a souvenir from Jack and Letta's New Orleans honeymoon, had long been emptied of its grounds and served as a cash container. During harvest season, Jack discreetly made a few deposits into it, but only when the debts were all paid. He said chicory cash was to be used for emergencies. Gilly never told her mother that she sometimes caught him taking a handful with him to town and returning with whiskey on his breath. She considered this, the image of her father stumbling up the stairs and red faced, and decided their debts could wait one more night.

Specks of Letta's coral lipstick dotted her front teeth, visible when she grinned broadly and said, "I have the most marvelous surprise for you, Gilly flower."

In Letta's efforts to ensure they didn't arrive to Millstone underdressed, she'd retrieved a dozen attic boxes and hope chests. Family heirlooms, she called them. She

urged Gilly to play dress up with her, and they'd danced by the mirror donning Easter hats, wedding gowns, faux fur shawls, and costume pearls so long and loose that Gilly had to wrap the strand around her neck three times to keep them from getting tangled between her knees. Many of the clothes bore marks of the rodent nests they once housed, and the boxes unleashed a scent of mothballs that traveled through the gaping attic door and lingered for weeks. Letta found an old funeral dress for herself, hemming the bottom to a fashionable tea length. For Gilly, she sewed up a bleached cotton dress. It was plain and sensible, appropriate for farm chores. Letta tied a satin yellow ribbon just below Gilly's newly budding breasts.

"To fancy it up a bit," said Letta, though Gilly knew that in truth it was to cover the patches where she had been unable to completely conceal the rat tooth punctures.

They walked the two miles to Millwood. It took longer than it should have because Letta insisted they duck into the trees every time a car passed. She hated the whole town knowing that their only vehicle was Jack's pickup truck. By the time they arrived, beads of perspiration had gathered on both their foreheads and Gilly's dress looked dingy under the porch lights.

"We'll catch our breath for a moment before we go in," said Letta, bending down to Gilly's eye level to dab sweat from her face with a dress sleeve. They were only a couple inches from being equal height, but Letta still stooped like it was necessary. Whether it was out of habit or to make her own frame appear less slight, Gilly could never be sure.

A soft piano melody filled the foyer as they padded in, tracking dust. They passed by the grand staircase with its sleek marble steps. From there, the dining room

opened before them, tinted gold in candlelight. A baby grand was situated in the back corner and the pianist, like the serving staff bustling to and from the kitchen, wore a black suit. Letta approached the maitre d' at his podium. To Gilly, he looked like the preacher about to deliver a brimstone sermon, only twice as pious.

“Reservation for McCarter,” said Letta. The pitch of her voice was too high.

The man gave her a doubtful stare, then checked his book and smiled politely.

“This way please.”

Gilly didn't recognize any of the restaurant staff. She'd heard that most of them hailed from Charleston; Ellie had sought employees with extensive experience in fine dining. These were outsiders and strangers, yet they seemed to belong in the dining room far more than she and her mother did.

"Get whatever you want, baby," Letta said loudly as the maitre d' seated them.

She picked up the menu, creamy colored paper mounted upon a glossy leather board, and pretended that her arms buckled under its weight. After she'd scanned it, she lowered her voice and squeezed Gilly's arm, saying, "Perhaps we'll just...How would you like to have dessert for dinner? I'll bet you'd love that! You don't have to eat vegetables or anything. We'll just have some...let's see. How about some nice custard? Do you want lemon or chocolate?"

Gilly didn't know what intimidated her mother more, the foreign looking words on the entree list or the prices marked beside them. A waiter passed with a plate piled high with some sort of steaming smoked meat and her stomach rumbled, but she replied, "Yes, Mama. Lemon is my favorite."

None of the neighbors to whom they were deeply indebted were present, and Gilly was glad for it. The couples and families seated around them weren't farmers or business owners or veterinarians; rather, they belonged to what Jack called the Country Club Party. Like the Mitchells, they came from money and seemed to find endless means of acquiring more of it.

Letta ordered a coffee service to accompany the dessert, oozing and aching over its presentation when it was delivered. The set was eggshell white and included the coffee pot, mini cream pitcher, sugar bowl, and sterling teaspoon with a dainty engraving on the handle. The coffee cup was half the size of their mugs at home, which Letta informed Gilly was the European way. She poured herself a cup and sprinkled sugar into the dark brew while Gilly devoured her lemon custard. The tartness cut through the sweet flavor and made her tongue tingle with every bite. Even as Letta sipped her coffee and sighed with contentment, Gilly caught her lustfully eyeing the bottles of champagne that chilled in ice on nearby tables.

After the coffee and custard had been reduced to drops and crumbs, the waiter cleared their table and returned twice to ask, "Can I get you anything else, Mrs. McCarter?"

Letta ignored the subtle hints and instead ordered glasses of water. Gilly didn't share her mother's reluctance to leave, growing more aware of the way their fellow patrons evaluated them from all corners of the dining room. After requesting a second glass of water, Letta made one last attempt to prolong the evening.

"I'm just running to the restroom. Will be right back."

With her mother gone, Gilly retreated to the foyer. She was relieved to find that the maître d wasn't at his podium and she'd escaped the stares of the dining room. The pianist had shifted from classical pieces to jazz, so Gilly climbed halfway up the staircase and shuffled up and down steps to the music like she'd seen Shirley Temple do once. Losing her footing, she slipped down two stairs before grabbing a quick hold of the banister. Since no one was there to witness, she giggled at her clumsiness and continued the stair dance. She realized she'd reached the top of the staircase and while the piano notes had grown faint, new noises emerged from down the hall. The corridor was empty, so she followed the hallway sounds and found herself in front of a wide door with a brass sign reading "Gentlemen Only" nailed across it. She was reaching to rub her fingers across the letters when the door swung open and Gilly faced Ellie Mitchell.

Everyone said Ellie kept her natural ebony black hair color until she turned 50, then it went white overnight. It was so long and wavy, one might mistake her for a hippie if that image were not belied by her turtleneck and blazer ensemble. Gilly had half expected her to be wearing a bustled hoop skirt.

"You're the McCarter girl, aren't you?" Ellie asked.

"Yes ma'am." Gilly prepared to apologize and flee.

Ellie's gaze wasn't rude. She was too much of a lady for that. But it was relentless. Gilly hoped the evidence of her and Letta's dusty trek to Millwood escaped it.

"Come on then," said Ellie. She pulled the door open wide and gestured for Gilly to follow her. Gilly hesitated, glanced down the stairwell and still seeing no sign of her mother, stepped inside.

There were three billiards tables, a bar boasting a shelf of brown liquors in crystal decanters, and a round oak table covered in dice and poker chips. The men occupying the tables reminded Gilly of a cartoon she'd watched one Saturday morning. They were marionettes. She imagined they remained motionless until Ellie entered the room and then came to life for her entertainment. The air was hazy with cigar smoke; the sole window closed and covered fully by a burgundy drape.

Ellie led Gilly to the center pool table where a man was tossing the balls into the rack. He was fat, but in the civilized way that suits can cover.

"How much have you lost tonight, George?" Ellie clapped him on the back as she spoke.

"Too much. What else is new?" The man grumbled in response.

"Before you break again, my friend here would like to play billiards," said Ellie.

Noticing Gilly for the first time, the man sucked on his teeth and asked, "Who do we have here?"

Gilly waited on Ellie to answer for her, and when she did not, replied, "Gilly McCarter."

"Well sure, darlin'. Don't you look pretty." The man patted the edge of the table where it puckered out from the green felt. "Sit on up here."

"No," said Ellie firmly. "She can stand. Let's put some money on her."

George frowned. "How's that?"

"If she breaks and doesn't scratch, you give me a hundred dollars."

The man chuckled uncomfortably. “You been drinking tonight, Ellie?” He picked up the cue stick from its leaning position by the table, but Ellie swiftly snatched it from his hands and placed it between Gilly’s.

“You wanted to meet my friend Martha, didn’t you, George?” Ellie asked. She braced her hands around Gilly’s shoulders, twisting them square and bending her into a shooting position.

George raised his less bushy eyebrow. “You got her here?”

“She’s down the hall. Waiting. Do we have a bet?”

George nodded and signaled the bartender for a Scotch refill.

“Miss Ellie, I’ve never played pool before,” Gilly pleaded. Ellie wrapped her arms around Gilly’s and moved her hands higher up the stick.

“You’re fine,” said Ellie. “Your grandmother and I started playing on my daddy’s table when we were about your age.”

Gilly shot and watched the balls scatter, expelling a held breath when she saw the cue ball resting against the back rail.

“Deal’s a deal,” said George. He procured a crisp bill from his jacket and handed it to Ellie, then turned to Gilly and said, “Come back and play with me again sometime.” He adjusted the bow on her yellow ribbon. “You’ve got real potential.”

After Richard left with his scotch, Ellie racked the balls again. “You should go, Gilly McCarter. Someone will be looking for you.”

Gilly had reached the door before Ellie said, “Don’t look at the cue ball.” She broke the rack, sending balls scurrying across the felt with a *clunk*. “You were staring at

it too hard. You just pretend it's not there. Understand?" Gilly nodded. She wished the marionettes would go still when she shut the door behind her.

Descending the staircase, she saw her mother frantically pacing the foyer. The pious maître d saw her first and said, "What are you doing up there? It's gentlemen only! Can't you read?"

"What was it like in there?" Letta asked her on the walk home. Her tone indicated more jealous longing than concern.

"Boring. They were just drinking and playing games," Gilly replied. "Car's coming, Mama." She turned toward the tree line, but Letta grabbed her hand.

"I'm sure tired of walking, aren't you, Gilly flower?" She stepped onto the pavement and waved her hands until the truck slowed to a roll beside them. The driver reached over and rolled the window down on the passenger side. He wore a blue work shirt, undoubtedly returning home from the Lando Mill. "Hi!" Letta leaned into the cab. "You would be our knight in shining armor if you gave us a lift home."

Sawyer thought that the burden of being poor was one which children bore much better than adults because they had yet to recognize and accept the conditions as inescapable. She saw a story on the news once about a teenager who was Harvard bound and had made her way through high school as a homeless independent. She bathed in the school locker rooms and did homework on the library computers and slept in her car. All clichéd, albeit noble, images of poverty, neglecting to include those of the furtive, sympathetic glances teachers undoubtedly cast her way when the school nurse came room to room to announce lice outbreaks.

A stack of bills awaited Sawyer when she returned to Warren from Thailand. Letta had taken a fall on a slippery bathroom floor and was still recovering with a broken wrist. Sawyer humbly went the district office and asked if she could sign a contract and get her old job back as a second grade teacher at Warren Elementary. Fortunately, since she'd returned early, in mid June, they still hadn't hired a replacement and she was able to secure the position, which made her feel simultaneously relieved and disappointed.

Several weeks into the school year, Sawyer came home and unloaded the mailbox in search of an envelope from Izzy. Seeing nothing, she walked into the house, fighting the urge to scratch her scalp raw. Their rental was part of the old Lando Mill village, converted some years after the mill closed its doors into a low income neighborhood by a private developer. The houses were never built to last, yet for the most part were still standing. Sawyer had heard a rumor that a commercial developer was interested in the land, which would mean the destruction of every mill house, including their own. She hoped to be in a foreign land with Izzy by the time it happened.

"You're home early." Letta stood over the kitchen counter with her wrapped wrist dangling by her side and her good hand occupied with pounding a bag of potato chips. Her Monday night chicken casserole called for crunched chips.

"I got a visit from Mr. Mitchell during morning recess. Gave me strict orders to go home after lunch and look after sweet Miss Letta." Sawyer drawled her grandmother's name, exaggerating Mr. Mitchell's inflection.

"Ron Mitchell told you that?"

"Yep. Mighty Christian of the district supervisor."

"You inherited your mother's sharp tone," said Letta.

Ron Mitchell had primarily funded her trip to Thailand. On a whim, Sawyer had created a GoFundMe page and posted the link to her Facebook profile. Letta was initially unsure of the platform, saying she didn't want Sawyer to be a charity case, but then when she saw how many people in the Warren community contributed to the page, she was flattered by the attention. The Mitchell family waited until the money flow had ebbed for a week and the cause seemed hopeless before making a \$3,000 donation that covered the rest of the travel expenses for Sawyer to go teach abroad.

Sawyer slid into her seat at the table and emptied her satchel. She moved the bills and fraction quizzes aside and retrieved her laptop with the *Warren Elementary* sticker prominently displayed on the front. She pulled up her email and scanned the inbox, frowning when she saw it only held a note from one of her usually disgruntled parents and a department store discount code. Letta eyed the bill envelopes and the untouched stack of papers beside the computer.

"Sawyer? Looks like you're behind on grading, hon."

"You should rest that wrist." Sawyer clicked on the Sent folder and reread her last three messages sent to Izzy with high importance.

"Hey Letta, whatever happened to the Booker family's farm?"

Letta raised an eyebrow and gave the bag of chips a momentary rest. "Booker?"

"Yeah, you know. You used to take me out there when I was a kid every Easter. To see the baby ducks and rabbits and pigs?"

"I remember," Letta replied. She pounded the bag again.

"Well is there still a farm?"

"Bookers still own the land, but that old farmhouse house is gone now. Never was much to look at. Some people rented it for a few years, but it got condemned a while back. Not much left on the property except the barn and the silos. You can still see them from the road."

"They still keep some animals there?"

"I reckon so." Letta shook the bag of chips in front of Sawyer's screen until Sawyer ripped it open for her. "Why, hon?"

Sawyer grabbed a handful of greasy chip remains before handing the bag back to Letta. "No reason."

Mags spent the early months of her pregnancy consumed by the sense that some great inevitable harm awaited her unborn child. She tried expressing her concern to Tom, but all he could offer was sympathy and repeated assurances that all would be well. Ellie came to the house less, preferring to spend her days showing Joseph Weaverman around town. Mags checked every morning for spots of blood in her underwear, certain that she'd miscarried in the night. To her, the only two indications that she even carried a human in her womb were the absence of her monthly cycle and the pronounced curve of her belly. She felt no movement within. From this, she nurtured a fear that the baby inside her was dead already. Not stillborn exactly. A creature from another world that she'd cruelly brought somewhere it did not belong.

While Mags endured the mental torment of her ghostly gestation, the other women of Warren were in celebratory spirits for the war in Europe was winding down and the return of the boys seemed imminent at last. The knowledge of this made them a lively crowd at the baby shower Ellie threw for Mags. They arrived bearing powder pink and blue afghans, towels, jumper suits, baby bottles, and stuffed bears. Ellie prepared a spread of punch, finger sandwiches, and frosted cake, elegantly arranged on a banquet table in the Gold Room.

The Gold Room, an addition to Warren First Presbyterian's fellowship hall, was regarded by every member of the congregation as the most sacred space in the church. Miss Hattie May Walker, a childless widow and fervent believer in tithing, died and bequeathed her worldly possessions to Warren Pres. In her will, she'd left specific instructions on how her generous monetary donation was to be used. She detailed the wallpaper, carpet, and lamp shades she wanted to decorate the room she called the

“Walker Memorial Reception Hall.” The elders voted and agreed to follow Hattie May’s orders to the letter, ruffling the feathers of Reverend Rumford who deemed such opulence sinful. They nailed a plaque by the door with the Walker family tribute, but everyone, even the Reverend, referred to it simply as “the Gold Room.” The wallpaper donned a Jacobean pattern in a deep mustard, the carpets a cool yellow. Chairs were upholstered in scratchy cheap material, tinted bronze. The only true gold colored objects were the floor lamps.

Mags remembered Reverend Rumford preaching the Biblical story about the priest Zechariah entering the temple to light incense. The reverend said the ancient priests went into the temple’s holiest room with a rope fastened to their feet, a necessary measure should the spirit of the Lord strike them down. The lesser temple men were forbidden from crossing the threshold into the room, even to retrieve a dead priest.

When they were girls, Ellie often convinced Mags to slip away from the Wednesday evening supper in the fellowship hall to explore the Gold Room. Mags complied primarily because she savored any occasion to gaze at Miss Hattie May’s doll collection. Hattie May’s most prized worldly possessions were her porcelain dolls, displayed in a china cabinet beneath the soft light of a floor lamp. They ranged in size and hair color, though the hues of eggshell porcelain skin were consistent. Ellie was particularly fond of one doll with a green taffeta dress and brunette chignon. Sometimes, ignoring Mags’ protests, she would slide the cabinet door open just to touch the folds of taffeta. Mags only ever lingered in front of the cabinet momentarily before retreating to the dark hallway, so she didn’t notice the day Ellie took the doll. She saw it later, slumped

over in the basket of Ellie's bicycle with her chignon loose. Ellie never confessed her crime and Mags never asked.

After the baby shower, Mags and Ellie were alone in the Gold Room cleaning up the leftover refreshments and gift wrapping paper. Ellie swiped a finger across the top of the remaining cake and inspected it closely.

"This is too dense. The sugar is positively grainy. Don't you think so, Mags?" Ellie waved her finger in front of Mags' face.

"It was perfect," said Mags. "Everything was. You are the most gracious hostess."

"Well, if you can believe it," said Ellie. "I do have one more gift for you." She sucked the icing from her finger and fumbled beneath the refreshment table, producing a rectangular box topped with a pearly bow.

Mags untied the box and gasped as she removed an ivory colored christening gown.

"How lovely. You stitched it yourself?"

"Of course," Ellie beamed. "I bought the material in Charlotte. No one around here will have anything like it."

Mags counted the buttons lining the back of the gown and imagined binding her phantom child in the satin.

"I promise you, your baby will never want for anything," said Ellie solemnly.

"How can a child learn virtue if they never want?"

“Don’t play,” said Ellie, gripping Mags’ forearm. “I’m telling you with the deepest sincerity that I will love and care for your child like it was my own.”

Mags nodded and pulled her arm free. They sat side by side in scratchy chairs, Mags with the tiny gown on her lap.

“Daddy suspects something is going on with me and Joseph.”

Mags’ eyes drifted to Hattie May’s cabinet of dolls with their fragile limbs.

“Let’s not talk about it here.”

“Of course I would never do such a thing,” said Ellie. “Any woman who would lack common decency. And godliness.”

Mags murmured in agreement.

“I love Frank. I do,” said Ellie. “He’s been gone so long though. I don’t remember the sound of his voice anymore. I suppose it’s possible that there are moments when I, well, am willing to overlook boundaries of utter propriety with Joseph. You can’t ever repeat this to another soul.”

“I would never.”

Ellie tugged the end of her braid and sniffed. “If people said hateful things about me, you wouldn’t believe them, would you?”

Mags folded the christening gown into one small triangle. It ought to be hung to prevent wrinkles, but it felt safer tucked into her palm. She answered Ellie, “No.”

Ellie rose and faced the doll display. “Sometimes I feel as if I have more enemies in this town than friends.”

“I think I need a drive,” said Mags.

“Want me to come with you?” Tom asked. Her restlessness kept them both up most nights. Tom’s eyes had grown clouded with spidery strings of blood vessels stretched from pupil to lid.

“No. Go on to bed. I won’t be long.”

“I’ll wait up,” he said, reclining back in his armchair. “Just going to rest my eyes a spell.”

Mags kissed his forehead and grabbed a coat and the truck key from their respective wall pegs. She was a good driver, though she’d never driven at all prior to marrying Tom. He taught her to drive the first week of their marriage and after that, was quick to surrender the keys whenever she requested them. Whether it was a thoughtless act on his account or he was earnestly trying to ingratiate himself to her, she wasn’t sure. In either case, the security of owning an automobile and having the know how to operate it was an invaluable gift, as it allowed at least the semblance of independence.

Driving into town, Mags listened to the soothing lull of the engine. At home, the walls closed in tighter at night. Even with Tom asleep beside her, she felt suffocated by the thoughts that had haunted her of late. In Warren, she found ample distraction. She mapped her trek around its three churches, starting with First Presbyterian, then Second Baptist (the first having been burned to the ground by the Union army), and finally Antioch Methodist on the outskirts of town. The farmland seeped into downtown somewhere between the Presbyterians and the Baptists, though the diner, drug store, filling station, and motel were still but a stone’s toss from barbed wire fences.

There was talk of a paper mill coming Warren. A foundation had been laid months earlier on the old Renfrow property down by the river, though rumor had it an estate dispute was delaying construction. Mags had heard dissenting opinions regarding the mill passed around the church fish fry. Men like Jimmy Rudolph and Ralph Gentry spoke of it with hope in their voices. These were the men whose overalls were oil stained, whose wives aged and lost teeth before their time, whose children walked barefoot in winter. To them, the mill would bring steady pay and millhouses to rent for pennies on the dollar. Others, like Betty Beard and Maureen Scoggins, knew a mill would mean good things for their boys returning from Europe. Yet in gentlemen's circles, the talk of which Mags was occasionally privy to through Ellie's chatter, the prospect of a mill promised an influx of vagrants, trash, and outsiders seeking employment.

The night air was stiff, even with the windows down. Mags smelled the faint whiff of smoke from a dying fire as she approached the intersecting crossroads that led to Antioch. She turned wide to round the corner and nearly ran him over.

He was naked and laying face down in the dust. Mags left the truck running and knelt by him, turning him over under the headlights.

"God Almighty." She recognized his handsome face, swollen as it was. The blood was so abundant, pooling in the dirt around him, that at first she did not see its origin.

"Mr. Weaverman? Joseph? I need you to help me. I can't lift you into the truck by myself."

He was disoriented but conscious, enough so to lean heavily on Mags and climb into the passenger seat. She shed her coat and covered him with it, thinking as she did of the day she met him and how sharply dressed he was in his suit and wool hat.

“Who did this to you?”

He moaned and mumbled an incoherent response. Mags wondered if he had broken teeth still in his mouth hindering his speech.

By the time she pulled into her driveway, she didn't have any recollection of passing First Presbyterian, Second Baptist, or Antioch Methodist. She honked once and Tom came running out in his underwear. While he carried Weaverman to the couch, Mags put a pot of water on the stove to boil and fetched a stack of linens. Tom looked out the window as she tended his wounds and tried to stop the bleeding.

“Did anyone follow you?” Tom asked.

“I don't think so.”

He lifted the telephone from the receiver and frowned. After placing the earpiece frantically back into its cradle twice more, he sighed and said, “They've cut the damn lines.”

“You're gonna have to drive for Doc Gaston,” said Mags. “I'll stay with Joseph.”

Tom nodded slowly and went outside, returning with a rifle in his arms.

Most Warren men either hung their rifles above mantles as trophies or else used them so often they had them propped carelessly by the door. Tom was not a hunter, and detested the sight of his gun. He'd bought it new when war was looming and he thought perhaps the need for able bodies was so great that his limp would be overlooked. Since then, he'd stowed the gun in the barn and only used it once, to put down a suffering mule.

In spite of his inexperience, he carried it to Mags with the ease of a seasoned soldier. She took it from him with one hand.

“Don’t hesitate,” he said.

“I won’t.”

Growing up, Mags and her sisters were tasked with all chores relating to the hogs. They learned at an early age it was best not to name them, save for names like “Bacon” and “Hambone.” Mags helped cure the meat after the spring slaughter, and she had to hold the squealing male piglets during their castrations. Her father was a seasoned farmer and knew how to make his cuts clean. Joseph Weaverman’s mangled flesh was telling proof of the men who’d castrated him. They couldn’t be farmers.

Tom and Dr. Gaston were marching through the front door within the hour. Despite Mags’ best efforts, Weaverman was thoroughly unconscious, the pallor of his cheeks already spotted purple with bruises. The doctor unloaded his kit on the coffee table, the slender glass bottles reminding Mags of a traveling medicine man she’d seen once at the county fair.

“Doc sent his son for the sheriff,” said Tom. “Why don’t you wait for him outside, Mags? You need some air.”

Mags carried a dish rag and a bucket of soapy water with her to the truck. She scrubbed the seats until the cab had no blood left inside it, and she continued scrubbing. Sheriff Morgan didn’t drive into the yard until dawn. He heaved himself out of the county police car with effort. Tom often likened the build of his upper body to a woodstove. As he walked toward the house, he brushed biscuit crumbs from his chest. Mags called him from the passenger door, “Sheriff.”

Morgan jumped and peered around the corner of the truck. “Mags? Lord, if you don’t look a sight.”

She assessed her clothes, bloodstained and dirty. The majority of the filth seemed to center disturbingly around her protruding abdomen. “I’m fine.”

“This is nasty business,” said Morgan. He gestured back toward the house and whistled. “I’m sure sorry you had to be the one to find him.”

“You need my statement?” said Mags, sliding out of the cab.

“Your statement?”

“I’ll be the closest person you have to a witness in your investigation.”

“Oh, well, Mags honey,” said Morgan. He leaned against the truck hood and removed his hat. “I don’t know how much of an investigation there’ll be. The priority right now is Weaverman’s trial.”

Mags slammed the passenger door shut. “His trial?”

“I hate to be the one to tell you this, but uh, I arrested the man just yesterday afternoon. Alleged rape.”

Mags tossed the soiled rag into her bucket of suds and watched the water discolor.

“Ellie.”

“Yes, ma’am,” said Morgan. “He got out on bail to await trial, but apparently some folks didn’t like the idea of him being on the streets. So you see, this ehm... crime, heinous though it may be, was likely just some of our local boys seeking justice. For Miss Ellie.”

Mags clutched her stomach, suddenly aware of the being inside. Two firm kicks. She wept uncontrollably then, for her baby who was surely cursed by the night.

“Again, terrible business,” Morgan said. He shifted uncomfortably, readjusted his hat and took Mags by the arm. “Why don’t I help you inside? You probably haven’t slept a wink.”

No one noticed a missing doll in Hattie May’s display case. For weeks, Mags sat in the pew between Janie and Evie on Sunday mornings and felt the eyes of God upon her as Reverend Rumford howled commandments from his pulpit. She avoided the fellowship wing of the church, not wanting to risk getting too close to the Gold Room and thus being struck dead or mute like Zechariah.

Warren saw a rare snowstorm the following January. Just a few inches, but enough for sleds to be drug merrily out of barns. Mags and her sisters hurried through their indoor chores so they could join Ellie and her brothers in the Mitchell family’s back pasture. The plush snow of the morning hardened to icy mounds by afternoon, resulting in numerous scraped lips and bloody noses amid the sled races and snowball fights. When the snow melted, the Mason family found two of their baby chicks frozen stiff just yards shy of the henhouse. Old Miss Wilkins said the chill had settled deep into her bones and left her with a lung rattling cough. The Mitchell’s pasture was a muddy graveyard of lost mittens and caps. Among the strewn belongings, Mags spotted Hattie May’s doll, a shattered pile of porcelain pieces shrouded in frosty taffeta. Presumably, she was a casualty of the frenzied horse play that had ensued early in the storm. Mags returned to the pasture alone the next morning to collect the doll, burying her remains in the cornfield where not even a plow would ever unearth her and scattering wilted husks around the mound.

Sawyer's plan began to formulate in her mind the moment she heard about the statue. There were no guarantees, but she dwelled on the possibility that this would be enough to bring him back to her.

She'd received an email from sent from Ron Mitchell to the faculty list serv. He requested all school employees, from preschool on up, attend the next PTA meeting in the high school cafeteria. Sawyer considered not going, thinking no one would possibly miss her, but Letta insisted she attend and make a point to talk privately to Ron Mitchell afterward and thank him again for being so accommodating with her "travel debacle."

The previous day's lunch odor still permeated the room. There wasn't an identifiable food in the scent, leading Sawyer to believe they still served the students pans full of mystery meats, slimy noodles, and soupy vegetables. They were not the worst school in the state, statistically speaking, but their funding was every bit as dismal as the lesser performing ones. The teachers who retired from Warren High were Warren natives. Any young blood that came through had a burnout rate of two years. The state colleges often pushed their education graduates toward the poorer counties with promises of charitable fulfillment. A neighboring county's school had their moment in the national news spotlight after a racial slur was carved into a black student's locker. After this, bright eyed educators spilled into the school with hopes of making a difference. Sawyer remembered the halls of Warren High as being racially divided, though not exactly hostile. Then again, she was not socially involved enough to be aware of such tensions.

The PTA president, a woman Sawyer recognized but couldn't name, took the podium microphone while Ron Mitchell sat on a folding chair behind her, beaming. Throughout her introduction, in which she identified herself as Christy Jamison of

Jamison Orthodontics, she turned periodically to smile at Ron. Just as Sawyer was losing interest in the speech and was reaching for her phone to scroll Izzy's Instagram feed again, she made the announcement.

To honor the Mitchell family's generous donation to the school's new library, which they made in the late Ralph Mitchell's name, Warren Elementary's PTA had commissioned an out of town sculptor to create a bust in his likeness. The statue would be ceremoniously unveiled upon its completion and it would greet library patrons for years to come.

Sawyer told Izzy about the Weaverman trial during their ferry ride to Wat Pho. Letta had recited the story to her so many times when she was growing up, she knew it by heart. She mimicked Letta's dramatic retelling, pausing after the shocking reveals until Izzy impatiently asked, "Then what?". Sawyer was pleased to learn that Weaverman didn't fall into Izzy's seemingly infinite knowledge of past and present injustices. News of the trial had swept up the East coast, back to Pittsburgh where Weaverman was from, but the ending of the war overshadowed headlines about the crime, of which the details were vague and the evidence generally deemed insubstantial.

"So it was the clan, then?" Izzy asked. He leaned against the ferry's deck railing with his sunburned arms looped around them. The breeze blowing off the water felt no cooler than car fumes. Being a Southerner, Sawyer was accustomed to heat, but quickly found that the sweltering climate of Thailand was far more oppressive.

"They never used that word," Sawyer replied. She pretended to be bored with the story and zoomed her camera lens in on Izzy's face. "Mob, they called them. Vigilantes.

Probably near twenty of them total, but they wore masks, you know. They arrested four guys, managed to convict one on a shoddy alibi and a wrist tattoo that Weaverman identified."

Izzy shielded his face as Sawyer's camera snapped. "How about Weaverman? Did he get cleared of the rape charges?"

"Yeah. That was all just hearsay anyway. My great grandma Mags never bought it."

Izzy shook his head and exhaled. "You sure you're not making this shit up? Good looking Jewish salesman makes a pass at the wrong woman and gets taken out back by some hillbilly clan mafia?"

Sawyer shrugged and zoomed her camera on Izzy's hands. His knuckles were white in their flexed grip around the railing. "Left him to bleed to death. Mags found him in the middle of the road."

"I bet that town hasn't changed a bit," said Izzy.

"Anyway," said Sawyer. "The girl's father wasn't called to stand trial. He spent the hours leading up to the jury's verdict at church, helping the deacons prepare their annual barbecue fundraiser. How's that for ironic?"

The mystery of the ordeal had always intrigued Sawyer less than the lack of resolution. Whether or not Ralph Mitchell actually donned the white sheets to deal with his daughter's alleged rapist or if he was just the orchestrator of the night, no one could be sure. None of the men, even the convicted, offered up his name.

After the trial, Joseph Weaverman went back to Pittsburgh and the case files were locked away securely in Town Hall. The convicted mob member with the incriminating

wrist tattoo served his ten years and took a job at the mill. The mob remained active through the '70's, but made their activities quieter and significantly less dramatic and gruesome. Weaverman didn't get his spot in the history books, and neither did the perpetrator of his hate crime.

Growing up, Letta knew there were only two rules that really mattered. Her mother's: To steer clear of the Mitchell boys on the playground. Her father's: To never walk past the Lando Mill after dark. Infringement of the more implicit rules was punishable by a reprimand at worst. The first time Letta blurted "Shit!" after stumping her toe on a loose floorboard, Mags didn't turn her head from the stove. She called over her shoulder, "Cussing isn't ladylike, Loretta Ann" and left it at that. Whenever Letta neglected her chores, Tom would remind her, "The farm is our livelihood. Without it, we won't eat." It was a maddeningly quiet, peaceful home.

Mags and Tom didn't argue with each other, their exchanges unfailingly pleasant. Try though she might, Letta couldn't prod her little brother Ricky into a quarrel. Even as a baby, he was content in all circumstances. If Letta snatched a toy from his pudgy hands, he'd just pick up another or suck on his fingers. They were a year and a half apart in age, but in the same class at school. Ricky was advanced with his reading and arithmetic while Letta struggled to keep up with her peers. Her teacher suggested that she repeat the first grade, saying she may master the skills better with Ricky alongside her. On their last day of fifth grade, she felt so emboldened by the prospect of leaving her humiliating elementary experience behind, she decided to break both of the rules.

She would've enjoyed going out on her own, but knew separating from Ricky would be near impossible. Tom always said he followed her around like a loyal old dog. Letta considered him more of a relentless pest. The quickest route to the mill, as the crow flies, was through the Mitchells' property. When the school bell released them for the summer, Letta drug Ricky down the road to catch up to the Mitchell twins.

They claimed to be identical, which might have been true in the womb. But out in the world, handsome Cal fared better than Wade, whose facial features were disproportionate in a way that made him look either clownish or mean, depending on his mood. Letta batted her eyelashes at Cal, a trick she'd seen once in a comic strip. She told them she wanted to see the mill people and asked if they knew how to get there. The brothers shared a sly look with each other and agreed, leading the way through an adjacent pasture. As they slithered beneath a low line of barbed wire, Ricky looked back at the road and grudgingly followed his sister.

Letta couldn't tell what the Mitchell farm's primary or most lucrative crop was. Her father planned and tended to his fields as faithfully as he cared for his family. Different plants for different seasons, a rigid schedule of fertilization. The organization of the Mitchell fields seemed random, bursts of sunflowers or corn stalks or cotton interrupting rows of vegetation. Near the woods, they passed an elderly black man driving a tractor. He didn't see them or else pretended not to, continuing to guide the machine over lumpy soil and pockets of brush. The Mitchells had the largest and most modern fleet of farm equipment in town.

For most of the journey, Cal and Wade marched side by side, whispering and looking back at Ricky and Letta.

"My daddy says there's no tellin' what kinda riff raff live up here," said Cal. "They hire felons, ya know, to work the mill."

"You're lying," said Ricky.

"No, it's true!" said Wade. "Thieves and murderers and rapers too."

“Yep,” Cal said with a labored sigh. “It’s a sad state this town’s in. And if this ain’t enough, now they’re gonna mix the schools. Blacks and whites in the same classes! Daddy says there’s no telling what will come after this. We’re living in Sodom and Gomorrah.”

Letta had overheard her own parents discuss the new integration law in hushed tones one morning while she was getting ready for school and her father read the newspaper over a plate of fried eggs and bacon.

“They’d be damn fools to step foot in any school in this county,” he’d said.

“It won’t be a cakewalk,” Mags had consented. “But I hope at least one of them will. High time it happened.”

Tom grunted. “Ike better be planning to send a battalion of troops down here if they do.”

Warren High’s integration proved uneventful; none of the rumored guards, dogs with bared teeth and foamy mouths, fire hoses spraying heedlessly into the crowd. The “crowd” was a meager group of three protestors that stood on the lawn, waving their signs for the sole photographer who’d shown up to document the arrival of Teresa Harper. Teresa was a sophomore, but her frame, petite as it was, could almost have been mistaken for a girl much younger. Principal Walters and Ralph Mitchell, Wade and Cal’s grandfather and the chairman of the school board, greeted her on the steps with tight smiles.

By the time they reached the foot of the mill hill, the sun was setting over Fishing Creek Bridge. The mill’s solitary smoke stack churned out a hazy cloud that hovered

above the tree line and met the dusk. After they passed the road sign reading “LandoManetta Mills”, Letta saw the first house. It was a squat structure, nestled among tall grass and wild shrubs as if the property hadn’t been cleared for a house, but rather a house just plopped right on top of it.

“Alright,” said Ricky. He tugged Letta’s arm. “We’re here. Can we go home now?”

“Hold on just a minute, Ricky,” said Cal. He winked at Wade. “Letta, you said you wanted to see a mill person. I dare you to go knock on the door.”

Letta looked at the two windows facing her. They were naked inside and out, no shutters or curtains. A guttural noise of apprehension escaped her throat.

“Why not?” Wade sneered, his ruddy features flaring. “Are you scared?”

“Not at all. It’s just... This house is no good. I want to find a better one.”

As they walked along the road, the houses multiplied and the spaces between them lessened. Letta thought she might could touch the edge of one house with her finger and its neighbor with her toe at the same time.

“Chicken, chicken!” Wade and Cal began to chant in unison.

“I’m no chicken,” said Letta. She turned defiantly toward the house before her and hopped up its concrete steps. The house’s underbelly was exposed, perched on moldy cinderblocks. Before she could lose her nerve, she rapped on the door three times.

She whirled around, intending to hop the steps and run off, but lost her footing in the process and tumbled to the ground. She heard Wade and Cal’s laughter as they disappeared across the bridge, then Ricky was beside her asking if she was hurt. She

assessed her knees, dirty and skinned up. As Ricky helped her stand, the door behind them creaked open.

“This is private property.”

The voice, mockingly stern, belonged to the freckle faced boy who looked curiously down at them. He crossed his arms and grinned wide, revealing a row of snaggleteeth.

“I’m Ricky. This is my sister, Letta. Do you live here?”

The boy nodded. “I’m Jack. Y’all lost?”

“No,” said Letta. She winced and brushed grass from her stinging knees. “Just on our way home.”

“Lemme show you around!” said Jack. Before Letta could decline, Jack had shut the door behind him and was striding up the hill, unconcerned with his bare feet.

The whistle blew at five, and then they weren’t alone on the hill anymore. Workers walked by in overalls and raggedy uniforms. They stunk, but Letta couldn’t recognize the metallic smell that mixed with their sweat and body odor. She wondered which ones among them were criminals and worried that she and Ricky were conspicuously out of place, but the men kept their eyes on the ground.

Jack didn’t seem to notice the workers at all, chattering ceaselessly as they entered the center of the mill village. He pointed out the company store where they could buy all the goods they needed. A woman, perhaps younger than Letta’s mother but with graying hair, walked out of the store as they passed. In one arm, she cradled a swaddled baby. With the other, she held a basket of potatoes on her shoulder. Beside her, a toddler,

clothed in nothing but a diaper and an oversized shirt, waddled along at his own pace. The weight of his sagging diaper seemed to be throwing his steps off balance.

Letta observed that the smallest houses, like Jack's, were clustered at the bottom of the hill and that those tenants had the most tiresome hike to work. Near the top where the ground leveled, the houses grew slightly. These, Jack explained, belonged to the boss men. They had porch swings and mailboxes painted with names like "Gordon" and "Horne." The largest house on the street, which was still modest compared to those of Warren's most affluent families, also had the best kept lawn, complete with daffodil beds and a stone bird bath.

Jack let them pause to admire it. "Old Man Fuller's wife likes birds. I can clear a robin from twenty paces with my slingshot. Come on, let's go to the depot!"

The depot was only recognizable as a depot because of the railroad tracks beside it. It was just a cement platform covered by a wooden overhang, but the empty crates and supply boxes scattered about suggested that it was a functioning loading deck for the mill.

"Trains come here from all over the country," said Jack. "I'm thinking about stowing away on a boxcar one day soon. See where it takes me."

He looked to his left, toward the mill, then to his right, peering miles down the tracks in search of an invisible train. Seeing no one in either direction, he reached deep into the pocket of his holey pants and brought forth a crudely rolled cigarette. Letta and Ricky gasped.

"Never seen one before?" Jack said gleefully. He stuck it in his mouth and mimed an inhale, then held it out for Ricky. Ricky got his own imaginary puff and

passed it to Letta. She hesitantly placed it in her mouth, rolled it between her teeth. They took turns until the end of the cigarette grew soggy and the cicadas signaled the late hour. Ricky and Letta went the long way home, avoiding the Mitchell property, and arrived in time for dinner. Neither Tom nor Mags asked where they had been, and Letta found she didn't care that the rule breaking was to be a kept secret between her and Ricky.

After Ricky and Jack met, Tom stopped called Ricky Letta's loyal old dog and started saying instead that he and Jack were "thick as thieves." Letta took on the role of the tagalong, following the boys to the woods, dangling lines into Fishing Creek, occasionally sharing a cigarette by the tracks whenever Jack could get his hands on one. In high school, Jack joined Ricky and Letta at Warren High and he and Ricky led the basketball team to its first ever regional championship. Just on the heels of their victory, they announced their plans to enlist.

Mags knew Ricky wouldn't return home as soon as he told her he was headed to Vietnam, and she said as much. Beyond this, she didn't bother trying to convince him not to go. Tom threw a send-off barbecue for both boys and the whole town came.

"I'll never forgive you for leaving me here," Letta sniffed. She sulked on the porch swing with her knees drawn to her chin.

"Sure ya will," said Ricky. He kissed her cheek with an exaggerated smack. "When we get back, you and Jack can get married and name your first boy after me."

Six months later, when Major Smith showed up on their porch in dress blues, Letta wailed and Tom slipped off to the barn, but Mags just looked puzzled and said,

“Huh. I always thought it would be you, Letta. Ricky wasn’t even with me the night it happened.”

It took weeks for him to be returned stateside. Mags spent the better part of an afternoon calling the governor’s office to ensure he’d arrived safely. The issue of the burial brought on the first real argument of Mags and Tom’s marriage. Throughout the ordeal of securing the return of Ricky’s body, Tom had remained reticent. But when the discussion arose regarding his final resting place, Tom was insistent that they send him to Arlington.

“I won’t have my boy buried among strangers,” Mags said.

“He died for his country,” Tom shoved away from the kitchen table. “He deserves a soldier’s burial. We should be proud of his sacrifice.”

“Damn his country,” Mags said.

The senior clergyman from Warren Pres came by the house during visitation to pay his respects. “We are all just, terribly sorry for your loss,” he said, clutching his hat to his stomach. “And we are so proud of Ricky. We have the flag at half mass.”

“I’m thinking Wednesday for the funeral,” said Mags. She gestured for him to sit and he shook his head. Letta brought a tray of coffee and creamer and he waved it away.

“The problem is, Mags,” said the Reverend. He cleared his throat. “The church cemetery is for our members only. And well, you and Tom haven’t been enrolled since ehm...for many years.”

The politely hushed conversations going on throughout the room trailed off. Silence hung thick for a full five seconds before it was broken by the sound of a shrill woman’s voice.

“My God, she is just beautiful.”

Letta looked over her mother’s shoulder. Without anyone noticing, Ellie Mitchell had made her way into the living room and was standing with her hands on hips, staring at Letta. “Doesn’t look anything like you or Tom.”

Letta had seen Ellie from afar over the years, but seeing her in her own living room was startling. She was draped in black from the outdated bonnet on her head to the tiny heels on her feet. No one moved, no one spoke. Letta lowered herself to the couch and set down the coffee tray.

“What can I do for you, Ellie?” Mags asked.

“Well, two things,” said Ellie. She peeled off her gloves as she spoke. Elbow length, evening gloves. “First, I came by to pay my respects, of course. But mainly, I’m here for business.” She waited until Mags raised an eyebrow and said, “I want Ricky to have my plot in the cemetery.”

She untied her bonnet strings below her chin. “I’ve decided I don’t want to be buried. I rather like the idea of cremation. I’ll have my ashes scattered somewhere. More romantic.”

“Our issue isn’t that we can’t afford a plot,” said Mags. “We are apparently being exiled from the promised land.”

“Reverend Mosby,” Ellie said, acknowledging him for the first time. His face was flushed and his jaw gaping open. “I believe...it would be downright unpatriotic to exclude a war hero from the grounds, don’t you? And I can assure you my father will agree with me. And the other elders as well.”

“Actually,” said Mags, interrupting Reverend Mosby’s defensive stuttering. “We’ve decided it will be best to send him to Arlington.”

Reverend Mosby looked so relieved that Letta wondered if he was going to kiss her mother for sparing him further discussion.

“Oh,” said Ellie. Disappointment flashed across her face only briefly before her smile returned. “Of course. Well, in that case, it seems I’ve overstayed my welcome already. I’ll be off.” Mags followed her to the door and was closing it when Ellie turned abruptly.

“Mags?” Her shoe caught the door by an inch. The pointy triangular tip was all Mags would allow back in the house. “It truly broke my heart when I heard.”

Letta thought she sounded sincere and for a moment Mags might have too, but then she repeated Tom’s words into the closing gap.

“He died for his country. We’re very proud.”

It didn’t take long for the house to empty of mourners after Ellie left, followed immediately by the flustered Reverend.

“You said you didn’t want him resting with strangers, remember?” said Letta.

Mags picked up plates of discarded sandwich crusts from the coffee table. “Ricky’s gone, Letta. Funerals and burials are just something us living people do to make ourselves feel better. And taking a guilt offering from Ellie isn’t going to make me feel at all better.”

Letta knew where Ellie’s plot was in the cemetery. It was sheltered by an oak tree’s far reaching shade, though not close enough that the headstone would catch a mess

of acorns and dead leaves. Whatever the woman's past transgressions, Letta resented her mother for not at least considering Ellie's olive branch. The Weaverman tale was rarely uttered, but from what Letta could gather of it, Ellie had always maintained her innocence, so it seemed the only person still carrying guilt was Mags.

Jack took another three months to get home, returning with shrapnel in his leg and a flask in his breast pocket. He and Letta met at the mill depot. She scarcely recognized him as he limped toward her in the dark. They didn't speak at first. He lit a cigarette and the song of the cicadas swallowed up the clicking of his lighter.

"No chance in hell I'll be able to get hired on at the mill now," Jack said. He blew tendrils of smoke toward the village where the workers were hobbling home. "Not with this leg."

"Doesn't matter," said Letta. "Daddy will let you take over the farm one day. After we get married." She held out an expectant hand and they exchanged the cigarette. He considered the proposal and nodded.

"I was thinking," he said. "We should go up to Arlington sometime. Pay our respects."

"Yeah, maybe. One day."

Letta threw the remaining cigarette onto the tracks and they stayed until the scattered sparks cooled to ash.

"Mama, what's a heathen?"

It was Ricky's sixth birthday. Mags was baking his favorite chocolate cake. Ricky was delightfully occupied by his gift, a miniature toy train. He rolled the caboose around the kitchen floor, spinning circles around the chair legs. Letta had been thoughtfully licking the batter remnants from Mags' mixing bowl when she asked her mother the question.

"Who called you that?" Mags asked. She gently slid the cake pan onto the top oven rack.

"I overheard Miss Selma at the post office."

Ricky stopped making choochoo noises long enough to cheerfully exclaim, "It's somebody who doesn't know anything about God, right Mama?"

"That's right, baby," said Mags. "Some people think you have to go to church to know about God."

"Why don't we go to church?"

Mags prided herself on her children's Biblical knowledge. Since birth, she'd read them one Bible story a night. Ricky could recite nearly the entirety of Genesis 6, the chapter about Noah's ark. Tom gruffly blessed all their suppers, and Mags drilled them with catechism lessons on Sunday mornings. She assured them they'd been sprinkled with holy water as infants, though Letta suspected her baptism took place in the kitchen sink and thus had long feared for the eternal destination of her soul. She knew all her classmates and neighbors were church goers, so it was likely the fact that she was a heathen in their eyes was to blame for their constant exclusion of her from birthday parties and play.

“Have you ever seen God walking through Warren on his way to church Sunday morning?” Mags asked.

Ricky giggled at this image. Letta pictured God with his white robes and curly beard strolling down Main Street. God was Baptist, probably. Maybe Presbyterian. Yet it seemed unlikely he would descend from heaven above to attend a service in Warren. She shook her head.

“It’s because he isn’t there,” said Mags. “I went to church all my life and I never once saw God in it. Church is just people. Some of them aren’t very good people either. We don’t worship people, do we?”

“Well,” Letta said carefully. “They can’t all be *bad* people either. I’d like to find out for myself.”

Mags looked hard at Letta and raised her voice to an uncharacteristically angry pitch. “When you’re a woman and you have your own home and husband and children, you can do what you want. But you won’t go to any church in this town as long as you’re living under my roof.”

Ricky’s train wheels stopped moving and Letta glared into the bowl before her.

Mags forced a stiff chuckle, swiped her finger through the last of the chocolate batter, and said, “You know, when I was your age, I would’ve loved it if I didn’t have to wake up early and wear a silly dress on Sunday mornings.”

Izzy didn't respond to Sawyer's emails or offer any notice of his arrival. The Saturday after the library bust unveiling, Sawyer's phone buzzed with a text reading simply, "At bus station. Come get me". She drove the forty five minutes to their neighboring town's bus station and found him on a bench updating his Facebook status. He looked up at her and said, "We're gonna make the bastard go viral."

Since she'd last seen him, Izzy had grown a patchy beard and tattooed a sea turtle on his shoulder. He asked her to stop by a McDonald's drive thru on the way home.

"What about the animals?" She asked.

"This is for medical reasons," Izzy said. "Healer I saw in Bali said I have an iron deficiency."

"Maybe you should have a banana," Sawyer muttered, then pulled up to the speakers and ordered two combos with large fries.

"Can you spot me this time?" Izzy asked as he dug half heartedly through the backpack on his lap. "I haven't switched currencies yet."

Sawyer paid the cashier at the window and passed the brown paper bag to Izzy.

"Ok so," said Sawyer. She turned left at the intersection to take the longer route home. "There's just one thing about the plan that keeps bothering me."

"Dammit. You didn't ask for ketchup," said Izzy. "You have to ask or they don't give you any." He unwrapped his burger.

"The thing is," said Sawyer. "There are religious implications of hog slaughter. For Jewish people I mean."

"No, no, no," said Izzy between bites. "You're getting caught up in semantics. The most important job we have right now is spotlighting. Spreading awareness."

“Right,” said Sawyer. She grabbed a handful of fries from the bag. “Awareness for...anti-Semitism? Or for this specific case?”

“All of it. Not our job to decide that. We’re just the whistleblowers. It’s going to be a very timely issue. You’ll see. I’ve already got the post written, we just have to add photo and video.”

The scattered aesthetic of Izzy’s blog made the purpose of it unclear to Sawyer. He seemed to dabble in travel and food photography, though the more recent content veered political. He was convinced that the anonymity of the Internet would protect the both of them from any repercussions. Sawyer was doubtful, but already committed to whatever came.

When they got home, Sawyer sat at the kitchen table with Letta while Izzy showered. Letta peeled potatoes and diced pickles for the potato salad she'd been asked to bring to her women’s prayer circle.

"How long is he staying?"

"Don't know." Sawyer had a red pen in her hand and a pile of vocabulary quizzes in front of her.

"Isn't he the reason you lost your job over there?" Letta pointed her knife toward what she presumed to be the general direction of Asia.

"We've been over this," said Sawyer. She squiggled a circle beside the word *discriminate*.

"Yeah, yeah, I know. You 'wanted' to follow him God only knows where. And you 'wanted' to spend all your savings doing God only knows what."

"Right," Sawyer said. "And somehow, that makes me no better than Mama, the woman who left you to raise her child so she could fuck around in Miami."

"Oh, that's pretty talk, Sawyer. Really." Letta set her potato down. "I just can't help but notice that he didn't mind dropping you off at the airport and going on his merry way to Australia as soon as your purse was empty."

"That was my money, Letta," said Sawyer. She threw her pen down. "It's still my money. I pay the rent. He can stay as long as he wants."

"Of course, hon," Letta flicked a piece of potato skin off her arm. "Just make sure whatever you plan to sacrifice this time is worth it."

Sawyer carried Izzy's backpack to the laundry closet and dumped its contents into the washing machine. She called over her shoulder, "It was Indonesia, by the way. Not Australia."

The farm was easy enough to find, even though Sawyer could only vaguely recall the directions from her childhood Easter trips. Just as Letta said, the silos were visible from the road, outlined in the moonlight like the bell towers of a cathedral. Sawyer was relieved to see that Booker had yet to invest in electrical hot wires or any kind of advanced security system. The pliers she brought from Letta's miscellaneous tool collection effectively removed two panels of barbed wire fence and gave them a path to drive through in her used pickup.

The horse corral was overgrown with weeds and a rusted plow faced the barn. The afternoon rain still dripped from the tattered roof, making the soaked hay bales piled

in the alleyway reek of mildew. The four cats lounging in the rafters and the hog in his back stall were the only animals on the grounds.

“You sure he isn’t going to bite me?” Izzy asked as he approached the hog’s stall. He had woken at the sound of their voices and was curiously sniffing them at the gate.

“I’m positive,” said Sawyer. “He’s used to being fed. Just get him out here and I’ll tie him.”

Izzy lured the hog out of his stall with a Tupperware dish full of Letta's chicken casserole. While he grunted and devoured the soggy leftovers, Sawyer tied the end of a rope around his neck. He trotted behind her to the truck, chasing the scraps of food Izzy tossed him along the way.

“I didn’t know he’d be this big,” said Izzy. He walked backwards at the hog’s pace.

“He’s average sized,” said Sawyer, though she too was surprised by the animal’s girth. “You’ll be better walking normal and keeping an eye in front of you. Snakes are a much bigger threat than he is, I can promise you that.”

“Glad you’re a farmer now,” said Izzy. He pulled out his phone and turned on its flashlight feature.

“What the hell?” Sawyer swatted the phone from his hand and it hit the ground screen first. “People can see that from the road.”

“You cracked it. Shit,” said Izzy. He tucked the phone in his back pocket and threw the last of the chicken casserole on the ground beside the truck.

They’d already set up the truck bed for loading. The tailgate was down flat and the old sliding board Sawyer had found in the attic rested against it.

“You get up there with the casserole bowl,” she ordered. She handed Izzy the hog’s lead rope. “I’ll push.”

“There’s nothing left,” said Izzy, holding out the empty dish.

“He doesn’t know that. Get up there.”

The slide was almost too steep for the hefty animal. Sawyer had to press against his backside and dig her heels into the supple ground to get him to the top. He clambered onto the bed and squealed angrily when he discovered the empty bowl. She hoped the muddy imprint of her hiking boots wouldn’t be too identifiable.

Sawyer avoided main roads as long as she could. She knew the back roads well from her Sunday drives with Letta. Most of the rural land in Warren was bought and sold for clear cutting, though a few properties had residential neighborhoods and strip mall plans in the works. Letta still referred to them by family name. The Renfrow place, the Scoggins farm, even the acreage she was raised on. Sawyer recognized it when she passed by, the condemned house with the concave roof that her great grandfather Tom had built himself.

A mile from town, Sawyer said, “We could go to prison for this probably.”

“They’ve got nothing on us,” said Izzy. “Even if they track the blog, we can just say we took the picture.”

Sawyer parked behind the school playground and they unloaded the hog. She and Izzy put on the ski masks that Warren’s snow-less, Southern winters deemed foolish purchases year after year. When they got to the front of the library, Ralph Mitchell greeted them with a gentleman’s smile.

Reaching into Izzy's backpack, Sawyer pulled out the brick she'd found in Letta's garden soil and brought the weight of it down against the back of the hog's head. Izzy gasped as the animal collapsed on his side.

"Jesus, what was that!"

"What?" Sawyer leaned down and pulled a piece of rope out of the bag. "We can't do it while he's conscious. He's not exactly easily maneuverable."

"I thought you meant you had like, I don't know. A tranquilizer or something."

"Where would I get animal tranquilizer?"

"Is he...alive?" Izzy asked.

Sawyer shrugged. "Does it matter?" With steady hands, she bound his front legs together.

"I...I think...what if we just left him here?" Izzy stammered.

"What are you talking about?" Sawyer tied the back legs without looking up.

"Just leave him here in front of the statue tied up like this. They'll get the idea."

Izzy's head swiveled around frantically as he spoke.

"What idea? What kind of point do we send with an unconscious pig?"

"I don't know, but I just. Um. I thought this was going to be more of a clinical type procedure."

"Farmers do this every day. This will go viral, remember?" Sawyer pulled the butcher knife from her bag and unsheathed it. Letta had ordered the knife from the Pampered Chef consultant in her Sunday school class. She used it to chop cabbage and Kielbasa.

"It's not right," he said, grabbing Sawyer's wrist. "We can't do this to an animal."

Sawyer yanked her hand free and held the knife out to Izzy. He slowly shook his head. The ski mask covered all but his wide eyes.

"You can just fucking leave if you wanna leave," Sawyer said.

"Don't be like that. I just don't know that this is something I can see through, you know? And I don't want to leave you here to deal with the mess."

Sawyer looked down at his hands, his fingers clasped tightly together. She knew, even in the darkness, that his knuckles were stark white. "Right."

"Yeah, I mean I'm...I'm proud of you, Sawyer. I never thought you would go through with something like this. I can see now you're sincere about this stuff."

Sawyer ran her finger over the flat end of the knife's blade and mentally practiced the castration incision marks she'd studied for three weeks. She'd gone to the county library for books to prevent anything incriminating on her Internet search history.

"We'll still out the Weaverman clan. I promise. My subscriber base is growing and I know this will be a story of interest," said Izzy. He waited for Sawyer to respond and when she didn't, added, "I'm waiting in the truck."

Sawyer hesitantly slid the knife back into its sheath, on which a cherubic faced cartoon chef sliced vegetables. Digging through the supply bag, she felt the cool metallic of the spray paint bottle. The morning janitor crew would arrive soon and remove the body, she knew. The hog may even live to see the dawn and return to his barn stall if his barely audible but steady breathing was any indication. It couldn't have all been for nothing.

With precision, she sprayed the letters over the hairy torso. Izzy would leave again and she was glad for it because the responsibility of making amends was hers alone. Setting her phone camera to flash, Sawyer snapped the picture of Ralph Mitchell smiling as he overlooked the hog bearing Weaverman's name in bright red.