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Cheat River

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Cheat River

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of
The University of New Orleans
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts
in
Film, Theatre and Communication Arts
Creative Writing

by

Kelly McQuain

B.A. in English, Temple University, 1989
M.A. in English, Temple University, 1991

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Abstract

Cheat River is a novel about balancing family obligations against self-preservation. That is what's at stake for Allison and Andrew McKenna, a pair of siblings in rural Appalachia who must endure their father's abandonment and their pregnant mother's breakdown. At first, the two find solace from their parents' problems on the banks of the river from which the novel takes its name. But eventually, Andrew's homosexual feelings drive him to the bohemian streets of Philadelphia in the early '90s where he falls in with political activists and a household of misfits. He disappears, and Allison comes to the city to look for him. By retracing her brother's life, she realizes not only what he meant to her but what it will take to survive on her own.

Keywords: fiction, siblings, women, gay, West Virginia, Philadelphia, mural, ACT UP, Gulf War, Appalachia.

Prologue: Burial Game

You steal into the safety of the woods, Allison, your sister, at your side, carrying her broken baby. Behind you Momma's screams rise up shrill and hurtful, and you try hard to shut them out. You run, concentrating on the comfort of the forest, the flicker of light through shade. Leaves filter the whole world out. Beneath you lies the sureness of ground, leafy and damp against the bare soles of your feet. In your arms, you hold tight a cereal box stolen from the breakfast table. Brambles claw at your pajamas as you tear past, moving fast to leave Momma's temper far behind.

Allison stumbles over a fallen branch, and the doll she carries spills from her arms. Your sister is a couple years younger, only nine, always looking up at you with needy eyes that knock a little breath from your lungs. Instinctively you stop, offer a hand up, trying not to notice her blue eyes ringed in red. She snatches up her doll and starts running again, blindly into green camouflage.

You watch her go, imagining her becoming lost or saved without you. The thought fills you with shame. You start after her, catching up quick because you are good at running. You take the lead and guide your sister through the wooded rising hillside. Up the trail you blazed with your father, the one that leaves this hollow and heads to Cheat River.

At the riverside, you finally catch your breath. Light gleams off the water's surface. You eat hungry handfuls of Cap'n Crunch, almost mistaking the stillness here for peace. But Allison's doll is broken, head smashed from where Momma threw it hard against a wall. The old doll—won by Grandma Rose at a fire hall bingo game--has sat neglected on Allison's dresser ever since she got her first Barbie; she only care about it again because Momma's taken it from her. You watch Allison cradle her baby like she used to long ago. She reaches out for you to see. Above its blue eyes gapes a dime-sized hole. *Bull's-eye*.

Allison brushes a leaf from the old doll's curls while you try to think of words that will make your sister's bottom lip stop trembling. The cereal in your mouth has grown hard to swallow. You want to leave your sister, go down to the river's edge with cupped hands and drink from the water, but Momma says worms get inside you that way, will eat you up from within.

After all, that's how Sadie, Daddy's old bird dog, died—heartworms from the mosquitoey creek bed that runs along the dirt road to your house. Even before the vet diagnosed her, Sadie was old and crippled up, walking like her back legs were made of concrete. She wouldn't even play with Buck anymore, the one dog you got to keep from Sadie's only litter. You can still remember the day she died, how Momma handed Daddy his gun, told him to put that dog out of her misery before she made her healthy pup sick.

You tell Allison this riverbank is sacred, and show her the grave beneath the wild magnolia, marked with a rock carried from the river. You tell Allison Sadie died in her sleep. You don't tell her how

you and Daddy walked here a few summers ago, a rifle in his hands, a shovel in yours, the two of you taking turns pulling Sadie in your little red wagon. You don't mention how you sat with Sadie a long time, feeding her biscuits and petting her fur until her cloudy eyes grew glazed and tired. Sadie was asleep when Daddy told you to move away. You couldn't look as he walked close, raised his rifle and fired a single shot. Afterwards, he dug a grave while you looked on, and together you lowered Sadie into the earth beneath the magnolia tree. Showing Allison the spot where Sadie now lies, you whisper only half the secret, the rest kept guarded alongside so much more.

Allison lays her doll-baby by Sadie's grave; its long-lashed eyelids flicker closed. The two of you study the hole in the doll's head. "We should bury her like Sadie," Allison finally says. She wipes her eyes with the back of her hand.

You have gotten her here, someplace safe. That should be enough, but it isn't.

You offer her your Cap'n Crunch, but Allison pushes the box away. She pulls her nightgown above her knees and ties it off. Sinks her fingers deep into the dirt. She claws at the muddy ground fast and hard. "Help me," she says, her voice trying hard not to break. "Help me bury her."

You drop down beside her and start to work, hoping playing along will stave off tears. The sun grows hot and you take off your shirt, not caring about getting dirt on the big buttons or what Momma will say. You hate her and will never go back. But that would mean leaving Allison, and she's too young to fend for herself. You're too young to take her with you. You wish Daddy were around to take care of you both, but he goes away more and more now. You wish you had a job and a pickup truck like his to kick up the dust of the road heading to town.

For a long time you work alongside your sister. The hole you dig is small but deep. Your arms grow caked with dirt and your knees ache from kneeling too long. Your damp hair keeps falling into your vision. Sweat makes your eyes sting. Finally Allison stops you. She is tuckered out, tired beyond crying as she wipes her hands on her nightgown then picks up her broken doll. She holds her old baby flat so its eyes won't flutter open. You can tell Allison doesn't want to look into them again.

The hole is deep and Allison's arms are little. She can't both keep her doll level and lay it in. So she asks you to perform the honor. Gently she hands you the doll, her hands smoothing down its little pink dress before she finally lets go for good.

And the burial game begins.

Part One: Brother and Sister

Mrs. Rosemary Chenoweth
requests the honour of your presence
at the marriage of her daughter
Katherine Marie Chenoweth
to
David Lee McKenna
nephew of
Mrs. Silas McKenna

Saturday, the Twenty-First of December
Nineteen-Hundred-and-Sixty-Eight
at 2 o'clock in the afternoon

First United Methodist Church
Seneca
West Virginia

Chapter 1: Light Threading Darkness

Allison

I was afraid of what might have happened to Andrew. Where my brother was and what he was up to weighed heavily on me as I climbed from the cab of Charlie's 18-wheeler and out into the sting of the hot morning sun. Beyond the truck, a wide avenue stretched toward the blue glass buildings of the Philadelphia skyline. I was used to mountains, not concrete and steel. It was August 1993, a Friday morning, and I had never been out of West Virginia before.

I swallowed hard and I reached back to get my purse. Old Charlie wasn't even looking at me by then, mad, I guess, at the way I'd shrugged off his stubbly kiss goodbye.

It's hard to believe it's been ten years, but I can still picture the way he thrummed his thick fingers against his steering wheel and squinted into the east, toward New Jersey and his drop-off point for his truckload of shoes, some shore town next to an ocean I'd never seen. Making good on our deal had made Charlie late, taken him off the turnpike and into the city now during the busiest rush of the day. I suppose I should have been grateful, but I was tired of looking at him and his cheesy T-shirt, its stupid slogan that read "Mustache Rides Five Cents, Please."

Charlie turned towards the skyscrapers. "Where you're goin' is somewhere up thataway." He jutted his chin up the avenue, past gas stations and fast food joints like the one I'd worked at since high school. I'd left Seneca in a rush, my uniform still on my back, and already the big-city humidity was starting to glue it to my skin. I couldn't wait to get some fresh clothes and wash the stink of Charlie off me. But first I had to hunt down Andrew and find out why my recent letters had gone unanswered, why his phone had been disconnected when I called the other day.

I was worried. Ever since he had left home a few years before, Andrew had never called much. He didn't want to get trapped on the phone listening to Momma. So it had been me who usually called. But Momma didn't like me running up her bill, so Andrew and I had written each other mostly. Andrew, little postcards or notes enclosed alongside the presents he sent each August for my birthday. Me, longer letters with news from home: the latest melodrama involving Momma, updates on Elizabeth's grades at school

Once, I even sent him a newspaper article. *The Seneca Sentinel* had carried a headline about a local boy Andrew used to know in high school, a boy who had later moved to Greensburg, Pennsylvania and joined up with an army reserve unit that had been called to active duty in Dhahran, Saudi Arabia. Not for any kind of frontline fighting, though. But to provide service support for the troops in the form of water purification duties. And yet, within a week of arriving, thirteen of them were dead and forty-three more were wounded in a case of sheer, stupid bad luck. The article I sent Andrew explained how on a night in

late February, not long after dinnertime, an Iraqi Scud had torn past the US troops' missile defense system to hit the warehouse the Greensburg unit had turned into their barrack. The news had shocked our town. Although other soldiers also died, it was Greensburg's 14th Quartermaster Detachment that bore the most casualties—what would prove the highest tally of any single coalition unit during that brief but ultimately unsatisfying war. By the time the article was written, the town of Greensburg had already decided to erect a bronze memorial in honor of their dead. In Seneca, plans were afoot to rededicate the baseball field where Andrew's buddy had once set records. But Andrew never mentioned the article, or if it had moved him in any way. Mostly our exchanges were perfunctory, superficial. As much as I hadn't wanted it to happen, over the years we had grown apart.

Charlie didn't ask if I was going to want a ride back home, and I was glad for it. I just slung my bag over my shoulder and shut his truck door, turned up the avenue toward those gleaming skyscrapers in the distance. When my glasses slid down my nose, I pushed them back up again. Behind me, I heard the noisy chug of Charlie's truck gearing up to go. I didn't look back.

I walked a couple blocks, feeling the day's building heat. Way up ahead, the avenue ran smack dab into a funny looking old building with a little statue of a man on top, a big piss yellow clock on the dome beneath his feet. I didn't recall crossing any time zones last night, yet the clock read fifteen minutes behind my wristwatch's 8:53. Broken, I figured.

I stopped a black girl in a KFC uniform and asked her if she knew where Rodman Street was--the place Andrew always used to talk about, and where I had mailed his past birthday cards. The girl gave me a suspicious look. "Ain't heard of that street." It was barely opening time, but already she wore a tired look I recognized, like she'd been slinging fast food as long as I had. She walked ahead.

"I think it's near Broad Street or South Street," I called after her.

The girl turned back. "Well, you're *on* Broad Street. And you're headed in the right direction."

"Is it up there?" I pointed to the funny building in the distance.

She shook her head. "South Street's just a couple blocks. Not so far as City Hall."

"Who's on top the building?" I asked, trying to sound polite, friendly.

"I dunno." Exasperation weighed down her voice. "Some white guy. Rocky or Ben Franklin. Quiz over? I'm late for work."

I let her go then, watching her cross the street toward KFC's familiar red and white stripes, her wide hips and questionable hospitality disappearing through the door. I found a pay phone and called the number I had for my brother once more--maybe he had finally paid his bill, maybe the phone company had made a mistake--but got the same sorry recording as I had back in West Virginia. I walked on, against the oncoming flow of cars and taxis, the honk of traffic and the hustle of people growing thicker the further north I went. In the next few blocks I passed a gas station, a jazz club, a fire station and a church. Still no sign of Rodman Street, though I did finally spy a marker across the street that read South, behind it a bleak

treeless block that hosted a fenced off garden of dried out flowerbeds and a row of boarded-up houses beyond. Behind the garden's chain link fence, a pale woman in worn cutoffs and a faded pink shirt stood picking yellow tomatoes. An enormous rottweiler lay panting at her feet. I headed on, past a parking lot and a low building made of glass brick and aqua blue tile. Center for Disease Control, the sign read. I thought of last night again, of the rest stop and Charlie.

I looked away, pushing that asshole trucker from my head. Across Broad Street sat a convenience store and a brownstone building whose left wall sported a badly painted mural. I did a double-take. As if one view wouldn't suffice, the mural recreated in flat colors and funhouse perspective its own squished-together panorama of the store, the brownstone, and the surrounding neighborhood.

I crossed the street to get a better look. In the mural, the convenience store boldly proclaimed itself a 7-Eleven. In real life, the building's old chain-store logo had been replaced with a smaller sign bearing the nondescript black lettering of a new name, the 8-Twelve Convenience Market. Was all of Philadelphia going to be a little off?

I was thirsty, so I went in to buy an iced tea. At the checkout, I asked the thin little man behind the counter if he knew where Rodman Street was. His brow knitted together as he gave me the once-over, looking at me like he thought I was retarded. In a thick, Middle-Eastern accent he told me it was right there, next to his store, his gestures overly animated and his voice bobbing in a jerky rhythm. "Around corner!" he squawked. "Past senior center!" He waved in the direction of the painted brownstone.

I felt my face flushed as I handed him my money. I looked like an idiot. But the man just smiled back at me when he handed me my change, not at all exasperated like I had imagined.

I took a deep breath and headed past the little senior center where a few old folks had stepped off a city bus and begun to gather, then turned up the little street the man talked about. It was no more than an alley, really. I still didn't see a street sign. I passed the center's loading dock, which gave way to a series of little row houses that alternated between looking disheveled and doted upon. From somewhere up ahead I thought I heard a radio playing. I chugged my iced tea and wondered what the hell I was going to do. Walk from one damn end of town to another, knocking on doors? And then luck struck. Halfway down the street I saw it, the background from some snapshot my brother once showed me, a bright red door and bright red flowerbox, the red flecked with splashes of iridescent gold. The door sat atop three marble steps, so bowed they held tiny puddles of water. White petunias spilled lazily from the window boxes, a hint of their perfume sweetening the air as I neared. Up close, I saw that the flecks of gold were actually planets and stars, tiny comets with curlicue tails. I recognized the style, the same as the doodles Andrew had covered his notebooks with back in grade school, a map of stars like he had once inked on his bedroom door before Momma had made him paint it away.

I stepped up, swallowed hard and knocked on the door.

Nothing. Then the bark of a dog and some scratching on the other side. Was Andrew back there, too? Wondering took me back to a spring day long ago, when Momma had yet to give birth to Elizabeth. I had stood outside Andrew's room pounding my fist against his door. "Go away," he had called. "Go watch TV." But I was tired of the after-school reruns that had kept me company all winter. Now twelve, Andrew had started middle school the fall before, so I no longer saw him in the hallway or on the bus ride home. I missed him. It was spring again and I wanted him to leave his room and come play with me. Wanted the two of us to walk together again up the wooded mountainside, now before Momma got home from work and we were forced to walk on eggshells so her head wouldn't hurt. I tried to tell Andrew all that, but he just yelled for me to go.

And so I did. Outside, the sun had warmed the world again. I left my windbreaker on the rail as I scrambled down our paint-splintered porch steps and into the yard. Soon the trees would be so full it would take a box of green Crayolas to draw them all. If only Andrew had looked out his window he'd have seen how beautiful they were; he'd have put on his sneakers and gone with me into the woods, back to the place he'd shown me the summer before. I felt bad that Sadie lay buried so far from home, and I wanted to lay flowers on her grave and remember her.

But only our dog Buck was waiting for me in the yard. Momma kept him chained to a stake so he wouldn't follow Andrew and me down the bus stop or get under her wheels as she backed out her car. At least he was happy to see me. He licked my face when I bent to pet him. Buck smelled of the woods where I was going and I liked that. I unclasped his chain so he could come too, but when I started to go, he lagged behind. He kept looking back and forth from me to the door, waiting for Andrew to appear. I slapped my thigh and called Buck's name, and finally he loped after me. Together we sank into the woods to climb the hill to the river.

Cheat River wasn't the only river around home, but it was the one I knew best. Andrew had shown it to me on a map in his West Virginia History textbook, how it started from a trickle of headwaters near Snowshoe ski resort then flowed down through Pocahontas and Randolph counties to ours. With his finger, he had traced its slow crawl through the Monongahela reserve, the way it wound past Seneca like a snake through high grass.

I hadn't been to the river or Sadie's grave in a long time, and wasn't sure I could find my way without Andrew. All winter long it had been too snowy to steal away there. Daddy had been working on a road crew that kept him away, so it was his buddy, Lew Pingley, who stopped by from time to time to check on Momma.

My grandmother once told me she didn't know which Lew was more full of, beer or bullshit. He wore Buddy Holly-style glasses and a wayside smile, and thought himself much funnier than he was. Momma had been a year behind Lew in high school, Grandma Rose told me, back when Lew was an all-state football champ, a boy with promise who wouldn't give Momma the time of day. But after he got back

from the service, Lew never amounted to much. He and Daddy had only come to know each other fairly recently, bonding over the fact that they had both spent time in country. Lew was missing the middle finger on his right hand--blown off by some damn gook he once told my brother--and it was a good thing, too, he joked, because it kept him from giving the finger to all the assholes he did odd jobs for. Daddy was two years older than Lew, but smaller-boned and a good deal shorter, not quite as fast and loose with his words. Neither one of them liked hanging out at the VFW since the government kept saying what they'd fought in had been a military action, not a war. They hung out at Wimpy's Pool Hall instead, where Daddy lost money to Lew he didn't have. Lew let Daddy work it off between highway jobs; Lew had a handyman business he ran out of his junkyard. Lew helped Daddy sometimes, too; over the last year they had built our cinderblock garage and new drive. But most of the time Lew simply helped Daddy shoot the shit.

Once in a while when Daddy was away for days at a time working, Lew would stop by to check on Momma. She wasn't getting much substitute teaching work, and spending time in the house all day made her stir-crazy and blue; jokester Lew at least offered a little adult conversation. When Lew's red truck pulled into the drive, Momma put on her coffeepot and sent Andrew and me off for a long walk with Buck.

Andrew didn't like Lew and would stop to draw dirty pictures in the dust of his truck as we left. The two of us could only stand to walk through the cold woods so long. But we knew if went home too soon Momma might turn yell and into the monster Andrew called Momma Hyde. So we snuck into the new garage instead, hunkering down beneath Daddy's pegboard full of tools where Buck would sprawl across my lap and Andrew would fill my head with stories.

But winter was over; time had to spring forward to keep up with the lengthening days. Not long ago, Momma had walked from room to room resetting every clock for daylight savings. She had a new baby growing insider her and couldn't count the minutes fast enough until it would leave her body. I was on the living room floor doing homework as she stepped over me to change the clock above the TV. The eleven o'clock news was finishing, and Andrew had just crept downstairs to ask if Daddy had come home for the weekend yet and seen his report card full of all As. Momma wound the clock hands to twelve-thirty and made a face like she'd swallowed something bitter. "You better hope the clocks in the bars downtown spring forward," she said. "That's probably the only way your Daddy'll drag himself home."

For a long time Buck and I followed the trail Andrew had shown me the year before, until finally a gentle rushing reached our ears. I closed my eyes, let the sound of spring runoff pull me forward. Buck barked loud so I opened my eyes, stopping at the Cheat's steep bank, stopping right before falling.

Water misted the air where Seneca Creek tumbled over rocks to join Cheat River. I was getting close. Not far downstream lay Sadie's grave on the bank overlooking Andrew's secret swim-hole. I followed the river down until I came to the tree that marked the spot, recognizing it by the way its branches arched above the river. The summer before, I had watched Andrew leap out into the river from an embankment rock. He had promised to teach me to swim, and I hoped he would get around to it soon. But

right then, the water looked rain-swollen and scary. I recalled Andrew once telling me a story about Indian braves losing their lives during flashfloods.

I ran my hand across the bark of Sadie's tree, remembering her. Buck sniffed at the earth. Overhead, Sadie's magnolia was on the verge of blooming, and if I could have reached the tree's branches I would have gathered its flower to decorate her grave. I wanted to open the buds with my fingers, feel the smoothness of the petals' skin.

Sadie shouldn't be forgotten. So I gleaned the woods for what I could: little clumps of pink and white flowers, a tiny branch of mountain laurel. I looked a long time, but there wasn't much to find. I gathered a vine and some sticks, hoping I could lash them into some sort of cross. But too soon I noticed the daylight had begun to leach from the sky. Momma was probably home by now, asking where I was. And Buck had wandered off somewhere; he didn't come back when I called out his name. I hurried back to Sadie's grave, wishing I wasn't alone.

Working quickly, I twined the thin vine around the axis of my makeshift cross. The arms broke off when I pushed it in the ground. I fixed it and tried again. The cross was lopsided, and my flowers already wilting. But night was coming. That would have to do.

Nightfall had a scent, and it was one of loneliness. All around me, grass and bushes pushed up, blurring into the failing light. Overhead, the last calls of birds flying home briefly drowned the insects clicking below. My clothes caught against stickers as I searched in vain for the trail. The woods grew chilled and musty, and I found myself wishing for the windbreaker I left on the porch. Above my head, a network of branches carved a dark deeper than the sky's. The heavens fractured. I thought this is what getting lost must feel like.

Would Momma miss me? I found a path, but not the one from before. This one, an old logging road gone weedy and rutted. I followed it anyway, hoping it would at least lead to Buck. But I only wound into deeper unknowns, like the boy and girl in one of the fairy tales Andrew used to tell me, lured to a candy-covered house in the woods. I suddenly hated my childish foolishness, how I had let sentimentality do me in.

More than anything, I wanted my brother by my side. I wanted him to tell me a story to make me feel safe, like he had done last winter when we'd hid in the garage. Over and over again I had made him tell me the story of Snowbird, the Indian princess said to haunt Seneca Rocks at the far end of our county. A story about a ghost should have scared me, but it didn't. The warmth of Andrew's voice offset any subject; in the dim light, his words would flow soft and conspiratorial, a cocoon of sound that staved off any chill. He had learned the legend a few years before, on a school trip to Seneca Rocks to study the way erosion worked. A park ranger had told him how millions of years ago the Earth had buckled, lifting up the Appalachians from an age-old sea. The hills we had grown up with all our lives were what remained--smooth and rounded, grown thick with trees that blazed like fire come fall. But not Seneca Rocks. That

steep rise was different than all the rest. Tough and nearly treeless, its sheer blast of craggy quartzite shot above the river valley below a good 900 feet. Climbers had died trying to scale it. In a notch at the mountain's top stood a lonely, resolute pillar of stone, the spirit of Snowbird, the park ranger explained, who according to local folklore had turned to rock out of sheer loneliness when the man she was waiting for failed to come. I had found the story sad and romantic, and I liked the way Andrew repeated it to me, since each new time the tale changed, deepened, sharpened inside me. But last week when I asked for it again, he had waved me off. I was getting too old to be treated like a baby.

And now in the woods I was completely alone. Only the moon peeked out to keep me company. I followed its bright shape in the sky as it played hide and seek behind a fleet of clouds. Some of the trees weren't quite leafed over, and high up in one I spied a strange shape, a rectangle silhouetted against the sky. In the distance I could hear the river again, its ribbon of rushing sound, and I wondered if I had been walking in circles. With nowhere else to go I headed towards the tree holding the floating rectangle in its branches. Creeping close, I held out my hands.

My fingers touched the bark of the tree. Nailed to the trunk were wooden slats forming a ladder. The rectangle above my head was someone's tree house. Maybe I could take shelter in it for the night and look for home come morning.

I climbed up, slow in case the boards weren't nailed well. When I glanced down, the ground seemed far away, yawning like the mouth of a cave. I was scared to be so high, but I held tight and pulled myself up, climbing through a square opening and out onto the platform. Planks nailed tight together formed a surface more than big enough to lie down on and still not touch the far end. On three sides little walls had been nailed up, just high enough to lean back against. I carefully scooted over to free side and dangled my legs above the ground. I could be a hundred feet in the air for all I could tell. Though I was cold and hungry, I felt a little happy having found this place, having stumbled upon someone else's secret.

I searched for clues as to whose place it was, how long it had been there. Had boys from the county work farm slipped over the hills to build it? Maybe it was something Daddy made as a boy, back when he had lived with Uncle Si and Aunt Adalene in the house our family had come to live in. Maybe this was where Bigfoot lived, or a Civil War soldier's ghost. No, I told myself. Most likely Daddy built this place--back as a boy when he had worked Uncle Si's farm.

In one corner I came across a small footlocker covered with stickers from packs of trading cards--*Charlie's Angels* and *Wacky Packs*--too new to be Daddy's. I pulled the metal box close. There was no lock, just a clasp that snapped open easily. Inside were photos I couldn't quite make out, a couple notebooks, a stack of old comics--twelve and fifteen centers. In the moonlight I studied their covers--*Batman and Robin*, a few *Aquaman*--the kind Andrew rummaged for at yard sales. I fanned one open: muscled Aquaman in his scaly orange shirt and green tights, freeing his little boy sidekick from a mechanical squid. Tucked inside the back cover were pages torn from a Montgomery Ward catalog. I

thought they must be toys someone wanted for Christmas, pictures to glue in a wish list for Santa like we used to make in school. But when I looked close I saw they were from the men's clothing section: grown-ups holding golf clubs or checking time on watches. Many were dressed only in their underwear. Why would anyone save pictures of underwear? But then my eyes caught sight of a light moving in the woods, a thread in the dark that slowly thickened. I put the comics and pictures back, scooted the metal box into its corner and cowered down.

As the light neared, shapes flashed in silhouette then dissolved just as quickly. It all came from one bright spot, a flashlight held in someone's hands. But the shadow behind it would not take shape. Twigs snapped; bodies rustled through brambles, sounds too big to be made by one person. I shrank against the rough floor of the fort. I didn't feel nearly so high now. I wasn't safe at all.

The sounds stopped just below me. I could hear panting, like an old man's ragged breath. Light washed the underside of the boards I lay on, shining up through the cracks before beaming more solidly through the entrance in the floor. Labored breath rose from below as hands and feet scraped against the nailed rungs leading up to me. I inched to the edge of the platform, so far back the soles of my sneakers hung off in space. The flashlight came through the entrance in the floor, and I drew back even more as a figure rose behind it. It sensed my movement and the light turned, blinding my eyes.

Blood pulsed in my ears. I fumbled backwards and lurched into space, my limbs clumsy and my belly hollow. I grabbed at the floorboards but clawed up splinters. I started to fall.

The flashlight tumbled as the figure dove towards me. An arm shot out. The light hit the floor, bounced, up, washed across a familiar face: Andrew, his eyes shining like wet stones. At the last second, his hand closed tight around my wrist.

In that moment, I felt torn apart--one half of me saved, the other still falling. For a moment I felt I was on the ground looking up at my brother, the chill of the earth at my back. But then I heard Buck bark below me and realized I hadn't fallen at all, my body just needed a second to sort itself out. As the flashlight rolled to a stop, I became aware of the pressure of Andrew's grip on my arm, how it hurt. Andrew asked what I was doing here, his brow pinched tight as if he wasn't sure whether to reel me in or let me go. My eyes were full of tears and I couldn't answer. Andrew sighed and pulled me up, wrapped his arms around me, and I knew indeed that I had left another me behind for good.

Andrew let go of me, crawled over to retrieve his flashlight, and shined it into the corners of the tree house. The wash of light paused on the metal box before moving on. Andrew turned the light on me, shining it into my eyes. It was too bright, and I was embarrassed by my tears. I wanted to turn the light on him. I wanted to look in his eyes to see if this place was his, one of the secrets he kept from me. But the light hurt; I had to turn away, sniffle back my tears as Andrew again asked why I was here.

Stupidly I told him about Sadie's grave and how there were no flowers. How night came fast and stole the sun away. How I had no choice but to try and find shelter. And when I was done, I looked back

up into the brightness, reached out my hand and closed it over the flashlight. My fingers glowed red as Andrew's face took focus. I wanted to know that someone missed me, that someone cared that I was gone. I looked hard into Andrew's eyes and asked, "Did Momma send you?"

"Yes," he finally said, looking away, back into the tree fort's shadows. "She sent me to find you."

"She's worried 'bout me?"

I hated how Momma's flatness had crept inside Andrew's answer. "Of course she is," he said.

Already I was learning the sound of a lie

* * *

And now, here I was years later in Philadelphia, standing on the stoop before a funny red door, hoping to find Andrew the way he had once found me. For a long time all I heard from the other side was that dog barking, barking like Buck used to do when we headed off for school. Maybe Andrew wasn't there. Maybe everybody but old Fido had already gone to work. I was about to turn and leave when I finally heard a human voice on the other side. "Duke! Back! Now!" A woman's voice.

Slowly the locks tumbled and the red door opened no more than a few inches, letting in a shaft of light. A pair of brown eyes sized me up through the opening--a black girl a bit older than I was, her skin chestnut brown, her short hair dyed a purplish hue. She was dressed in a skimpy red kimono that revealed just about the longest pair of legs I had ever seen. Pushing past her knees came a tawny muzzle, Duke the dog, sniffing me out.

"What you want?" the girl asked, shifting her long bare leg to keep the dog inside.

I swallowed hard, wishing I still had some iced tea left. "Is Andrew McKenna here?" I finally asked.

Chapter 2: Breath

Andrew – Seneca, June 1982

This dive is Andrew's perfect moment: his bounce upward from the springing board, his pitched arc into the air. The way his body nearly flies before folding into its fall. The pool rushes up. Andrew arrows his hands, parts the surface in a clean thrust—one world traded for another.

Andrew opens his eye. Ribbons of light snake across the pool floor below, but Andrew arcs away from them, pivots upward. He wants to laugh but forces himself to breathe out slowly instead. He rises alongside his bubbles back to the surface.

There, laughter finally comes amid gasps for air as Andrew searches for anyone who might have witnessed his triumph. His eyes land on lifeguard Artie, standing by the high dive to police the kids in line. Artie flashes Andrew a smile, snaps his fingers, gives a big thumb's up. "Real potential," Artie calls as Andrew paddles near, and Andrew feels he might blush if the water weren't there to cool him.

He swims away. And that's when he sees Ricky Pierce watching him too.

* * *

Ricky gets him like he always does. He is fourteen, two years older, twice as strong, soon to be a ninth-grader come fall. Andrew is a runt in comparison, small-boned, eager for a growth spurt yet to come. And Ricky is nearly feral in the way he sniffs weakness out. Time and again, he got Andrew last year—spitwads at lunchtime, purple nurples in the hall. Once, he even stuffed Andrew's locker full of pamphlets—agricultural brochures on hog castration.

Today at the Y Ricky catches Andrew from behind, pouncing on him near the shallow end. He forces Andrew underwater before Andrew can catch his breath. Andrew fights, claws, grabs at the hand holding his head. He knows whose it is. He fights the water too, which floods his mouth when his lungs seek air. His body forgets the difference between breathing and swallowing.

But then Ricky lets go.

Andrew rises. His lungs ache as he coughs water and gulps down air. In his ears is the blast of Artie's whistle. Andrew struggles to the side of the pool. "What? What?" he hears Ricky ask, and Andrew turns to see the older boy shrugging innocently at Artie's approaches. Artie yells at Ricky to get out, and Ricky flashes Andrew a sneer before leaving. Andrew leans against the poolside and buries his face in his arms. He is crying now. The little kids nearby have stopped playing to watch.

Another hand touches his head. Andrew looks up. Artie, squatting low. Andrew can see the gold hair on his legs.

"You okay, buddy?"

Andrew nods yes.

Muscles fill out Artie's bright orange T-shirt; his big shoulders taper to his waist in a streamlined V, a build like a superhero out of one of Andrew's comic books. Andrew knows his eyes sometimes linger on Artie too long, and he wonders now if Ricky Pierce has noticed this too. Artie suggests Andrew get out awhile. But that would mean sitting next to Ricky on the timeout bench. Andrew swallows down the metallic taste of the pool. "I'm fine right here," he finally manages.

* * *

Andrew refuses to give in to fear. Later, when he's feeling better, he slips underwater once more. He holds his breath and lets his lungs burn all over again as he fights the urge to surface. He practices leg kicks and punches, fighting against the water, trying to force each blow as fast as in air. Water dulls momentum but hones muscle. And Andrew wants to be, *needs to be*, as powerful as Artie, with his blond hair and blue eyes, his build as powerful as Aquaman's.

Just when he thinks his lungs will burst, he surfaces. With chlorine-fogged eyes Andrew peers past splashing kids to check on Ricky on the bench next to Artie's raised chair. Ricky's eyes narrow when he catches sight of him. He starts to shoot Andrew the bird, but right then Artie glances over, and Ricky has to morph the gesture into a scratch of his nose. Artie sighs, leans down toward Ricky, his words getting swallowed in the din of the pool. The noise swirls up into the moss green arches of the Y's vaulted ceiling, then swoops down again to jar in Andrew's ears. Maybe if he had Superman's nearing he could zero in on Artie's words. Yet he doesn't need to be Kryptonian to get the gist of what Artie's saying—that Ricky can get back in the pool if he promises to behave. Treading water, Andrew feels betrayed.

Ricky stands, offers a stiff salute to lifeguard Artie, then heads off robot-like back toward the diving board. Passing by a group of girls at the six-foot marker, he leans over their heads and pretends to spit. The girls shriek and dive beneath the pool's foamy surface. Ricky snags his thumbs in the belt loops of his cut-offs, hoists his shorts above bony hips, and swaggers away laughing like the rogue he is. The girls splash water against his legs, but Ricky ignores them. Andrew watches until Ricky moves far away, back to his graceless cannonballing off the dive.

Andrew kicks forward, sharking beneath the surface, eyes stinging as he heads to the shallows where he must navigate the wavy limbs of goofing children. An obstacle course. Escape route practice. He moves fast, easy, as streamlined and slippery as an eel. He won't let Ricky Pierce hold him under again, won't watch the breath bubble out of his lungs. Damn Ricky to hell. Andrew will be quick and powerful next time. He will stretch his lungs until they balloon inside him--twin oxygen tanks lasting minutes, hours, days, forever. This is his world now. Underwater is a dream he can swim inside, live inside. Almost.

Thoughts fracture. Andrew wants to stack them neatly inside his brain-- *Everything in its place*, Momma says, her new baby on its way and all Andrew's old toys and clothes packed into boxes that must find space now in his sister's room. *Can't Allison share with the baby?* Andrew asked just last night, *Can't*

you put the crib in her bedroom?--let Andrew keep his own. Sorry, Charlie, Momma had said, I'll need the baby's room next to mine, close in case it cries at night.

And so Andrew comes to be pushed around, shoved aside, put wherever a twelve-year-old boy can be fit. In a girl's room, even, with posters of TV hunks on the walls, *Starsky and Hutch*, *The Dukes of Hazard*, Fonzie from *Happy Days*, all those Hollywood eyes staring down at him in at night, twinkling, winking: *We know what you're thinking.*

* * *

At five till three, Ricky foregoes cannonballing and slinks toward the boy's locker room, beating the end-of-swim rush. Andrew waits, hoping Ricky will be gone by the time he gets there. He swims past the stragglers to the deep end, trying to wring a few more minutes of pleasure before hitting the showers. There, above the water, the diving board stands free. Andrew swims to the side of the pool and hoists himself out. Time for one last dive, and Andrew's heart leaps with anticipation of the jump to come, that brief moment when gravity shifts and flight tilts over into falling. Andrew grabs the cold metal poles of the high ladder and starts to climb. Excitement jolts through him like a bolt of lightning down his spine. If this dive outshines the last, maybe Artie will ask Andrew to stay after the other kids have gone. Maybe he'll be waiting there as Andrew surfaces, offering a hand up as Andrew climbs from the pool. Artie's on the swim team at the college over in Elkins and works at the Y to help pay for school. Maybe he will rub Andrew's wet hair and compliment his form, share secret tips for making his next dive even better. Maybe Artie will strip off his shirt, silver whistle bouncing against his tanned chest, his legs and arms flexing as he climbs up the high board himself to show Andrew how it's done. Andrew can see Artie now, launching upward, body snapping forward as graceful as an acrobat. In Andrew's mind's-eye, Artie's golden skin slices the water like a blade, a dreamy dissolve fading into rings of foam.

Reaching the top of the diving board, Andrew snaps back into the moment. The pool yawns before him now. Andrew breathes deep the chemical air of the county Y. One good dive, and Artie's friendship is his.

The thought whirls, dizzy in Andrew's brain as his feet bounce against the board. He launches himself a little too soon, twisting his body wrong as the blue pool rushes forward too fast for his limbs to angle out. His arms slam the surface; his stomach wallops the water.

Andrew surfaces, gasping for air, as panicked as when Ricky Pierce held him down. He swims toward the shallows, trying to calm his tremoring body. Before Andrew's even halfway there, Artie blows his whistle and walks to the poolside. "Three o'clock!" he calls. "Everybody out!"

Andrew takes his time, slowly gliding to the edge of the pool. He doesn't want to leave the water, the way it moves over his skin like someone's hands. But Artie impatiently twirls his silver whistle by its long cord. He points at Andrew and says, "Out, buddy." Artie has the only dry hair in the place, long on top and slightly curly, always falling into his eyes. Andrew, with his buzz cut, would like to grow his own hair

like that, but Momma would argue that it'd be too long. Andrew reaches for the ladder, wishing he felt safe under Artie's gaze, wishing Artie really was his buddy, that he would do more than give Ricky Pierce a measly timeout. But by the time Andrew climbs from the water, Artie's eyes have settled on some other kid, someone else he's calling buddy, and once again Andrew feels cheated.

* * *

In the boys' changing wing, Andrew hides his Batman beach towel behind a radiator and peeks inside the shower room. Coast clear, just a few little kids laughing and poking at each other. He takes a spot beneath a free showerhead and begins rinsing the chlorine from his skin. For a long moment he lets the water spill down his face like a veil. It feels warm and good.

When he opens his eyes again, Ricky Pierce is there, taking the shower across from him near the door. Ricky's cut-offs are slung over his shoulder and he has a cake of soap in his hands. He drops his shorts on the floor and begins working the soap up and down his arms in a foamy blur. A whisper of chest hair sluices down Ricky's front to the top of his belly, a thin dark line--an exclamation mark dotted by the divot of his navel. Ricky's mouth twists into a sneer as he watches Andrew. He runs the soap down the length of his grown-up cock, daring Andrew to strip down, too. Andrew *never* strips naked in the shower room. He wants to leave but knows it's too late. He won't concede his fear, won't let Ricky Pierce get him again.

Ricky Pierce slurs out his name. "Hey, Andy-Pansy," he calls, and a nervous chuckle ripples through the room, the littler kids suddenly looking at Andrew. "You dumb-ass cocksucker. You shouldn'ta got me in trouble with your pal Artie."

"He's not my pal, Ricky."

Ricky's eyes narrow. "Andy-Pansy. You think you're such hot shit. But guess whose shit is hotter? Maybe someday I'll let you kiss my ass and find out."

A few boys laugh out loud at the joke.

Andrew feigns bravery. "You're just jealous 'cause I dive better than you."

"Yeah, you're real Olympics material," smiles Ricky. He winks at one of the older kids. "*Special* Olympics, that is."

The boy start to guffaw. A couple of the youngest kids scurry from the room, sensing a fight. The remaining ones hug the tiled walls, waiting. Ricky doesn't let them down. He bunches up his wet shorts in a tight ball and hurls them at Andrew, snickering as Andrew ducks and the shorts spatter against the wall..

"Toss 'em back," Ricky commands.

"Go to hell."

Suddenly Ricky jerks back his head then thrusts forward, spitting out a gooey hocker that flies through the steam to smack Andrew in the chest. The shower water won't wash the slug shape off; Andrew has to flick it with his finger, make the slick wad fall to the floor and the pull of the drain.

“Toss ‘em back,” Ricky says again. “Or I launch another throat oyster.”

Hating himself, Andrew works his foot into the fabric of Ricky’s shorts and kicks them back.

“Stupid,” Ricky says as he catches his cut-offs. Andrew braces himself for another throw, but Ricky surprises him by slinging the shorts over his shoulder again. “You know what I really oughta do?” Ricky says, a trumped up smile spreading over his face. “I *ought* to go upstairs and hide behind the snack machine. Ambush your mommy when she comes to take you home. Jump out and punch her big fat belly.”

“No you won’t, Ricky.”

Ricky laughs hard, barely able to get his words out. “I’ll stomp her down and smash her like a jack-o’-lantern!”

“Stop it..”

“Then I’ll wipe my feet on her big milk udders. Yee-ha!” Ricky shuffles his feet, doing a little dance. “Hog blubber mommy, hog blubber mommy!” he sings insanely.

“You *can’t* hurt her--she’s *pregnant*.” Andrew says it like a magic word, an incantation to keep harm at bay.

Ricky halts his little jig. “I know that, you dumb retard.” He crosses the room, moves in close. “I just don’t want any more Andy-Pansies popping out.” He reaches out, clamps a hand around Andrew’s throat, pushing him back beneath the wall, trapping him. Ricky tells the remaining boys to clear out. Without a word, they do what he says.

When they are gone, Ricky smacks his free hand hard against Andrew’s cheek.

“You know how she got that way?” Ricky asks. “Some prick juiced her snatch, that’s how.” Ricky takes Andrew’s hand inside his own, forces it down, into the tight space between both their bodies. He closes Andrew’s fingers around his cock. Ricky’s eyes tighten their hold on Andrew, daring him to look down.

Andrew doesn’t dare. Still, he can feel it--the heat of Ricky, his hardness. The feel of Ricky’s pulse inside his hand.

“I bet it wasn’t even your drunken daddy who done it,” Ricky tells him. “I bet it was that retard who delivers newspapers. Or some nigger hobo who spiked her snatch.” The spray of the showerhead flattens Ricky’s hair, makes it cling to his forehead in ugly streaks. “Maybe the two of them together, retard and nigger, gang-banging your mom like the cunt she is. Better prepare yourself,” Ricky grins. “Nine months’ incubation and out pops a jigaboo retard, as black as burnt toast!” And with those words, Ricky slams Andrew hard against the wall.

Ricky pulls back, doubles over with laughter. With each new chortle, his penis bobs, waving like a mocking finger.

Take it back, Andrew wants to scream, but the words curdle in his gut. He is crying now, crying in front of Ricky Pierce.

“Aww, did I hurt your feelings?”

Ricky presses close again, and this time Andrew pushes back, yells at Ricky to keep away. But Ricky is stronger, and Andrew’s movements feel sluggish, like he’s still under water. Andrew pushes harder. Ricky jerks to the side, letting Andrew’s own momentum send him crashing to the floor. As Ricky steps over him, he gives Andrew a hard kick in the belly, knocking the air out of Andrew’s lungs. Then Ricky heads out to the hall, his still-hard prick pointing the way.

Andrew crawls to a corner and curls up. He rubs the tears from his eyes with the palm of his hand. Breath slowly returns to his body. The pain in his stomach becomes a dull ache. He wonders why Ricky Pierce hates him--what is this difference that circulates inside him like a poison? For a long time Andrew sits there, hoping the shower steam will sweat the answer out of him, hoping the water will wash it away.

* * *

Later, alone in the changing room, Andrew finds his locker door ajar. His shirt and beach sandals are missing. Everyone has cleared out, and there is no one to ask where they are. At least his shorts and underpants are there, so he changes into them, then wrings the water from his wet trunks and wraps them in his beach towel. Searching, he discovers one flip-flop in the wastebasket, the other in a puddle of water surrounding a clogged floor drain. Andrew puts them on, then hunts the room for the T-shirt his father bought him as a back-to-school gift last year, an old favorite now. Only after opening and closing all the locker doors does he give up hope. Ricky must have taken it, coveting the Wonder Woman decal on front, the way Lynda Carter glistens in her star-spangled suit. Andrew never should have worn it here. Momma will yell at his carelessness, but she should have bought him a lock like he asked for. But all she ever thinks about is the new baby on the way.

Andrew has to make a pit stop. His feet squish against the wet floor as he heads to the alcove where the bathroom lies. And that’s where he finds his Wonder Woman shirt, sopping in a urinal.

Andrew looks down at Lynda Carter’s ruined face and tells himself he didn’t like the shirt after all. It wasn’t his favorite; it wasn’t. The smell of waste is heavy in the room, enough to make Andrew gag, but still he has to go. He glances back into the locker room, afraid Ricky Pierce might be lurking there, ready to pounce upon him with his hyena laugh. But the room is empty. Andrew steps to a neighboring urinal and takes aim at a small gray toilet freshener there, dwindled to the size of a cloudy cough drop. It is Ricky Pierce’s eye, and Andrew pisses on it the way Ricky pissed on his T-shirt. The smell of urine is thick, and Andrew holds his breath as he goes. When he leaves the bathroom, Wonder Woman stays behind.

Upstairs, Momma still hasn’t arrived, though Andrew is the last kid left. He checks the stairwell where the snack machines are to make sure Ricky Pierce isn’t hiding there. He checks the game room up front, but there are only a couple of high school boys shooting pool. And in the lobby itself, only Artie remains, and he’s back behind the glass window of the check-in booth, filling out paperwork. Andrew sags down onto the clammy maroon Naugahyde of one of the couches in the foyer to wait.

Used to be Daddy picked Andrew up, but no longer. Andrew misses that time with him, alone in the truck together on the ride home, Daddy barely saying a word, but Andrew finding comfort nonetheless in the man's presence. If Daddy noticed at all that Andrew's shirt was gone, he'd simply say 'Time to get a new 'un.' With Daddy at his side, Andrew could close his eyes, rest his head on the window, feel the air rush through his hair. He could be going anywhere with his father, Daddy so quiet Andrew could get a word in edgewise, unlike with Momma. Maybe Andrew would tell him how Ricky Pierce looks ugly behind his big buckteeth, Daddy knowing it's not true, but there is a need to make something up, some imperfection Ricky has beyond his hatred of Andrew. Maybe the two of them, Daddy and Andrew, wouldn't say anything at all; Andrew would just sink into the seatback and let the hum of the engine soak inside his skin, let his eyes grow heavy as he waits for Daddy to reach over and muss his hair, that rare but welcome gesture Andrew knows he'll never tire of.

But after fifteen minutes, it's Momma who finally walks into the Y, wrapped in her orange maternity muumuu, a few wiry red strands of hair coming loose from the pulled-back sweep of her summertime 'do. Though the lobby is empty, Andrew feels suddenly embarrassed by Momma's prize-pumpkin stomach, like he is the one who did this to her. Andrew has felt the new baby kick inside her. Just the other night he let his hand glide over her warm belly as Momma lay stretched out snoring on the sofa. *A bun in the oven*, he's heard Daddy joke. Andrew knows his old man's only fooling, but the words always reminds him of the witch baking Hansel in the Golden Books he once read to Allison. He likes the baby, wants to protect it and take care of it the same way he takes care of Allison. But there is something about it that bothers him too.

And now, seeing Momma waddle in with a stomach the size of a potbelly stove, Andrew's complicated feelings about the new baby shame him. What if Ricky Pierce's words actually comes true—*Nine months' incubation and out pops a jigaboo retard, as black as burnt toast*? Not that the baby comes out half black; that is just plain silly. But what if something is wrong with it? The doctor has told Momma not to smoke, but still she sneaks Lucky Strikes or Salems when Daddy's not around.

"Ready?" Momma asks impatiently.

Andrew pulls his gaze from Momma's stomach to her face, flushed from climbing the steps outside. Yes, he nods.

"Good, 'cause I got errands to run. Your sister's at your grandmother's. You can stay there." Momma's eyes narrow. "Where's your shirt?"

"Lost."

"What do you mean, 'lost'?" Momma's voice is so loud that Artie looks up from behind the window of the check-in office.

Please, Momma, just let this be. "Someone stole it."

“You probably forgot where you put it, the way you are. I better go look myself.” She shakes her head. “You’d lose your balls if you didn’t have a sack to carry ‘em in.”

Andrew swallows hard as Momma crosses to the office and raps her knuckles on the window. Artie puts down his clipboard and slides the glass partition open, listens patiently as Momma explains the need for a scavenger hunt. Next to Momma, Artie looks younger, the college boy he is, not quite his own man. He glances down with a look of pity that cuts Andrew to the bone. A forced smile is on Artie’s face as he exits his office to lead Momma downstairs. In silence, Andrew follows them.

Back in the changing room, Momma flips open locker doors, glancing inside them one by one. Andrew sits on a bench and wrings tight the towel in his hands. The smell of chlorine lingers in the air. Artie leans against the wall, swinging his whistle in the air and looking bored. After a while, Momma turns around. She glances at Artie, then at Andrew. “Andrew, please. I’m doing this for you. Get your head out of the clouds and help me.” Andrew stands and starts opening doors, surprised when Artie even joins in.

The three of them search row after row of lockers, all empty. Momma’s lips pinch tight as she closes the last one. Andrew’s about to breathe a sigh of relief, but then sees Momma’s eyes light on the bathroom alcove. She heads in.

Andrew’s chest constricts. He prays a kindhearted janitor’s already fished out his shirt and thrown it away. But he knows he’s not that lucky. From beyond the alcove’s archway, a sharp “A-ha!” rises. The room coils around him, and Andrew fears he will black out at any second. He wants Artie to throw his superhero arms around him and save him. But he is too weak to move, too weak to ask for help. He watches in silence as Momma reaches back into the locker room and grabs from a bench a plastic bag some kid forgot to take his swimsuit home in. She returns to the alcove only to walk out seconds later, her hand protected inside the bag as she waves the sopping T-shirt high in the air. “What’s this?” she asks.

Andrew looks at Artie, who stares at the shirt, trying hard not to laugh.

“Who did this?” Momma wants to know.

There isn’t enough air in Andrew’s lungs to answer.

Momma steps forward until her big stomach nearly knocks Andrew over. Artie is laughing for real now, and Andrew hates him. Artie knows who did this, he has to. Why won’t he stick up for Andrew?

“You better tell me,” Momma says.

Artie’s stare burns into Andrew’s body; the sound of his laughter singes Andrew’s ears.

Momma shoots Artie a dirty look to silence him, then turns back to Andrew. “Okay, mister, if that’s the way you want it.” She reverses the plastic bag over her hand so that the urine-soaked shirt is tucked neatly inside. She chucks the bag into Andrew’s gut like a football. “You can wash it yourself.”

Artie flattens himself against the wall as Momma marches past him and heads upstairs, complaining about his lack of control over the kids. Andrew slowly starts to follow. Artie touches Andrew’s shoulder as he passes. “Stay cool, buddy,” he says. But Artie’s words carry no comfort now.

Hurt burns inside Andrew like a forest fire. Only with great effort does Andrew manage to force any air into his lungs, just enough to choke back his tears. He bolts past Artie and up the stairs, only stopping when Momma's lumbering form blocks his way.

* * *

Andrew's mother smokes a Salem on the drive to Grandma Rose's house. Though he fears for the baby, Andrew's grateful for the silence Momma's bad habit brings. The bag with the Wonder Woman shirt rests in his lap, a smelly lump. Andrew imagines Ricky's germs leaking through the plastic.

Momma turns onto Kerens Avenue, pulls to the curb in front of Grandma's gray house. Their old AMC Rambler jerks to a halt. Still numb inside, Andrew fails to move, so Momma grumbles as she reaches over him to unlatch his door, her swollen stomach pressing against his side as she tells him to scoot, she has errands to run. Andrew climbs out the door, stands dumbly on the grass next to the sidewalk, swim trunks in hand, staring at Momma through the rolled-down window. She places another cigarette between her lips, eyes scrunching as she cups her palm to light it. Two drags before the new Salem catches. Momma breathes deep, tosses her match away. She catches Andrew's stare and gives him a hard look. "What?" she asks. "I've had two today and that's it."

Her eyes go low, the look of a lie.

"And I wouldn't even smoke those if you didn't frustrate me so much." She reaches for the plastic bag left lying in the front seat.

Andrew turns to go.

"Hold on, Superman," Momma calls. "You forgot Wonder Woman here."

Andrew fumbles to catch the lobbed bag. A few drops of urine spatter his skin. Andrew's jaw clenches.

"See if your grandma will let you wash it here." Momma lets out a stream of smoke. She looks at him, her face softening. "You know, honey, maybe they wouldn't pick on you if you stood up for yourself more."

Andrew says nothing.

Momma pulls off. Andrew wipes his chest with his rolled up beach towel. He can't bear the thought of going inside and explaining to his grandmother what's in the bag, so he heads around back to where hear his sister Allison playing. Alongside the house bloom orange tiger lilies, the kind that grow around backwoods outhouses. Shithouse flowers, Andrew's Daddy calls them. From a spigot nestled among them, a green hose winds toward the rear yard. Andrew follows it back to find Allison and her friend Janet leaping through ropes of water flung by a whirling sprinkler. Allison can't swim too well, but still she likes to get wet. As she moves, her thick hips gleam pale beneath the late afternoon sun. Allison cups her hands to splash him, and Andrew lets her get in a shot or two before backing out of firing range. He sits down next to the pile of towels and candy that the girls have left beneath his grandmother's chestnut

tree. Andrew steals one of their candy cigarettes and sticks it in his mouth. Maybe it will soothe him the way it soothes Momma; maybe it will burn away all the feelings growing inside.

“Hey!” cries Allison. “Them’s ours. Why don’t you come and play?” Diamonds of water fleck the new glasses the eye doctor has started making her wear.

Andrew throws down the cigarette pack, shakes his head no, makes the girls promise not to tell Grandma Rose they saw him. Allison wants to know why. “Just because,” he tells her. Allison sighs and crosses her heart.

Andrew takes the alley behind his grandmother’s house down to the tracks where the coal trains used to run. He follows them past the edge of town, where he climbs the hill that shortcuts to home. Soon the noise of Seneca falls away, replaced by the cicada call of the woods, the smell of earth and grass. Andrew takes deep breaths as he trudges uphill, letting the mountain air fill his body until he can almost forget about the bag still clutched in his hand, the tainted reminder of how much Ricky hates him. In the distance, he hears the rush of Cheat River, and he wishes he had the energy to walk the distance to it. But he is tired and hungry from swimming. This trail is shortest, dropping down along the edge of old Mr. Beaman’s property, right across from the dirt road that heads to home.

As he walks, Andrew kills Ricky Pierce a million different ways: acid, poison, black widow in his shoe. Silver bullet, holy water, stake through the heart. And once he is completely dead, Andrew’s mind’s-eye reassembles him, rewiring Ricky’s heart until he is no longer enemy but friend. A goofball buddy Andrew can slurp Mountain Dew with, trade comics to, have sleep over in his room. But then Andrew remembers he doesn’t have his old bedroom anymore.

Andrew scrambles down the mountain and through Old Man Beaman’s tomato patch. The penned hunting dogs howl in their cages. Surely Beaman himself must be nearby, his shotgun raised in the air. But then Andrew sees the man’s truck is gone.

Andrew slows down, catches his breath. The yowling of the dogs is a barb in his ears. From Beaman’s tethered vines, Andrew selects two plump tomatoes. He bites into one, letting its juice spill down his chin. The other tomato he hurls against the chicken-wire mesh of the pens. The dogs bark and bark. Andrew throws the second tomato as well, then picks up another and throws that too. He doesn’t smile. He doesn’t laugh. Instead he keeps throwing tomatoes one after another, watching their soft bodies explode. Juice splatters against the pens like blood.

Andrew hopes Old Man Beaman will shit his pants when he sees what he’s done.

Chapter 3: Blind Eye Turning

The girl with the purple hair at Andrew's address in Philadelphia was named Aleta, and though she first regarded me with suspicion, she eventually opened the door for me when I told her who I was and what I was after.

"Yeah, Andrew used to live here, but not for a long time," she said as I stepped inside. "I doubt I can help you much."

I tried not to feel disappointed. Duke the dog slipped past me as I entered, and while Aleta tried to coax him back in, my eyes took in the sight of the row house's dim interior. Overstuffed furniture covered in bright, exotic blankets filled the small living room, whose stucco walls had been painted deep crimson. A Moroccan lantern, wired with flickering chandelier bulbs, sent patterns of light and shadow dancing over it all, including a dusty TV that sat inside a fireplace no longer in use. The bricks of the fireplace were painted black and graffitied with names in various colors. I looked for Andrew's among them, finding his loose cursive squeezed between inscriptions of "Remy" and "Waif."

"Our guest book," Aleta explained. "Housemates, friends, sons-a-bitches." She had given up on the dog, leaving the front door open a crack for when he decided to come back in. "Want some coffee?"

I nodded, even though I never drank the stuff back home. Momma always bought the cheapest brand. But I was taking risks now. Time to try something new. "You can tell me about Andrew," I said aloud.

Aleta smiled, which made the most of her high cheekbones and white teeth. Even in her wrinkled kimono she looked regal, like a New Wave version of Diana Ross, and I felt intrigued. I followed her into the kitchen in back and sat down at the table there. Sunlight streamed through a sliding door, its cracked glass mended with electrical tape. The zigzag shadow it makes on the dirty wooden floor reminded me of the crack in our kitchen wall back home. I looked away. There were dishes in the sink and crumbs on the counter, the whole place the kind of dirty that would send Momma into a rage, the kind of mess I had tried hard not to let build up back home ever since Daddy left us years ago. But I didn't want to think about home, so I kept my eyes on Aleta, who'd put a small pitcher of water in her microwave to nuke. I was surprised to find she ground her own beans in a small electrical contraption. When I asked, she told me that the metal and glass pot she was rinsing out was something called a French press.

"Andrew always used to sing my praises when it came to coffee," Aleta told me. As she spooned the freshly ground coffee into the pot, its scent reached out to me, earthy and sweet. "That's how we met," Aleta continued. "The place around the corner where I work. He'd pretend to do his homework, I'd sneak him free refills, and soon he'd be so buzzed he'd flirt with every guy in the place, gay or straight. But maybe that was thanks to the Jim Beam in his backpack." She sighed.

I wasn't sure I wanted to hear all this. But I guess I needed to. "Sounds like you know him pretty well."

"Guys. They are so useless." She shot me a smirk as she took two glass mugs from the dish drain and sat them on the table. "Give me a strap-on any day."

I thought again of Charlie last night, and the blood rushed to my ears like it always does when I feel awkward or put on the spot. The microwave dinged, and I was glad when Aleta turned away. I watched her fetch an oven mitt from a drawer and take out the pitcher, watched her pour the hot water into the press pot. By the time she brought the press pot and a couple spoons to the table, my face had settled back into itself

"Give it a minute, then press down on it," she said, gesturing at the arm of the pump, which stood above the black lid of the pot like a metal lollipop.

"How long ago did Andrew move out of here?" I asked.

"Oh, girl. You know what he's like, right?" She poured some milk in a measuring cup. "When he gets a new boyfriend he forgets everything else. Like rent. Like telling us he's moving out." She pulled from a drawer another gizmo, a battery-operated mixer no bigger than a screwdriver, which she put in the milk to froth it up to three times its size. "That room of his is still not rented out, and it's been, what, going on a year? And now everybody just throws their shit in there." She collapsed dramatically into the chair across from me. "Who will finally clean it? Me. Have to take care of everything like I always do."

"I know what that feels like." I put my hand on the black knob of the press pot. "Now?"

"Not yet." She unlatched the sliding door beside her and slid it open. Outside, in a small garden, drooping pink hydrangeas clustered against the foot of a rickety fence covered in ivy. Beyond it, an old brick row house maintained a precarious state of deterioration. "Anyway," Aleta continued, "first it was Ethan. For a month or so Andrew practically moved in with that jackass, using his room upstairs as nothin' but a clothes closet. I should know. 'Is me who took Waif's room across the hall when she went whack and ended up in the nut house, you know what I'm saying?"

I had no idea where she was going, but I nodded nonetheless.

"But then Ethan and Andrew go 'poof', and finally Andrew's back here, a parade of losers at his heels. Lemme tell you, if I'd a put a turnstile on his door and charged five bucks a throw, our rent troubles would of been a thing of the past. But then here comes Steven and it's true love all over again. Andrew moves out--forgets to tell us, as I've mentioned--but then *bam!*, yet another fiasco."

I realized my fingers were still hovering atop the press pot. "Now?"

"Let it steep, will you?" She pushed my hand away and flicked a strand of her purple hair out of her eyes. "Only this time it's worse, 'cause Andrew doesn't even go into work at the museum, so they start calling us because he hasn't bothered to give 'em the new number and none of us know it. Remy, who lives here too, goes off the deep end thinking Andrew's dead, that Steven--who ain't *never* liked Remy--has

gotten high or something and *killed* Andrew or driven him to *suicide*. Yo, it's like that Waif shit all over again, yet another 'can open, worms everywhere' if ever I saw one."

She sighed and scratched her head. My brain needed a minute to catch up. But too soon Aleta started again.

"My Andrew and Steven details is all sketchy. For the real deal, talk to Remy--who, by the way, was relieved Andrew was *not* attempting suicide, just tripping real bad, staying in bed all day, not answering the phone, because shthead Steven had left him." Aleta rolled her eyes. "Like none of us never saw *that* coming. Anyway, Remy finally shook some sense into the boy. Or, knowing Remy, *nonsense*, because now, from what I hear, Andrew's flown that coop a his. Again, details sketchy, but whatever that happened was enough for him to orphan poor Duke. Which reminds me. Duke!" she yelled suddenly. "Get in here!"

I turned to see the front door nudge open and that funny looking dog amble back in. My brother's dog.

"Door!" Aleta bellowed, and I flinched again. Duke's ears pricked up. He turned, lowered his face, and head-butted the door closed. "I taught him that," Aleta said proudly. "Now if I could only get him to work a deadbolt, I'd be in business. Anyway. You going to press that damn knob or not?"

Before she could yell again, I did as told--a habit I'd have to learn to break one day soon. Then Aleta took over, filling our glass mugs with coffee, topping them with frothed milk. She scooted a sugar bowl towards me, and I spooned some in. Duke came over and gave me another sniff test, and I looked him over more closely as I waited for my coffee to cool. He was smaller than the dogs we had growing up, black and white and toffee colored, one eye blue, one eye brown, with a muzzle full of fuzzy whiskers that hinted of a little terrier blood in him. I bent down to scratch his wiry ears while I tried to make sense of all the information Aleta had just told me. I wondered what I should do next to figure things out or whether my trip here had simply been a lost cause. Duke must have sensed my anxiety. He pounced up and gave me a kiss on the cheek. I squeezed the paw he had laid on my knee and decided I liked him.

I looked up to find Aleta squeezing honey into her coffee from a small plastic bear.

"Weird, I know," she said when she caught me staring. "But that's me!" She smiled and took a sip.

I looked at the plastic bear she had just set down.

Honey.

I hated the smell and the taste of it. It made me think of that summer my father and Lew Pingley tried to domesticate the hive of bees Andrew found in the woods, the summer I got stung thirty-two times and almost died. The summer Daddy left and Elizabeth was born.

"You all right?" Aleta asked me. She took a dog biscuit from the pocket of her robe and gave it to Duke, who sank to the floor, munching greedily.

I nodded, scooted the honey bear away from me and took a drink of my coffee. In no particular order, Aleta rattled on a few more details about my brother's life in this city, how he had dropped out of school just a semester shy of getting an art history degree, how he had nearly gotten arrested at a political protest not so long ago, how he had landed his plum job in the membership department of the Philadelphia Museum thanks to the thrift store suit she had helped him pick out. Had there been more coffee and no clock on the microwave, I got the sense Aleta might have gone on for hours. But as the blue digits ticked toward ten o'clock, Aleta stretched her arms and announced she had to get ready for work.

"You wanna see Andrew's old room before you go?"

I was tired and wanted to find someplace to lay down my head for a while. But finding a hotel and a cool shower would have to wait. Aleta sensed how important my brother's trail had become to me, and she was being kind.

Aleta gave the dog his breakfast and led me upstairs, past bedroom doors plastered with silkscreened posters advertising rock bands I'd never heard of and burlesque reviews by a troupe called the L'il Dump Theatre. Behind one bedroom door a radio was playing, strands of jazz mixing with the occupant's steady snore. Aleta laid a finger to her lips as we passed and whispered, "Tommy." When we reached the top floor, Aleta pointed to the door across from her bedroom. It was painted with the same curlicue comets and shooting stars as the red door outside. "That was Andrew's. Take a look. Don't mind the boxes. Me, I gotta get ready for work." Aleta disappeared into the bathroom.

As I opened the bedroom door, the room drew a breath as dirty window shades flapped against their screens. Muffled jazz made its way up from the bedroom below. Piles of boxes and bags filled the room, reminding me of our front porch at home on yard sale days. I stepped in. Near one window, a mattress lay on the floor, and I wondered if rain had blown in on it. The whole room had the musty smell of old newspapers, and I fought a reflexive urge to start cleaning up. Andrew's name was written in black magic marker on a box of books and papers that sat atop the mattress, so I began to look through it: paperback novels with post cards and old letters mixed in, a few notebooks, an old journal. I cleared a place on the mattress and sat down, hoping to find some clue in the box as to where he went and why. The wind flapped the window shades again, and a glitter of light caught my eye. I looked up.

On the wall across from the bed, Andrew had taped an enormous map of the world, which he had decorated with paint and magic markers. He had drawn a cluster of blue dots on places in West Virginia and Pennsylvania, a few more in Virginia, New York and the Jersey coast. The places he'd been, I supposed, and from across the room all those dark dots on the wall-sized map amounted to no more than a mouse's nibble. Certainly no sizeable bite out of the world. But spiraling out from that hub were dotted trails in shiny gold marker, pointing to places like California, the Florida Keys, the Gulf of Mexico. The trails branched out over the Pacific and Atlantic, touching down in Hawaii, Australia, Easter Island. They hopped from one European capital to another, alighting on islands and mountain chains I had never heard

of. Hovering above these dreamed-of journeys was a symbol I'd come to recognize, a simplified outline of a winged figure whose fat little head sported apple seed eyes and two tiny nostrils, my brother Andrew's trademark angelic alien. I studied the map a long time. All the places my brother wanted to go, a map to everywhere. And here I was, stuck in Philadelphia with only the shirt on my back and the money in my purse.

After a while I became aware that the shower water had shut off and Aleta had begun moving around in her room. I threw a few things from Andrew's box into a plastic bag I found and crept back through the room's junk to the hall.

Aleta's door was wide open, and she stood there in her sunny back bedroom with only a towel draped around her waist, putting on deodorant. I averted my eyes.

"Everythin' all 'ight?" she asked.

"Do you mind if I take this?" I said holding up the bag.

"You'd be doin' me a favor if you took his dog and everything else in that whole damn room."

I told her I thought the letters and notebooks were enough for know. Maybe they would help me find Andrew.

"Maybe," she said, finally putting on an army green tank top. "But you'd be better off talking to Remy." As she finished dressing, she gave me directions to the nearby bookstore where he worked. "Just don't get lost in the Amble-Through," she warned at the end. I thanked her. As I started down the stairs, she called after me. "Pull that front door shut so you don't let any crackheads in."

Outside, I could hear an old song, "Lover Man", coming from the second floor window. The raspy, languid plea was unmistakably Billie Holiday, not Diana Ross, though the song and the sight of Aleta made me think back to the summer I had seen *Lady Sings the Blues* three times, the summer I had wanted more than anything to be black. Imagine, a shy white girl from West Virginia, plunking down six quarters for that vintage matinee.

My grandmother was the one who gave me the money for those shows. She would hand me coins from one of the many pockets in the colorful apron she'd come to wear ever since the summer before, when Momma had her play the Pick-a-Pocket lady at a church fundraiser. Momma's energy had been high back then, her mood wild and happy. She might feed Andrew and me banana splits for breakfast, lunch and dinner, or drag out board games—Payday, Sorry, Life—and play with us all night long while Daddy was away, pinching our toes when we grew too sleepy to grab the dice as soon as it was our turn. We went to church every Sunday back then, where Momma sang so loud people rows ahead would turn to look at her. When Reverend Helmsley asked for someone to organize the annual spaghetti dinner, it was Momma who jumped to her feet. No one else offered to work with her, but she didn't care; she would man the kitchen herself and make her family work the floor. And so, while Andrew read the little kids stories and Grandma Rose let them pull plastic prizes from her apron pockets, I took iced tea to their parents and apologized that

their food wasn't ready. In the kitchen, Momma, never the best cook, had burned the meatballs and scorched the bread. I returned to get refills just in time to see her drop a pot of bubbling sauce all over herself. Everyone in the church basement must have heard her scream. Faster than I could take Momma ice in a towel, Grandma Rose was there in the funny apron Momma had sewn, making sure her daughter was okay then inspecting the kitchen. She pushed her glasses up the bridge of her nose and told me to fetch Andrew to clean the floor. Then she got to work. Momma pressed her ice against her arm from a stool in the corner. I tried not to meet the look in her eyes. Grandma Rose was a good cook, and not a soul went hungry.

Thereafter, I was never sure if she continued to wear the Pick-a-Pocket apron because she found it useful or because she liked reminding my mother that she'd saved the day. Each pocket on the apron was a different size and color, and soon they were full of other things: lengths of string, car keys, bills Grandma needed to mail. A handkerchief for wiping my nose; a few folded dollars for Andrew when he mowed her lawn. My brother called it her utility belt, said it held as much as the one Batman wore on TV. I liked how that apron always held money for me as well, a few quarters for helping her peel apples or clean her house, spare change that quickly added up for enough for the vintage movie matinee.

A steady hum shimmered the air of the old McManus Theater--the only air-conditioning downtown that worked--and I soaked up the coolness in alongside my new best friend, Janet Lambetti, until our sun-blistered bodies grew as sweet and cool as the Peppermint Patties stacked in the candy case. Since the Twin Cinema opened at the new plaza edging town, only second-run movies played at the McManus anymore--but that was okay. The old theater was close to Grandma Rose's house, and when it wasn't featuring Japanese monsters, it filled our afternoons with love stories so beautiful they made my heart ache.

A straw-haired woman handed us our tickets. Old Mr. Barrister, the owner, unclasped the velvet tie to let us enter. His head was round and large and pink, and I imagined him a monstrous, aging baby. He studied the two of us, Janet and me, dressed in our nearly dry bathing suits, our beach towels wrapped around us like sarongs. Over the last couple months, my chest had begun to hurt, my nipples had begun to swell, and I covered the area reflexively as I felt Mr. Barrister's eyes upon me. "I know your mother," he smiled fatly. With yellowed fingers he tore our tickets; in his hands I saw years of raised cigarettes raised--a look I knew from watching Momma. "Know your father, too," Mr. Barrister croaked. "Always down at Wimpy's Pool Hall. You remind him he owes me ten bucks." He laughed, touched my bare shoulder. My skin grew even colder.

Across the dirty red carpet a worn trail disappeared into the dim interior. We bought candy in the lobby and headed inside. Soon the magnificent white screen stood before us, and I led Janet Lambetti by the hand to our seats. We were friends because both our fathers were hardly around, and both our mothers had started working. Summertime meant staying with grandmas who lived down the block from each other. Together we chose the least gummy seats and settled onto their springless cushions. The theater was

ragged, nearly empty, sure to close by summer's end. I hunkered down in the dim cavern and watched Janet blindfold herself with an old handkerchief of her dad's. She had just read Helen Keller's autobiography and wanted more than anything to go blind. This was how she had come to practice.

Soon the lights went down altogether; the screen blazed to life and Janet listened passively as black voices full of blues and sorrow filled the cool air around us. But I not only heard, I saw. I saw that tall thin woman being wooed by Billy Dee Williams, her skin a graham cracker brown. I saw the wanting in the man's body, his desire to save her from herself. With each song, I shaped my mouth around lyrics I'd come to memorize. I saw the beautiful hopelessness of the blues singer's life and knew my own life only lacked the beauty part. If only I could turn bright brown, I thought. But when the lights came up, I was always my same disappointing self.

Afterwards, I led Janet into the sunshine. I studied her, still blindfolded, unaware of the looks we got from people passing by. I was jealous that Janet partway held my wish--her hair black and kinky from the Italian blood in her veins. I wanted to trade our heads like with Barbie dolls. But the stares we got shamed me. Still, Janet didn't seem to mind as I touched her hair, laid my hand on her shoulder, moved her forward past the YMCA down to where the old roundhouse used to be until it burned last winter. The heat of its blaze had melted snow for blocks.

Now I guided Janet through the rubble field where coal trains used to run. I steadied her arm as we stepped from one railroad tie to the next, following the old tracks to the brush field edging town. Janet picked up the rhythm easily, and I was surprised and envious at how close she was to her goal of sightless navigation.

Leaving the train tracks, we passed the white trash houses on River Street as we neared the swinging bridge that cut back to Grandma Rose's. If any blacks were to have moved to Seneca, this would have been where they'd live, and they wouldn't be called black, but 'nigger', a word tied with 'faggot' and 'motherfucker' for meanness at school. I knew what people like the old movie owner thought: One thing to see black folk on a movie screen, another to see them move in next door. That was how it worked, my brother once told me, and I found myself wanting him here with us now as a big-shot teenager strutted onto the porch of the last house before the bridge. I had seen him somewhere--maybe on the steps of the Y when Momma dropped off Andrew to swim. I watched the boy spit, watched him see us passing, his body stringy thin and pale as he leaned against the porch rail.

Despite the addition of metal braces along each side, the old swinging bridge shook beneath our steps. Below us, slow catfish blinked up from the mud water, their whiskers twitching along the shallow bottom. This summer was hot, the water low. A shopping cart jutted above the surface, glittering in the bright afternoon. Halfway across, I stopped cold, filled with a sudden urge to thunder the bridge. Janet held the rail but never removed her handkerchief as I jumped up and down as hard as I could, my sandals like lead hooves sending shock waves out across the receptive wood. I laughed a wild laugh I didn't know

was in me. The sight of Janet hunkered down, biting her lip, made me stop. I felt ashamed. I wanted to hug her till her fear fell away, wanted her black hair to fall over me and hide my freckled face.

Instead I took her hand once more and led her across the bridge into a field of tall grass. I rolled against the ground to smooth a place for sitting. The grass formed a high wall around us, cutting off all view except the sun and sky above. Spiders and beetles crawled out of our way as Janet opened her orange vinyl purse and handed me my baby oil, took out the candy left over from the movies--cut-rate stuff they were trying to clear out. On the lap of her skirt she arranged it all in perfect groups by touch alone. Pixie Sticks, Sweet Tarts, two small bags of M & Ms--covered peanut and regular. I wondered how she knew to open the yellow bag, her favorite. I watched her pop candy after candy in her mouth in dull repetition, wondered if the different colors all tasted the same.

I took off my bathing suit top in hopes the late afternoon sun would turn my beginner's breasts a ripe mahogany. I wanted little Hershey's Kisses for nipples. I wanted to shame my mother, to be the first black girl to start fifth grade come fall.

I poured on baby oil and lay back as the summer sun turned my fat thighs into butter. Black Sambo-lina, soon the tigers would be chasing after me--ready boys with cigarettes and pouty lips, eyelashes longer than a girl's. I'd find a music lover who would play the blues for me, want me to sing. The sun felt good as it melted me to clay once more, my atoms mingling with the precious dirt beneath me, reforming me into some big, brown, passionate Amazon. Not even Andrew would recognize me anymore. I would have secrets, same as him.

Suddenly my legs and belly, my arms and face, felt the cold eclipse of the afternoon's brightness. I looked up to see Janet leaning forward, staring straight into the sun--her blindfold gone, her eyes wide open. A placid look covered her face as she offered up her sight to that bright heavenly star.

Then the voices--not angels, but devils. I looked at Janet, but her mouth hung open and she didn't seem to hear--had she given up that sense as well? The pupils of her eyes burned red where the black should be. I reached for my tube top, held it over my chest. Anxious words crept towards us from across the field--the sound of boys searching. I peeked above the grass to see three of them standing where the bridge let off. They had towels in their hands like they were heading off to swim. "They came this way," the spit boy said, talking dirty as he told his friends what he wanted to do to us. My hands kept sliding off my oiled knees. My freckled skin was surely burning, soon to peel away in strips thinner than gauze. I watched the boys split into three different directions, all of them away from us. Something flip-flopped inside of me, wanting to cry out to them, wanting to be caught. Instead I turned to Janet, still staring at the sun. Her fisted hands drummed against her eye sockets with steady, dangerous force. I shook her arm, but she seems entranced. "Can't you see them?" I asked, shaking harder. Janet hammered on, oblivious, trying to smash the pupils back inside her skull. "Can't you see them?"

Chapter 4: *Watching Psycho*

Andrew – Seneca, June 1982

Heading up the dirt road past Old Man Beaman's, tomato juice up to his elbows, Andrew rounds a bend and takes in the sight of home. Not much to look at. Just an old hardscrabble farmhouse, added onto piecemeal and patchwork since his father inherited it from his Great-Uncle Si and Great-Aunt Adalene not long before Andrew was born. They were the relatives who raised Daddy after his parents and sister died in a car wreck, and the family story goes that the old couple was glad to take him in since they could have no children of their own. Even before the accident, Uncle Si and Aunt Adalene's door had always been wide open to Andrew's father, not only to him but to all the nieces and nephews who sometimes filled their extra beds when their mothers and fathers ran into trouble. But Daddy was not only the oldest of all his many cousins, he was the one who had stayed with them the longest. So he was the one Aunt Adalene left the place to when she followed her husband to the grave less than a year after Andrew's parents got married. Andrew has lived in this house since he was born, and he sometimes wonders. if his great-uncle would spin in his grave if he could see it now, its steps loose and its columns leaning, its porch roof buckled and about ready to fall. Daddy tries. New pea-green aluminum siding stretches halfway around the house, stuff left over from a job Daddy helped his buddy Lew with. But the project's been put on hold until Daddy gets the money to buy more that matches.

Andrew loves and hates this place. He walks up their drive, past the cinderblock garage Daddy built for his truck but only keeps boxes and tools in now. He passes the fancy satellite dish his father won off a friend in a poker game last Christmas. In the yard, Buck rests in a circle of dirt worn beneath the maple tree there, and when he spots Andrew he rises dutifully, dragging his chain through the messes he's made. Momma hates having a yard full of filth, so it's Andrew's job to scoop up Buck's messes in old cereal boxes torn in half, then bury them in the old orchard or fling them into the creek along the road if the water is high enough to float the evidence away.

He passes close, and Buck jumps up to greet him, nearly strangling himself. Andrew scratches the dog's ears, amazed at how easy it is to make Buck happy. The dog looks up into his face like he senses Andrew's sadness, licking his lower lip in that nervous way he's had ever since his tooth got broken. Back when he tried to steal a piece of Kentucky Fried Chicken and Momma hit him with a rock.

Andrew feels sorry for the dog and releases the chain from his collar. Buck sniffs Andrew's fingers, pokes his nose into the bag in the boy's hand. Andrew shoos Buck away from the ruined shirt. When Buck tries to lick the thorn cuts along Andrew's calves, Andrew throws a stick into the high grass along the edge of the woods. Buck runs after it, picks it up, shakes it in his mouth, then lets it fall. He

never quite got the hang of Go Fetch. Andrew's pretty sure Ricky Pierce has a dog better than this, so when Buck decides to head up the mountain, Andrew's not all that sorry to see him go.

Andrew makes his way up the porch instead. The old boards moan beneath his weight, and he wonders if what Momma says is true, that someone's going to lose a leg out here real soon. He considers doing his chores, but thinks better of it. This is time alone and Andrew wants nothing to steal it from him. Inside, the house feels different with no one around. Andrew moves quietly through the downstairs rooms. He pretends he's a thief as he steals a bag of potato chips from a kitchen cupboard. He takes them to the living room, where he stops to enjoy the uncommon quiet, nothing but the sound of his own blood pulsing in his ears. Standing amid the mismatched furniture and family clutter, he suddenly screams as loudly as he can. He falls down laughing in his father's chair, glad to be alone, glad to be free.

Andrew flips on the TV, wheels it on its stand close to the recliner. A satellite station out of Pittsburgh is broadcasting *Psycho*—jittery Anthony Perkins in grainy black and white. Andrew stayed up late to see it once, watching with Allison while Momma was at Grandma's and Daddy was passed out on the couch. Norman Bates is Andrew's favorite crazy man. He draws Andrew in with the sadness of his life. Andrew watches him try to impress a blond lady with his taxidermy skills, leading her into a parlor full of birds he's stuffed with sawdust. Norman's uneven voice fills the weird little room inside the TV, fills the room Andrew sits in as well.

The blond lady nibbles at a sandwich crazy Norman has made for her. "*And do you go out with friends?*" she asks.

Norman sits with folded hands. "*Well,*" he stutters, "*a, a boy's best friend is his mother.*"

Andrew starts to chuckle, but is stopped cold by the gravelly rumble of a car coming fast up the dirt road. He races the potato chips back to the kitchen and flings himself in his father's chair again just as the car pulls into the drive.

"*You know what I think?*" says old Norman, his voice all a quiver. His words come slow. Outside, a car door slams. Hurry, Norman. "*I think that...we're all in our private traps, clamped in them, and none of us can ever get out. We scratch and, and claw, but only at the air, only at each other. And for all of it, we never budge an inch.*"

The sound of Momma's feet pounds up the back porch steps. The kitchen door swings open. "Andrew!" Momma hollers.

Andrew takes a few steps forward, stopping at the sight of Momma standing in the kitchen archway ahead. Her eyes burn bright as she draws on her cigarette. Andrew thinks of the new baby burning inside her.

"What is it, Momma?" Andrew's voice is sturdy, trying to drown the TV voices that buzz behind him.

“You *know* what,” Momma says, setting a grocery bag on the counter. “How dare you sneak away from your grandmother’s house without telling anyone!”

“I told Allison.”

“She’s ten years old, for Chrissake!”

“Almost eleven,” says Allison, coming in the door behind Momma, arms full of more groceries.

“Don’t you make me sew your mouth shut,” Momma warns her.

Allison slinks back outside.

Momma moves in close, her face all twitchy. Her eyes scour Andrew like a wad of steel wool; he knows she wants to spank him, but he is too big. And her own stomach is in the way now, too; there’s no room left to turn him across her knee. “You’d just love for some pervert to come along and snatch you up, wouldn’t you? Do you *want* me to get my picture in the paper for worst mother of the year? I don’t want you running off again. *Ever*. Understand?”

Andrew shrugs. “Whatever.”

Momma slaps him so hard Andrew’s teeth rattle.

“Don’t you ‘whatever’ me. I was worried.”

Andrew’s face stings as Norman Bates’ voice floats up behind him. “*It was just too great of a loss for her,*” Norman confesses. “*She had nothing left.*”

“*Except you.*”

“*A son is a poor substitute for a lover.*”

“Good God,” says Momma, moving past Andrew to the living room.

“*Why don’t you go away?*” the blond woman continues.

With a quick jerk of her arm, she wheels the TV stand toward her. “What the hell are you watching now?”

“*I couldn’t do that,*” says Norman, looking up at Momma through the screen. “*Who’d look after her? She’d be alone up there.*”

“Jesus H. Christ,” says Momma.

“*It’d be cold and damp like a grave. If you love someone, you don’t do that to them, even if you hate them.*”

Momma flips off the TV off and rolls it in its stand back against the wall. She turns toward Andrew. “Don’t rot your mind with such trash. Now go outside and clean up the dog shit in the yard. And I want that animal back on his chain before supper. But first take your pissy T-shirt to the basement and put it in the washer. By *itself*. Can you handle that?”

Andrew nods yes and unclenches his fists, heading off without getting to see the best part of Norman’s story, the part where the blond lady gets stabbed in the shower.

* * *

In the basement, the smell of dust and old mice droppings mixes with the dampness rising from the washer. Andrew covers his nose against the urine stink and shakes the Wonder Woman shirt out of its plastic bag into the hot water. He adds soap, a white blur of too much. Andrew stares at the water filling the tub and knows he will never wear the shirt again. He considers burying it in the old orchard alongside Buck's messes, ridding himself of its memory forever. But Momma might search his dresser for it. He pours bleach into the washer, not caring if he ruins Lynda Carter.

Upstairs Andrew closes the basement door and steps into the small pantry by the kitchen. The water heater there chugs as the washer below kicks into cycle. On the wall above a shelf stocked with canned goods lies an air vent, and through it Andrew can hear the sound of Momma moving in her bedroom, the squeak of bedsprings as she and the baby-to-be lie down to rest. Sometimes late at night when he sneaks downstairs to forage for snacks, he stops here and listens to the sounds that eddy in this spot. The flow of faucets, the rasp of the furnace, the hum of people upstairs breathing. The occasional sound of his mother crying. Sometimes the air's push and pull through the vent plays tricks on his ears. Those rare nights Daddy comes home, Andrew has paused here wondering, not sure if the muffled grunts from above come from fighting or fucking.

June's nearly over, but the bank calendar tacked to the kitchen wall still reads April, the page yellowed from where the sun strikes it each day. Andrew pulls the calendar down to change the date. In the margin all the months are laid out in miniature. Momma says the new baby will likely arrive just after school starts, that money will be tight--she won't be able to do secretarial work for the School Board or get on the substitute teacher list like she wanted. Andrew wonders what the new baby's birthday will be. Allison hopes for August, the same month as hers.

Andrew's finger traces July 21st, his own birth date. He'll be thirteen then, a teenager like Ricky. Andrew moves through the months and holidays in reverse, past the Fourth of July and Easter, past April Fool's and St. Patrick's, past Valentine's Day and New Year's Eve. In December he stops at his parents' anniversary, two days before Christmas. Only seven months before his birth. That shouldn't be.

Nine months' incubation, Ricky's voice taunts again.

Though Grandma Rose has told him that he and Momma had to stay in the hospital a few days after she delivered him through C-section, there's never been any talk of Andrew being premature.

He finally knows the truth; it was *his* fault Momma and Daddy were forced together. How could he have not have realized this before?

On the bank calendar, his finger skims back two more months, to the likely date of his conception. Late October. Seneca's annual Pumpkin Festival. That's when Daddy's seed must have taken root inside Momma. That's how Andrew wormed his way into this world--at Halloween time, not the backseat treat his parents wanted but an unexpected trick that would last their lifetimes.

* * *

Andrew's heart is still sick with this secret at suppertime when Momma cracks eggs in a skillet with the flick of her wrist. She's decided that Daddy will have pancakes and fried eggs for dinner since he failed to come home last night so he could be here for breakfast. Andrew stayed up late last night but never did hear his truck, just heard Momma talking low into the phone as she called bar after bar in town. Now Momma wants to make a point, wants to rub Daddy's nose in his mistakes the way she did to Buck back when he was a puppy in need of training. Wasted effort, thinks Andrew. As useless as his father's excuse when he finally called back a while ago, saying he stayed at Lew's house to rise early and spend the day helping pour a concrete patio for one of Lew's clients. "More likely sleeping off a hangover," Momma had muttered as she hung up the phone. Now it's half an hour past the time Daddy had promised to arrive.

"You two hurry and finish eating," Momma tells Andrew and Allison; she wants Daddy all to herself when he gets home. They need to talk.

They need to fight, thinks Andrew as he works hard on his pork and beans, on his hamburger patty, avoiding the Brussels sprouts not even Buck will eat.

Momma sets to cracking more eggs. Andrew watches her hold the white shell in the curve between her thumb and forefinger, the slight twist of her hand just before the yolk and clear liquid flop gently into her big black skillet, egg after egg. How many does she expect Daddy to eat?

Andrew moves his Brussels sprouts around with his fork, hoping they'll disappear. When he tries to eat one, it reminds him of the way his Wonder Woman shirt smelled, and he spits it out with a gag. Across from him, Allison curls her lip in disgust.

Andrew watches Momma crack the last of her eggs against the rim of the skillet. "Shit," she says softly as a punctured yolk oozes down the side of the pan. "Shit, shit, shit." She takes a fork from a drawer by the sink. On tiptoes, she reaches for the highest cabinet. Her fingertips nudge a glass bowl toward her. It tips the ledge and starts to fall, but Momma catches it.

"Your father will just have to eat his eggs scrambled," she says as she dumps the contents of her skillet into the bowl. *It's only one egg*, Andrew wants to tell her. The rest still float intact like oversized eyes. But Momma plunges her fork in anyway, whisking the eggs into a blur of light yellow. She glances at the clock above the stove: a quarter till seven. "If he doesn't get here soon, he'll not only be eating them scrambled, he'll be eating them burned."

Andrew can't help himself. "Why don't you just wait and fry them when he gets here? They're just eggs."

"Okay, Julia Childs," Momma says. "You can fix dinner tomorrow night. You can see what it's like not to have him show up." She reaches into the middle of the table to get the salt and pepper.

Momma shakes the salt over her bowl, but nothing comes out. "Damn," she says. She takes the spare saltshaker from atop the refrigerator, but it's empty, too. "Why can't you kids ever refill anything?" She searches through her spice cabinet for the shakers there. When she holds the glass shakers up to the

light, she twists her lips, not satisfied with the amounts in those either. She finds a couple more pairs in a drawer by the sink, then lines them all on the counter in a row. No two pairs are alike. Some are glass, some plastic, the others ceramic figurines--a pair of pigs wearing silly clothes, a bride and groom. Momma scoots the peppers to one side, the salts to another, like the separate boys and girls lines they used to divide Andrew's class in at school. She hunts through the cabinet for her box of salt, her can of pepper. She finds the pepper tin and fills five shakers to the top, then begins working on the salt. Allison clicks her heels under the table, watching Momma, watching the salt fill the bride's clear glass gown with pure white. Andrew can tell Allison wants to play with them. But just then Momma snaps her head around like she can read Allison's intentions too, and the two kids jump at the sight of her wild eyes.

"What?" she wants to know. "What?"

"Nothing," says Allison. She stares down at her plate, pops a Brussels sprout in her mouth as penance for looking.

"Hurry up and finish so I can clear the table," Momma growls. She screws the head on the bride and groom, then slides them out of line. They're special--wedding presents from Great-Aunt Inez. Maybe tonight she'll use them with Daddy.

Andrew watches Allison sneak sidelong glances at the miniature couple. She pushes her new glasses up the bridge of her nose. "Can I have the salt please?" she asks politely.

Momma looks at her, then sets the little pig in the middle of the table. Allison frowns and refuses to touch it.

"What about you, Andrew? You need some salt, too?" Momma asks. Andrew nods yes, hoping Momma will slip up and give him the little bride. Then he can trade with Allison. "You haven't even touched your Brussels sprouts," Momma complains. Across the table, Allison pops another into her mouth. Her cheek swells as if filled with jawbreaker candy. She closes her eyes and carefully starts to chew.

"I don't like them," Andrew tells Momma. "They make me sick. They taste bad and smell worse."

"I don't care if they taste like dog shit. I told you to eat 'em."

"Why can't you fix a vegetable I like? Fix carrots. I'll eat carrots."

"You can't eat carrots the rest of your life."

"Well, duh...."

"Cut it out, smart ass."

Andrew doesn't want to tell her how the sprouts smell like his shirt. "I can't eat them, Momma." He crosses his arms.

"Well maybe they need salt." Momma lifts up the pig and lets a pinch of salt drop onto the sprouts.

"Not enough," Andrew says sharply, the words a knife he tries hard to twist.

Momma glares at him. "How about some more, then?" She reaches to the counter and grabs the other saltshakers, begins pouring a dab from each one, pausing in between to ask if that's enough. Andrew

closes his mouth and doesn't say a word. Finally only the bride is left. Momma turns her upside down and shakes her with hard thrusts of her arm. Salt spills from the bride's veiled head.

"She's got dandruff!" Andrew finally bursts out, and across the table Allison lets go with a nervous laugh. It's not the right thing for either of them to do. Andrew looks up at Momma's flushed face, shaking in the same rhythm as her arm and hand and the little upside-down bride. Momma's face is beet red, like the flush Daddy wears when he comes home drunk.

"Not enough?" Momma asks through gritted teeth. She lets the bride drop onto the middle of Andrew's plate as she reaches back to the counter to grab the round box of salt. "I'll give you plenty!" She turns the box over Andrew's plate and the salt comes down like heavy white water. Allison looks scared, like she might bolt any second, fly out the door to the safety of the woods. *Don't leave me*, Andrew wants to tell her.

"Enough?" cries Momma. "Had enough yet, Andrew David McKenna?" She hisses his name and the salt wavers, dances heavy on his plate. A mound grows, burying the sprouts and the rest of his hamburger. All the salt makes Andrew feel funny. His mouth grows hot from the sight of it, from being too close. Spit pours into Andrew's mouth and it won't shut off. It comes too fast, drowning him, making him sick. Momma's pulling all the water from his body with her spray of salt that she spills in a white stream back and forth across the table in long sweeps of her arm, shouting *smart-ass* and *asshole* and *ungrateful bastard*. Andrew's sick from the spit in his mouth that won't stop. He grips the sides of his chair as Momma flings the salt, spraying it everywhere, pouring it on his head and into his lap. Buck barks at the back screen door; Allison starts to cry across the table--while Andrew feels his own salty tears pour into his mouth, unable to shut them off, to shut Momma out. He knows he is going to be sick, and he can't tell anyone because it is raining salt over his head and he knows that Momma will never stop.

* * *

Later Andrew watches Momma's big-bellied silhouette move from the door to the edge of the bed in the room he now shares with Allison. Momma's come to shut off the lights and put a trashcan next to Andrew's bed in case he decides to throw up again. Allison's in the bathroom brushing her teeth as Momma sits down on the edge of the bed, the mattress dipping toward her. She offers Andrew crushed ice with cola syrup to soothe his stomach, feels his forehead for fever as Andrew starts to spoon the cool sweetness to his mouth.

"I'm sorry," she says. Then, "Don't tell your father."

How could Andrew? The man's not even home yet--probably won't be for who knows how many nights to come. He's sick of this mess, just like Andrew was sick at the table. Momma's soft cooing can't change that now, her face pale and hovering, her eyes trying to swallow Andrew up inside them. From Andrew's stomach to throat lies a sour burn, something ice and syrup can't soothe. If Daddy's smart he'll stay away until Momma goes to bed, then sneak in and gather Andrew and Allison in his arms, drive the

three of them far away, never to return. Momma will be left alone with her new baby, its tiny life sacrificed to secure their passage. Andrew knows he can live with that. And that is the secret he keeps inside himself--not that Momma's sorry; she's always sorry—but that he would do almost anything to someday be free. Momma leans in close to call him her little man, and a strand of her hair brushes Andrew's face as he turns away. He holds his bowl up to his nose, afraid she might kiss him.

But Momma draws back, shifts her weight on the bed. "So we won't tell Daddy a word," she says, the matter decided. "He has enough to worry about. Let's not make him feel bad when he gets home. Okay?" She urges Andrew toward conspiracy, but he refuses to budge.

Momma takes his bowl and turns away, her shadowed profile stark against the light spilling from the bedroom door. Darkness swallows the details of her face, and Andrew is grateful he can't see her tears, welling up now as they always do.

"I know I sometimes do bad things," Momma says, the breath catching in her throat. "I'm sorry. I'm truly sorry." She reaches down to rub Andrew's arm, but he squirms away, pulls the sheet to his throat. He has decided never to love her again.

Momma's hand searches out his and closes around it. "If you kids would only cooperate," she whispers, trying to win him over like a baby. "Just a bit. It would make things easier. Promise me you'll try, and I'll try, too."

In the dark, with Momma's face floating above, Andrew finds himself almost convinced. Something unlocks inside him. "I promise," he finally tells her.

Chapter 5: Playing Possum

Just as Aleta warned me not to, I got lost on my way to find Remy. The old song coming from the second-floor window of Andrew's house had sent my mind reeling back, leaving my legs to wander mechanically into a series of tiny, uneven cobblestone streets too small for auto traffic and lined on both sides with narrow brick houses that hugged together. The Amble-Through, I figured. In the ten years since my arrival, I've come to know it well—those shady alley-sized streets my brother and his friends gave that nickname to because they were always ambling through it on their way to or from the dive bars and gay clubs they haunted. The houses dated back to the mid-19th century, some of them no bigger than three shoebox-sized rooms stacked on top each other and known as trinities. Cheap rents meant student boarders and young artists tackling first fixer-uppers. The little interlocking bends were perfect places for smoking pot, sneaking kisses, or having a quickie if that was your want to do.

But right then I knew none of this. I simply left the brick sidewalks made bumpy by tree roots and took to the street, worried to have lost my bearings but happy to have found coolness from the rising heat as the hands on my wristwatch crept closer to noon. The streets either dead-ended or made so many turns they essentially folded back on themselves. I let my tired bones carry me one right-hand turn to the next until I finally spit out onto a much larger street. Across the way stood Giovanni's Room, the bookstore where Remy worked.

The shop was on the corner of 12th and Pine, across from a pizza parlor. What Aleta hadn't told me was that there would be books in the window enumerating *The Joys of Gay Sex* and chronicling lesbian leather love stories. Beaded necklaces and amethyst bookends rounded out the display, and from the look of things there seemed to be a great demand for books whose jackets showcased the male torso. A rainbow flag hung above the door. Giovanni's Room was obviously a gay bookstore, and though I felt a little funny pushing past the glass door, I was determined to find Remy.

Find him I did, Remy standing thin and tall behind the counter. He actually cackled when I told him who I was.

"Well, pinch my tits and call me Mary!" Remy said. "I know all about *you*.... You're the enabler!"

My ears grew hot. I wasn't sure what Remy meant by the term, but it didn't sound good. I took him in. He had thinning hair, wavy roan curls cut short. He had a largish nose and a longish head, which sprang like the top of a Q-tip above his shoulders. He slumped across the counter and leaned close to me, and I saw that the speck on his earlobe was actually a pink triangle earring. "Nice outfit, by the way," he said, taking in my uniform. His accent was heavier than mine, a Deep South drawl--Tennessee? Georgia?--

that he peppered with the occasional hip-hop inflection. “But let’s cut to the chase,” he said. “Just *what* can I *do* for Mr. Andrew McKenna’s little *sistah*?”

I swallowed hard and told him how I had gone by Andrew’s old place and talked to Aleta, how she had told me that he might be able to tell me where Andrew had run off to.

“Well, I can’t help you there,” he replied, becoming serious. The store wasn’t very big, just a single room with a staircase in the middle leading upstairs. A middle-aged man pushed up behind me with a couple paperbacks, and Remy’s long arms reached around to take the purchase as he continued to talk to me. “I’ve been by his place. I’ve got a key. But Andrew seems to be long gone.”

“Do you have any idea--?”

Remy cut me off with a sigh as he started to work the credit card machine. I scooted away to give them room, and my eyes caught sight of a display of a magazine featuring two hairy, potbellied men who wore what looked like a couple of studded black belts crisscrossed over their chests. From the title, I learned they liked being called bears. I thought again of last night, of Charlie’s big stomach and meaty paws. I was glad when the customer took his change and squeezed past me to the door.

“You hungry?” Remy asked me.

I hadn’t eaten since the day before, and the knot of worry that had kept hold of my stomach was starting to give way to emptiness. “Yeah, but what I really need to know is--”

Remy held up his index finger to say wait a minute. He walked over the staircase and called upstairs. “Yo, Ed baby,” he called up. “I’m gonna take an early lunch. You cool with that?”

A thin man with graying hair leaned over the railing. “These invoices are done,” his gentle voice said. “I think I can handle the register.”

I followed Remy back out into the heat. He paused on the corner and looked around. “Skipped breakfast,” he told me. “Too busy trying to roll last night’s trick out the door.”

I wasn’t sure what Remy meant by that, but I let it slide.

“Where should we go?” he wondered. “There’s Duck Soup, there’s More Than Just Ice Cream, the pizza place across the street.”

“I’d rather just talk about Andrew and--”

“I know!” he said, cutting me off yet again. “I’m in the mood for Mexican. Taco House it is!”

And with that he leapt from the pavement to jaywalk across the intersection. I followed, dodging a mail truck sneaking through on the tail end of the traffic signal’s yellow light.

I had never met a queen before, and scarcely had heard of that term back then. But the sight of Remy’s pierced navel peeking out from beneath his high-riding belly shirt suggested volumes.

Taco House was up Pine Street a short way, a little hole in the wall on the edge of the Amble-Through. An enormous cactus dominated the plate glass window, giving the place a hominess the chain

restaurants back home could never muster. Remy flung the door open for me, and I realized then that he performed every gesture dramatically, as if performing upon an imaginary stage.

The place was small--a few mismatched tables in front, a counter in back, a kitchen tucked somewhere behind. I let Remy do the ordering, and soon we were drinking Diet Cokes by the front window at a table that was actually an old Ms. Pac-Man game. Remy worked his broad smile, as he took a stab at interrogating me. "Andrew didn't say much, but when he did, the way he talked about you and home, well, I can't say I'm surprised you finally followed him here. But why'd you wait till *now*, when he's already flown the coop?"

I didn't know what to tell him. How could I explain what had finally set me off? All the creeping worry I'd felt since the Christmas before, when I'd last seen Andrew. How his communication had slowly trickled off over the months, then stopped altogether. In the five years since he'd left home, never once had he forgotten my birthday with a call or a card. Not until last week. How could I describe the panic that had set in when I called his number and was told it had been disconnected? How could I explain about the omen I saw when old potbellied Charlie had walked into Hardlee's Fastfood yesterday evening and told everyone working the counter that the gendarme atop Seneca Rocks had finally fallen sometime the night before? Since God knows when that rock had stood. How could I tell Remy that I suddenly realized staying one more day in Seneca would cause me to petrify and crumble as well, that I had to get out, go with Charlie and find Andrew, no matter the price it cost me? There was no way I could say all that to a stranger. My eyes welled up. I felt my ears grow hot.

The shifting calculations Remy passed off as expressions disappeared then, replaced by genuine concern. He wiped my tears with his napkin, took my hand in his.

"Come on, kiddo," he said softly. "It's not that dire. People do weird things all the time and live to tell the tale. Your brother's okay, wherever he is. And you'll be okay, too."

While we waited for our food, I managed to convey to Remy a condensed version of why I had come to town--all the misgivings inside me, my growing concern for Andrew. In turn, Remy did his best to fill me in on Andrew's life since he had come to Philadelphia. He told me how the two of them had met in a college composition class at Temple their first semester there. Andrew had been bored with the class, having already taken a similar one at a college back home the year following his high school graduation, the same year he had tried to save up money working as playground supervisor for the county. I remembered that Andrew had lost interest in that earlier class prior to completing it; there had been a knockdown, drag-out fight with Momma about the tuition money he had wasted--she had opened his mail and discovered his failing grade. But I had never really known *why* Andrew had abandoned his first academic foray. Listening to Remy connected the dots. Although it had been obvious Andrew was unhappy back home, and I had plenty of clues as to why, I never knew how badly he had been in love at the time or

how heartbroken he would become once he moved to the city. According to Remy, Andrew had ended up in that north Philadelphia English classroom hot on the heels of a boy he had chased from back home.

“The guy was a pretty good-looking cuss,” Remy recalled. “I met him once at a party we had in the Rodman Street house. Josh or Jamie or something--”

“Could it have been Jake?” I asked. That was the boy Andrew had hung around with right before he left home. The same boy from *The Seneca Sentinel* clipping I sent my brother a couple winters later, figuring Andrew would want to read about what had happened to his friend in the Gulf War. But I didn’t know that Jake might have come himself to Philadelphia in the years in between.

“Honey, it could have been Bilbo Baggins, for all I know,” said Remy. “I recall faces, not names. Faces and torsos and arms and legs, and this boy was the complete package, all right? Though no hobbit at all, really, but *trés* preppy--all faded Calvin Kleins and Izod alligator shirts. I think he wanted to play professional baseball for the Phillies or something, but there he was that fall attending classes at Temple, with your stalker brother lying in wait for him behind the bell tower every chance he got. At any rate, Andrew was very hush-hush about whatever *drama* had unfolded between them back home, though I think they managed to hook up a time or two.” Remy’s eyebrows had grown animated again. I could tell he plucked them. “Miss Iona here--that’s my drag incarnation, and she’s *very intuitive*--could tell from the get-go that Mr. All-American was *way* too closeted for his own good. But your brother, on the other hand.... Hell, once he had gotten to the City of Brotherly Love, he was all about lovin’ the brothas. *Mmm-hmm!*”

For a while I had known that Andrew leaned that way, but still it felt strange to hear someone else speak of it. I was glad when the tattooed boy working the counter brought us our food just then, a pair of overstuffed burritos and a plate of nachos slathered with cheese. I was famished, I realized, and my first bite of the burrito was warm and comforting.

“Alas, the affair ended badly,” Remy announced in between chews. He couldn’t remember what happened. Something about the army? The details had gotten lost among art shows and college degrees. The L’il Dump Theatre Troupe he and my brother started. Andrew’s string of subsequent boyfriends. The suicide attempt of an old housemate of theirs. “Andrew ever tell you about Waif? No? I think it was he who gave that very strange girl the nickname, ‘Waif’, like she was a starving model in some Calvin Klein ad. Tiffany was her real name, but that sounded too much like a poodle or a jewelry store, and that sad girl had neither a puppy’s playfulness nor Harry Winston’s sparkle.” Remy sighed. “So much history, so short a time. Like the hullabaloo outside the Bellevue Hotel where your brother got brained. But you don’t want to hear all that now, do you? You’re tired. Just look at you.”

Remy’s spiel had moved through my mind like a whirligig. At least I caught hold of the first part. The army. It *had* been Jake after all. “Yeah, I’m tired,” I said aloud. I felt like roadkill. Like something old Charlie would have to wash off his truck’s mudflaps.

“Go to your brother’s apartment,” Remy told me. “The rent’s paid until the end of the month. Wash your face, have a nice lie down..” He dug in his pocket and produced a chunky ring of keys, slid a couple off. “I used to dog sit for your brother and that asshole Steven once in a while.” He laid one key in my hand and then the other. “Two doors,” he explained. “One outer, one inner.”

I reached for my bag. “Who’s Steven?”

“Good God, how could I skip *him*?” Remy exclaimed. Steven was the latest add-a-bead on your brother’s chain, chain, chain of fools.” Remy rolled his eyes. “I never cottoned to him. Mr. Hotshot Art School Photographer, he was. Too good to talk to anybody he didn’t want to catch in his camera lens. He’s the one who gave your brother the bright idea he could be a *model*.” Remy laughed. “Naturally, out of all of the tricks to pass through your brother’s turnstile, Steven’s the one Andrew had to go and shack up with.”

As I went to put away Andrew’s keys, I dropped my bag.

Remy reached down to help collect what spilled out. “What’s *this*?” he asked. I explained it was my EpiPen. Remy held it at a slight distance, as if it were the kind of dirty hospital needle Andrew used to tell me sometimes washed up on the Jersey shore. I took it from him.

“I have allergies. Sometimes I need a shot.” I gathered my checkbook and change.

One of Remy’s plucked eyebrows arched a little higher than the other. “Well. As long as you’re not going off the deep end like your brother.”

I looked at him. Curiously.

“Let’s just say Andrew was not at his best when he was chemically enhanced.”

I wasn’t altogether sure what Remy meant, but I had a good idea. Last Christmas, when I’d last seen Andrew, he’d been drinking far too much. He could have been on something else too for all I knew. I tried not to worry about it right then as Remy explained that he had last heard from Andrew via a postcard mailed to the bookstore.

“I got it about a week after the he left us the dog He was in Baltimore of all places. Working at some fleabag hotel. But he hated it.” Remy drained the last of his soda.. “I think he was planning on heading to California.”

We spoke a while longer, but our plates were empty by then and Remy had to get back to work. I gathered up my purse and the plastic bag containing Andrew’s journals I had gotten from Aleta. Outside, Remy lit himself a cigarette and told me if I headed straight up Camac Street through the Amble-Through I would find Andrew’s apartment above a deli. He pointed the way, then gave me his phone number and an air kiss to the cheek, promising we’d have to get together again real soon.

* * *

The apartment wasn’t far at all. The brownstone building had a set of stairs leading up to a small landing where a door to the left broke off to AppleJack’s Deli while another led to a staircase to the apartments above. Andrew’s name was still on one of the mailboxes, and I gathered up the bills and junk mail that had

accumulated there. It took me a minute to remember again which key opened the outer security door, but soon I was climbing the two long sets of stairs up to his top-floor apartment.

Inside it was a mess, just as Remy had warned. The door opened onto a combination kitchen-dining area. I tried the light switch as I entered, but nothing happened. Despite the dimness I could see the table was covered with pizza boxes and take-out containers. Dishes were piled in the sink, and dirty clothes covered an empty futon frame in the nearby living room. The place reeked. A TV stand had been rolled in front of a bricked-up fireplace, but all that remained of the set itself was a dusty outline. I opened a window, and noticed it had a pair of metal brackets beneath it. But any air-conditioner they might have once supported was now gone, as was the window screen. I propped up the stubborn window with an art history textbook I found on the floor and pushed the curtains aside, which let in only a fraction more light since the window was within spitting distance of a brick wall next door. I visited the bathroom. At least the plumbing was working, an improvement over the rest-stop toilet I had used the night before. But still it would require a hazmat team to disinfect the place. I peeked behind the grimy curtain surrounding the claw-foot bathtub, and noticed a garden hose snaking in through a casement window near the showerhead. Its end draped over the tub's old-fashioned spigot. I figured it was designed to carry water up to the roof, but learning why that was necessary could wait awhile.

I had the rest of Andrew's apartment to explore instead. Behind a pair of pocket doors in back, I found what appeared to be an art studio. Andrew's old drawings were scattered across a rickety drafting table, and a few unfinished canvases lay alongside unassembled stretchers in next to an overstuffed armchair. A metal shelf was filled with stacks of old magazines and an array of brushes, chemicals, and empty aluminum cans. Extension cords tangled toward a large closet that I figured must have once held Steven's darkroom, since it was covered from floor to ceiling with heavy black fabric held in place by electrical tape. Cardboard boxes and black portfolio cases filled it now. At the very back of the room, a pair of heavily painted French doors looked onto a small balcony that attached to a fire-escape whose stairs led both above and below.

But I didn't feel like going out there now. For despite my urge to either scrub down or blowtorch the apartment, I was dead on my feet. I took Andrew's bills, my handbag and the plastic bag full of his old journals and headed to the front room, beyond the bathroom, which I hoped would hold a comfy bed.

What I got was a mattress on the floor. It was the lumpy futon mattress from the living room, which bore a tangle of sheets and a few tumbleweeds that appeared mostly composed of Duke the dog's old fur. I opened the windows in this room, too, a pair of them that looked out onto Pine Street and the rooftops of the Amble-Through. I stripped the mattress and recovered it with the one clean top sheet I could find in the back of Andrew's closet. I took off my shoes and my Hardlee's uniform. With a sigh, I lay back upon the mattress and stretched out my arms.

Though my brother was nowhere to be found in the apartment, the place was nonetheless full of him. Full of his trash and old clothes, full of his rickety furniture and old books, full of his drawings and hopes. Parts of him remained, like sloughed DNA at a crime scene. I knew, of course, the real Andrew was long gone, tracing, perhaps, one of those dotted routes he had drawn on the map in his old room on Rodman Street. Yet in his absence, a trace of him persisted; I felt it acutely, the way a soldier might still feel a phantom limb.

As I closed my eyes, the ghost of Andrew settled around me, as surely as the dust in the apartment air. I craved sleep more than anything, but the proof of my brother's departure had left my thoughts abuzz. What filled my head was the memory of another leaving, years before: our father's.

* * *

Andrew was a week away from turning thirteen the mid-July night our father left. I had yet to turn eleven. Momma was fast at work on turning Andrew's old room into a nursery for the coming baby, due in September, so now my brother's twin bed lay across from my own in the room we'd come to share. I liked having Andrew near; it made me less lonely. Night after night, hope lay wide awake in our hearts as the two of us listened for the sound of Daddy's truck tires scattering loose rocks up our dirt road and along the new concrete drive he'd poured the spring before. He had let Andrew and me press our hands and spell our names in the wet cement. But that seemed forever ago. More and more, Daddy's time at home was eclipsed by time spent away. Our house had grown perilous in his absence, as if Daddy was one of the columns propping up the roof of the front porch.

The night our father disappeared for good, I must have sensed what was coming. I sat up in my bed, unable to sleep. Andrew, across from me, must have given up on waiting, for I could hear his breath growing heavy as he edged toward sleep. I tried counting the days since I'd last seen Daddy in daylight. Certainly not on workdays, and not on weekends for a long time. Not even on the Fourth of July, when the rest of the family had gathered with our cousins at Grandma Rose's to eat hotdogs and light fireworks. The last time had been when I was stung, hadn't it? Thinking of that day hurt me all over, and not just in the spots where the bees' stingers had gotten me.

Anaphylactic shock, the doctor had called it. A mixed-up head was a small price to pay; I could have died. The hospital nurse told me my confusion would go away, but it hadn't. That day still wouldn't come into full focus. There had been a truck in the yard—Daddy's blue pickup? Why didn't his coming home make me happy? All I remembered was coming from the woods, a sudden mix of anger and sadness inside me. I remembered picking up a rock, the weight of it in my hand. How it felt when I threw it at the truck. How I missed. The sound it made when it hit the wooden crate that held the beehive Daddy and his friend were trying to domesticate. I could see the bees' angry swarm rising above the crate, felt my own hatred become a part of their frenzy. The bees spiraled outward, bringing it back to me. First one sting, and then another. My throat went tight. The world swooned away and I fell. Buck, chained in the yard, started

to bark. I couldn't breathe. I heard Momma shout as the light of the world tunneled away. And then hands, a man's hands--Daddy's?--picked me up higher than ever before, carrying me away as the bees dissolved their angry attack and my mind slipped away into merciful oblivion.

It had to have been Daddy, because he was there that night when I woke up in the hospital with a tube in my arm. I could hear him arguing with Momma outside in the hall, Momma and somebody else--the doctor, maybe?--and I wondered if they were all mad at me because our family couldn't afford to pay the bill. Andrew wasn't there to ask, and the next afternoon when we picked him up at Grandma Rose's, he told me to hush up, not to think about it anymore. Daddy had already hauled off the bee box and gone back to his road crew, and Momma was mad but not saying much, to me or anyone else. I was okay, Andrew told me. Be happy with that. In the weeks that followed, I tried to take his advice, but it was hard not to worry over the bees and what happened, especially now that I had to carry an injection pen in case I ever got stung again.

Thinking of that day still made me uneasy, so I pushed it from my head as I crawled into Andrew's bed that July night, gently so as not to wake him. Our room was hot and the metal fan Momma had set on my dresser barely stirred the air. As uncomfortable as it was, I still wanted to touch someone, touch Andrew, his bare back damp with sweat beneath the bedsheet. Andrew didn't stir as I settled in. My nose nudged his neck as he rested facing away from me towards the window screen. His skin smelled of Ivory soap and shampoo, and behind that a trace of chlorine and woods. The smell of summer. The smell of Andrew.

I nestled my feet among his and listened for engine sounds or a truck door opening, the creak of the screen door and our father's voice loose in his throat from too many beers. But only the call of crickets rippled through the night.

If Andrew was upset, he didn't show it, though surely he still must have been mad at having been turned out of his old room to make way for Momma's baby. Earlier that morning, until swim time, I had helped him finish erasing his presence from that pocket of the house next to Momma and Daddy's room, packing up his games and the comics he drew from, his old Mego action figures. All the while Momma loomed over us, dividing Andrew's belongings into what he could keep and what had to be put aside for a yard sale. 'I'll hear no bellyaching,' Momma had told Andrew when it was done, paint fumes thick in the air as she laid the tip of a brush against the wall behind where my brother's bed used to be. Andrew stood opposite her, running a metal scraper under the last of the old wallpaper--a cowboy and Indian pattern left over from when Daddy had been a boy in that room. From the look on my brother's face, I could tell he was sorry to see it go. Momma was painting the walls bright yellow, a good color regardless of whether she had a boy or a girl. "Move's only temporary," she had assured him, but I knew Andrew feared it would be more permanent than passing.

A breeze billowed the window curtain. . I looked over Andrew's shoulders onto the stars that decorated the night and wondered again about Daddy. Set like a pearl among the sky's diamonds was a round moon, fat and full. Beside me, Andrew's breath rose and fell, as steady as I imagined the ocean to be--a place Andrew had promised to show me some day. Faint clouds thickened in the sky.

Finally from up the road came the yowling whoop of Beaman's hunting dogs. I bolted up, picturing the dogs hurling their bodies against the rusted wire of their cages as someone passed by. Could it be Daddy? I elbowed Andrew. He stirred from sleep, drew himself up and scooted toward the window screen.

Our father was coming. Buck, in the yard below, sensed this too, and clattered his chain down the new driveway, straining to catch sight of Daddy's pickup. I gripped Andrew's shoulder and leaned over him. Together we stared into the night, up the road, to a bend in the hillside wooded with pines. At last, faraway lights cut through the trees. Daddy's blue pickup jounced into view, then jerked to a halt once when he reached the foot of our drive. Buck leapt toward it, but the chain round his neck yanked him back. The truck motor purred then sputtered out. Across the tin roof of the front porch Andrew and I stared, eyes glued to Daddy's old Ford. After a moment, a dim blue washed up inside the cab, and our father's face appeared, no bigger than a dime, as strains of country music competed with the crickets. Over a Tammy Wynette song came the unmistakable snap of a beer can being opened. The pull-tab glinted as Daddy tossed it out his window to the ground. Below us, the porch light snapped on. The screen door screeched. Momma's shadow fell across the yard. Her body joined it a moment later as her slippered feet followed the flagstone path to the truck. Daddy downed another mouthful of beer.

"You coming or going?" Momma asked. "Make up your goddamn mind."

Daddy turned off his radio, disappeared again behind the windshield's black blur. A moment later, his truck door swung wide. He slid one leg out and then the other, rising slowly to his feet. Buck jumped up again, and Daddy reeled back unsteadily before reaching down to scratch the dog's head.

"Daddy's drunk," Andrew said. "Damn, he's drunk."

"Don't swear," I told him. That was something best left for Momma to do, then, as she and Daddy headed up the porch. There words grew lost to us. I gathered my hair in my hands and lifted it to cool my neck. A flowered bedsheet lay crumpled between my brother and me.

"He's as bad as she is," Andrew finally said. He drew back to lean against the wall.

"Don't talk like that." I reached to touch him, but he pushed me away.

Something slammed downstairs--a door? Andrew shushed me as voices rose up through the house. He scrambled out of bed and rushed to the air vent near the door, hunching down on hands and knees to listen. I followed. Momma and Daddy's voices moved from living room to kitchen, back and forth, cross words fading in and out as the two of us strained to hear.

Where were you? Assing around, I suppose."

"Kate, I've been doing some thinking."

“I’m surprised you can even think of my name, piss drunk as you are. It’s a wonder you could drive home.”

“Things got to change.”

“The one night you have between jobs to be home and you spend it boozing.”

“I’m sorry, Kate.”

“The one goddamn night I thought we’d clear the air. And just look at you. You’re sorry, all right. One sorry sonovabitch.”

“*Kate--*” Daddy’s voice grew louder. Andrew and I leaned closer to the grate. “This is it.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Means I’m through trying.”

Momma laughed. “You never tried a day in your *life*,” Momma said. “You never tried to raise these kids. Or understand what I go through day after day. You’re married to your pool stick and pint glass, not to me.”

“I’m serious. Listen up. And don’t you light that cancer stick while I’m talking to you.”

“Leave me alone! Since when do you give a shit about my welfare?”

“Wasn’t yours I was thinking of.”

I shut my eyes and listened to their voices flowing through the floor grate. I pictured the two of them going at it, red in the face. They shook their heads and slammed their fists, spit out nasty words, too much dammed up for too damn long. The voices rose hard and brittle as I pictured them: Daddy hunkered in the archway of the living room, draining the last of his beer as he tried hard to ignore the names Momma called him; Momma standing just inside the kitchen, one hand propped against her spine, another growing white-knuckled as she gripped a chair-back. Up through the floor grate my parents’ hateful words angled up, hooking into me. Andrew laced his fingers through the metal grate and squeezed hard like he wanted to break it. I laid my hand overtop his.

Andrew’s eyes snapped to mine, locked on tight. I was suddenly struck by the blackness of his eyes. And, more than that, the way he looked like our father. Daddy’s sandy hair and fine features washed up in my brother’s face. Andrew only needed to grow a little, work beneath the sun awhile, and he’d be Daddy’s spitting image. As I watched Andrew clench his jaw, I knew he was trying to be brave for me. I wanted to cry.

We both know where this night was headed. So it came as no surprise when through the metal grate Daddy’s voice grew with stony resolve. “I’m going, Kate. I’m getting the hell out.”

“What are you talking about?” Momma asked, not getting it.

“It’s always sorry old Kate,” Daddy said. “Well, I ain’t sorry no more.”

Momma asked Daddy what he meant.

“Means I’m tired.” His words built up like stones, each one shoring the next. “It isn’t right to live like this. We got off to a bad start and it’s been downhill ever since. Thirteen years is long enough to figure out a thing ain’t right.”

A sudden silence rose through the floor grate. Momma must have figured out that Daddy wasn’t kidding. But what could she do? What could she say? She was too strong a woman to beg.

“So that’s it?” she finally said, and I found it strange her tone was no more bitter than usual. “You’re going? Well, thanks a lot, asshole. You picked a hell of a time to leave.” And then I understood why she was playing her hand so cool. I envisioned Momma smoothing her nightgown down, stroking her palm slowly across the trump card of the baby in her belly. She thought Daddy was drunk. Bluffing.

But Daddy stood firm. “I know my timing’s off,” he said. “I thought I’d try to stick it out through the baby, but that’ll just make things worse. I don’t have any trying left in me, Kate. You used it up.”

“Don’t shrug it off on me. You’re not leaving. I won’t let you.” Worry now soaked Momma’s words. A hateful growl snapped out of her. “You got some cunt holed up somewhere, you tell her to fuck herself. You got a problem with this family, you be man enough to work it out. But you’re not leaving.... I’d sooner see you dead. And I’m as good as my word on this, David McKenna. I’m as good as my word.”

“You can keep the house,” Daddy said. “And I’ll foot the bills to see you through. Do my part. But I got to get away for now.”

“You walk away and that’s it. You come back here and I’ll blow your balls off.”

Daddy sighed. “Don’t talk crazy, Kate.”

All this time I was looking at Andrew. What was to become of us?

The scrape of shoe leather against stairs sent us scurrying to our beds, quick, before Momma or Daddy could discover we had spied on them. Quick, before their shame turned into punishment we knew we deserved--two children unable to keep their parents’ love alive. Better to jump in bed, close our eyes and play possum.

The feeble creak of floorboards grew stronger as someone approached the bedroom. I peeked to see a thin lip of light glaze the bottom of the door, and the shadow of a pair of feet just behind. With a squeak, the knob turned, and I shut my eyes again. I knew it was Daddy. Floorboards squeaked as he moved towards our twin beds. Daddy bumped my dresser, and a picture frame fell. Andrew feigned a rustle, and I followed his lead with a shift of my own, my legs kicking my bedsheet into a ball. We were just two children sleeping through the night, trusting the world would arrive in the morning the same way we had left it the night before.

Daddy sat on my bed, leaned close, and his scent slipped inside me: Old Spice and stale beer and game after game of smoky pool. His rough lips brushed my forehead. Too soon, the mattress rose and he was gone. I dared to look then. Saw my father’s dirty tractor cap and denim-clad back, the mud on his work boots and the seat of his jeans. He leaned over Andrew now, who, like me, pretended to sleep. Daddy

stroked his hair. "Grow up strong," he whispered. I wished I could see his face, memorize the movement of his lips. Was Andrew as paralyzed as I was? Did he also want to reach out and tell Daddy not to go? I closed my eyes again as Daddy crept from the room. Neither Andrew nor I said a word as our father went down the hall. (Was he in his room now, packing clothes, taking things?) My ears latched onto Daddy's sound again when he walked back past our door downstairs to Momma. In hateful words she listed his crimes. Daddy said nothing. I heard the screen door again and the sound of boots tamping across the front porch. Buck yelped as something broke. Momma screamed Daddy's name. I clamped my eyes harder.

"David, you bastard!" Momma cried, out in the yard now, her voice coming through the window. "You are a piece of work. Go ahead and fuck whatever whore you got stashed away! Show her the kind of man you are--fathering three children you can't even take care of. You son of a bitch!"

"You sure you can count right?" Daddy's truck door slammed; the motor gunned.

I heard something hit the pickup's hood. Momma's hands? She kept on yelling but sounded sadder now. "I have never loved anyone but you!" Tires squealed and gravel crunched.

I could take it no longer. I opened my eyes and jumped onto Andrew's bed. His face was already pressed against the window screen watching Daddy's pickup leave. At the foot of the drive, Momma stood, arms wrapped around herself, slowly shaking. Andrew and I said nothing, not even when Beaman's dogs howled then fell silent, telling us that Daddy was finally gone for good.

After a while, Momma came back inside. The thought of rushing to her, comforting her somehow, passed through me, but when I heard her feet on the stairway I grew afraid and jumped back in my own bed. When her bedroom door closed with the familiar tumble of a lock sliding into place, I knew it was too late.

I rolled towards Andrew, who was sliding up the window screen. As he crawled onto the porch roof, I hopped over to his bed. Outside, the moon still hid behind slow, scuttling clouds. Andrew rose to his feet and stood. He walked to the edge and stretched out his arms.

I leaned my palms against the cool tin roof, wanting to go after him but too afraid. Andrew's calf muscles tensed as he rocked on his tiptoes, leaning, pushing. He will do it, I thought. He will leap. And I would watch him fall as his longing to fly gave way to gravity's hard truth.

"Andrew," I called. His arms dropped. His toes unflexed. He rocked back on his heels. He wheeled around, still dangerously close to the edge. So I reached to him, and he slowly did the same. Our hands clamped together, and I reeled him in. I searched my brother's face for what this meant, but Andrew's emotions were quicksand. He was only here because he knew I needed him.

The clouds lifted, and the yard below returned to form and substance: the bone-colored curve of the driveway, the cold glow of the garage, the overgrown apple tree that spilled knotted fruit our family failed to make use of. I pulled Andrew back inside.

Chapter 6: Monster Models

Andrew – Seneca, Fall 1982

Come September, Andrew spies on Jimmy Gilmore in seventh grade Music Appreciation. The class follows lunch on Andrew's schedule, and today, like every day, a scratchy symphony fills the air, emanating from frayed speakers by the teacher's desk. Talking is forbidden. The students are left to gain what culture they can as they sit in their seats and digest their food. Most fall asleep, drooling onto desktops. But a few manage to stay awake like Andrew and Jimmy: a girl with a frizzy perm reading a contraband paperback by Judy Blume. A couple of brainiacs studying science and math—subjects for which the county buys actual books. And, of course, the Lachlan twins, who sit at the double-desk ahead of Andrew's and block his view, working quietly and intently on *erasing* themselves, rubbing pencil nubs over their forearms until the skin rises up as pink as a scar. Daughters of a Pentecostal preacher, they wear long sleeves and cornflower skirts to cover marks on arms and calves. As scratchy strains of Beethoven fill the room, the twins rub crosses into their flesh, lines that loop their wrists like bracelets—abrading themselves as casually as other girls braid hair. Andrew hopes the two of them will hurry and disappear; they're hard to see past as he keeps watch on Jimmy, who brings an itch to Andrew's own skin as well, the disheveled, devilish sight of him leaving its own kind of mark.

Miss Fehlinger doesn't care about anything that goes on, hunched over her copy of *Good Housekeeping* magazine. She considers children some sort of contagion. Each hour when the bell rings and the students swarm past, she pulls out a spray bottle of diluted lemon juice and vinegar, and wipes desktops and door handles free of sticky germs. All the students know how crazy she is—over sixty but still living with her mother; making rich kids wear disposable gloves when giving lessons on her Steinway after school. She has a reputation for being as easy to torture as a crawdad in a plastic cup. But though she has given up any intention of teaching, Miss Fehlinger remains hunkered down, wearing away the days one album at a time, looking up only when noise breaks out or the record needle skips so bad she has to tape on a nickel to weigh down the arm.

Andrew is glad for the tranquility of the room. He sits in back at his twin desk alone, drawing to the music in his spiral-bound notebook. He is trying to replicate the wings of the music room mascot, a yellow canary named Tweety who fidgets in a cage nearby. In Andrew's drawings, the bird's wings rise from the back of a boy: Jimmy Gilmore.

Four rows ahead Jimmy sits, in the troublemaker chair next to Miss Fehlinger's desk, his legs sprawled sideways as he rests his head on his arm. Being held back a year has forced him to assume a role of swaggering bravado, and Andrew envies his bad-boy air. Since the start of the term Andrew has watched

Jimmy grow taller day by day, his voice deepening, his body surging, fast on his way to becoming a man. Andrew's come to admire Jimmy's brazen panache, like now, how Jimmy raises his head and clears his throat, speaking above the gravelly music. A few sleepy-eyed students perk up to watch as well, the way Jimmy, with a smirk, compliments Miss Fehlinger's outdated sense of style--aquamarine Jackie O dress and matching cat's-eye glasses. Jimmy Gilmore is something Andrew fears he will never be: tall, strong, capable of sparring with words or fists. Andrew is forced to be a "good boy" instead. His mother has picked up part-time clerical work at the Board of Education; she tells Andrew that his behavior reflects on her. If she is ever to make it onto the county substitute teacher list, he needs to study hard and behave himself. Make her proud. He should be studying his math for next period, not drawing pictures of Jimmy.

* * *

This fear of being found out is what makes Andrew's heart leap the day he comes upon Jimmy Gilmore alone in an empty school hallway on the second floor. It is during the short break after lunch and Andrew is walking from the bathroom to the playground outside, a wet paper towel pressed against his face to staunch one of the nosebleeds that plague him on a regular basis. Growing pains, Momma has told him, though Andrew thinks it's suspicious how they only started after she backhanded him last fall. He told himself that Momma was only angry because Daddy'd recently left, but the nosebleeds continued, and now he wonders if she has ruined him in a way nobody else can see.

But right at this moment it's the sight of Jimmy Gilmore crouched before the music room door that makes Andrew McKenna stop dead in his tracks. Unlike the angelic aliens Andrew draws in his notebook, the real-life Jimmy Gilmore has no psychic antenna on his head, but still he senses someone else's presence. His face jerks up with a look of fear that dissipates as soon as he sees it's Andrew and not a teacher. Jimmy turns back to breaking in, while Andrew tries to hold onto the look on Jimmy's face.

It's a long moment before Andrew realizes he is stupidly standing there. Mechanically he forces his legs to start up the hall while he attempts to cover as much of his face as possible with his paper towel.

"Stupid fuck," Jimmy growls low as Andrew passes.

These are the first words Jimmy Gilmore has ever said to him. Andrew swallows hard, his stomach muscles tensing in case of a punch. He feels his nose starting to trickle again. But Jimmy makes no move, only continues messing with Miss Fehlinger's door. He is talking to it, not to Andrew. In fact, Jimmy's face breaks into a grin as he looks up a second time. Mischief flickers in his eyes quiet and quick, like heat lightning.

"Man, you almost made me pop a vein," Jimmy laughs.

Andrew wants to dash out the fire door at then end of the hall. But Jimmy's presence holds him there. The older boy is not trying to break into the room after all. Andrew presses the cold paper towel hard against his nose, transfixed as he watches Jimmy tear open a cafeteria mayonnaise packet and squirt its contents into an oversized balloon.

“What’s that?”

Jimmy looks up at Andrew like his is mildly retarded. “A rubber, you jerk.” A crescent scar Andrew has never noticed before grazes Jimmy’s skull, and he wants to run his finger along it. “You’re dead if you tell anyone,” Jimmy warns.

“I won’t.”

“Wise man. Quick. See if anyone’s coming.”

Andrew goes to the fire door and stands on tiptoes to peek out the small glass window there. “Safe,” he tells him.

Jimmy stands and shoves the empty packet through the vent of a locker, then stretches the mouth of the rubber over the music room’s doorknob. With a lewd grin, he milks the sheath like a cow’s udder, and Andrew shrinks farther behind his damp paper towel. Jimmy wipes a trail of mayonnaise across the music room door, cleaning his fingers, then hooks his thumbs into his jeans and struts toward Andrew. Stretched across Jimmy’s frame is a washed-out T-shirt picturing Frankenstein’s monster. The older boy leans in close to study Andrew’s face. “What the hell’s wrong with you?”

“Bloody nose,” Andrew tells him. Up close, he can see one of Jimmy’s teeth is chipped.

Jimmy pulls the paper towel from Andrew’s face. He reaches out and runs his index finger down the side of Andrew’s nose, brushing just above his lips before pulling away. Jimmy looks at his finger: a daub of bright red. He licks it clean, then pokes Andrew hard in the chest.

“I’m a vampire,” he whispers. “You better not tell.”

Jimmy tosses the wadded paper towel at Andrew, who closes his eyes as it smacks him in the face.

Later, after recess, students swamp the hall outside music class, marveling at Jimmy’s condom surprise, eager to see Miss Fehlinger’s reaction. The metallic taste of blood still clings to the back of Andrew’s throat. The crowd hushes at the familiar click of Miss Fehlinger’s low-heels. Her rhinestone glasses flash as she parts the throng in her bright green dress, key extended. At the sight of the rubber, Miss Fehlinger nearly collapses. Jimmy shoots Andrew a look of sniggering satisfaction. Andrew’s face burns as Miss Fehlinger--mouth agape, eyes glazed--reels across the hall to Coach Wyatt’s health class. Students giggle and yelp in disgust. Jimmy bites his lip and pounds the flat of his hand against a locker. Rugged Coach Wyatt finally shows up, removes the rubber, and throws it in the trash. “Who is responsible?” he shouts, glaring from kid to kid. Old Miss Fehlinger starts to cry.

Andrew looks at Jimmy laughing and says not a word.

* * *

Afterward, each time Andrew looks at Miss Fehlinger’s new can of industrial-strength Lysol and the box of disposable medical gloves she now keeps on her desk, he steals a glance at Jimmy and feels the ghost-poke of his finger. The aliens in his notebooks have batwings now, and Andrew has begun drawing old Universal Studios monsters that he quietly tears out and passes Jimmy’s way. Frankenstein’s monster

battling it out against the Wolfman, Dracula transforming into a vampire bat--and always, at Jimmy's insistence, a damsel in distress fainting in a nightgown that barely covers her breasts. "More guts," Jimmy writes on the reverse of the pages he slides back to Andrew. "Bigger fangs." "Give the Bride of Frankenstein some monster tits."

In return, Jimmy takes Andrew under his vampire-batwing. His family lives out past Andrew's, so later after school Jimmy has his older brother Wayne give Andrew a lift. Though the weather's cool now and they have to wear jackets, Andrew likes sitting across from Jimmy on the wheel well in the back of Wayne's truck. Through the cab window, beyond the empty gun rack, Andrew studies the back of Wayne's brush cut. The sight of Wayne's arm draped casually across the seatback reminds Andrew of his father. Enough time has gone by. The man is never coming home.

Wayne brings the truck to a halt at the foot of Andrew's hollow. His turnoff winds up the hillside past a low, uncut field, the start of Beaman's property line. No one will be home, Andrew realizes. This week the Board of Education finally allowed Momma to pick up some substitute teaching work over in Harman half an hour away. And Allison's started going to Grandma Rose's after school to help take care of their baby sister there. Momma will have to pick the two of them up; no one will be home for an hour or more.

Andrew swings a leg over the truck's tailgate and turns to Jimmy. Now, he decides, is the time to show his new friend what he has bought for him. "Want to come up?" Andrew asks, trying to keep his voice casual and even. "I got some monster models we can put together."

Jimmy shrugs, then smiles, rising to follow.

* * *

In the room he now shares with his sister, Andrew lies atop his bed with the Creature from the Black Lagoon's head in his mouth, watching Jimmy piece together the amphibian's body. A massacre of plastic model limbs lie scattered before Jimmy on the chipped surface of Andrew's desk. Now and then Jimmy pauses to take a whiff of model glue before passing the bottle on to Andrew, the glue's scent sharp and jagged in Andrew's nostrils each time he draws it deep into his lungs. After each hit, Andrew sucks harder on the Creature's head, running his tongue over the finned intricacies of the monster's glow-in-the-dark skull.

Jimmy looks up. "What the fuck you doing?" He swears as well as Momma, cusswords shot with effortless aim.

Andrew flinches from their BB impact, spits the Creature's head into his hand. "Nothing." Andrew's feels woozy. Behind his sister's taped-up posters, the walls of the room seem to slightly shift.

"Gimme that," Jimmy demands, and Andrew forks over the Creature's head.

Jimmy rubs the wet plastic against his shirt. "Christ," he groans.

Andrew rolls on his side to better stare at Jimmy as hunches over the model on the desk and continues to work. Perspiration glistens off the nape of Jimmy's neck where his hair tapers to a feather point. Jimmy has told Andrew how he is the youngest of six brothers--three already gone from home, the other two struggling through high school with girls on their minds. Jimmy's let it leak how the ones who remain have no patience left over for their *hey-guys-wait-up* kid brother. Don't they see how cool Jimmy is, how strong and sure of himself? Andrew knows it is only by default that he has managed this tenuous grip on his new friend. And he knows, too, that he is desperate for anything that will maintain it.

Like these models he picked up while accompanying Momma on one of her weekly yard sale jaunts. A bunch of 4-Hers were holding a flea-market carnival to fight muscular dystrophy. While Allison ran off to the face-painting stand, Andrew had followed Momma over to the sale. Old clothes and ancient appliances covered a card table. Picnic benches were stacked with Milton Bradley games and jigsaw puzzles. Andrew was scouting for old comics when he spied something better, a pile of '60s vintage Aurora models: Creature from the Black Lagoon, Frankenstein's Monster, King Kong and Dracula--kits half-finished or never started. The 4-H leader minding the moneybox told Andrew's mother they had been some kid's who'd never come back from Vietnam. Andrew didn't care; the Bride of Frankenstein model had never even been opened. Elsa Lancaster lay strapped to a board, her lightning bolt hair-do sizzling straight up. Though Momma shook her head at such foolishness, she held her tongue as Andrew--armed with his money from mowing Grandma Rose's lawn all summer--bought out the whole under-priced collection.

How could Jimmy Gilmore ever resist such temptation?

* * *

And so their fall comes to this: the two boys meeting every few days after school to work side by side as they complete first Dracula's Dragster and The Wolfman's Wagon, then struggle over The Munsters' complicated diorama. One day in late October Jimmy is given permission to stay for supper. The smell of fried chicken and biscuits trails up through the house from where Allison busies herself in the kitchen below, having taken responsibility for supper ever since the new baby was born. This past August, when Elizabeth finally came, Grandma Rose stayed in their house until Momma could get back on her feet. Andrew's mother was sad then, crying in her room all day, unwilling to nurse her new little girl so that their grandmother had to buy formula and teach Andrew and his sister how to mix it up, warm a bottle, test a dribble on their wrists. Eventually Momma came around, started nursing the baby--though Allison refused to altogether give up bottle-feeding her tiny charge.

Lately, Momma's acted better. Tonight, as they wait for dinner, Jimmy sits fully welcomed beside Andrew, hunched over his desk, working hard on their latest creation, Frankenstein's Monster. Andrew savors the luxury of being close to Jimmy. Never mind that outside an almost-Halloween wind rises; the water pipe rattle of Momma showering in the bathroom is nearly enough to drown the sound. And anyway,

Andrew and Jimmy's newest monster model creation deserves to be made on a night like this—windy outside, spooky branches slapping the window glass. Safe next to Jimmy, his nose full of glue fumes, Andrew feels a current crackling between them, as powerful as anything cooked up in Dr. Frankenstein's lab.

But then a loud crash and the baby's cry come from a room down the hall. Andrew spits out the paintbrush he was chewing on. He is halfway to his feet when a blur of flesh streaks past the open door. Can that really be Momma? Andrew lopes forward, stepping on model parts strewn across the floor. Jimmy follows close behind.

Shower water trails the hall carpet, a line from the bathroom to the nursery's open door. Andrew races to that far room, the one that used to be his. There he finds Momma lifting his wailing sister from her crib, her baby blanket full of glass shards, Elizabeth's tiny fist curled like an apricot around an alphabet mobile's tangled strings. Andrew looks up at the exposed ceiling fixture where the milk glass lampshade and attached mobile have come unmoored.

Momma lifts Elizabeth toward the light, and when she sees the baby is unscathed, she cradles the infant against her breast. The child's mouth finds its familiar anchor; the baby hushes and begins to nurse. Momma's face softens as his sister's fist unclenches. The mobile falls to the floor in a tangle of ABC shapes. The whole world goes silent except for the baby's soft suckling.

Never before has Andrew seen his mother naked like this--soft, pink, caught in rare comfort. Her shock of auburn pubic hair startles him. But not even the harsh light of the bare bulb overhead reveals any true complaint in her flesh. For a long moment, she isn't Andrew's mother at all, but a girl, too young to have such a child. Her only flaw, as far as Andrew can see, is the scar across her belly from where the doctor cut him out of her years before.

"Holy shit!" Jimmy finally cries.

Momma jumps like she's seen a snake. As her eyes take in the boys, Andrew backs up, knots Jimmy's sleeve in his fist and pulls him down the hall, back to the bedroom where Andrew slams the door.

"Christ almighty," Jimmy laughs, falling down on Allison's bed.

"Shut up," Andrew tells him.

"Your mom's got major udders." He holds up two stuffed animals like a pair of tits.

"Shut up," Andrew repeats, locking the door.

"She ever let you suck on 'em like that?"

The Wolfman sits on the floor, and Andrew kicks him hard against the baseboard of the wall.

"Don't get sore," Jimmy chides, sandwiching the animals beneath his head. "I wish I had a mom like that. You got it made, living in a house full of girls. You're king, man." He scratches his armpit, a smug grin on his face. "Let's go back in there," he teases. "I need another eyeful."

From the desk Andrew pick up the torso of Frankenstein's Monster and hurls it at Jimmy's head. He ducks, and the model piece crashes against one of Allison's magazine posters—Lando Calrissian from *The Empire Strikes Back*. Shards of plastic shower the bed.

“Chill,” Jimmy commands.

Andrew's eyes cut into him like light sabers. In the baby's room, he can hear Momma starting to slam things. Little Elizabeth has begun to cry. Andrew tells Jimmy he had better go.

* * *

Momma gives Andrew the cold shoulder but never mentions the streaking incident. Andrew wonders why he's lucked out, if she's just too embarrassed to punish him. Jimmy sure mentions it. At school the next day, he rhapsodizes about Andrew's mother's tits on the playground after lunch. Later, when Jimmy's brother drops Andrew off at the foot of his hollow, Jimmy starts to follow until Andrew turns and lays his hand on his chest. “Not today,” he says.

For weeks Andrew puts Jimmy off, afraid of setting off his mother, until finally Jimmy's needling gets so bad that Andrew has no choice but to invite him over again. Andrew's careful, waiting for a day when Momma has a meeting after school at a place so far up the valley Andrew doubts she'll get home until well after dark. A day when Allison's gone too, off at Grandma Rose's with little Elizabeth, learning to cook new dishes for her upcoming Thanksgiving menu. That's how he finds himself alone again in his room with Jimmy, one cold afternoon in the middle of November.

Jimmy has converted Andrew's dresser top into a bar and is making Purple Jesuses--grape Kool-Aid and alcohol gradually siphoned from every bottle of booze Jimmy can find, a mixture he swirls together with a teaspoon and pours over ice into jelly jar glasses. He hands Andrew his drink, and Andrew stares at the concoction, noting aloud its chemical smell. Like a freshly mimeographed quiz sheet, he decides. Under Jimmy's gaze, he dares a mouthful. The Purple Jesus tastes like the world's worst cough medicine. Though he tries not to, Andrew can't help but gag.

“You'll learn,” Jimmy laughs. He slaps Andrew's back and chugs from a glass of his own.

Andrew presses the jelly jar to his lips and tries again. The liquor charges through his body, radioactive, like the serum Dr. Jekyll takes to transform into Mr. Hyde. A raw tingle shivers underneath his skin. He feels his old self slough away, someone new emerging.

Jimmy raps his knuckles on the wall separating Andrew's room from the bathroom. “Ain't too thick,” Jimmy says. “You could drill a spy hole for when she showers, cover it with one of your sister's pin-ups.”

Andrew's eyes stay focused on the pile of broken models laid before him on the desk. “Hand me the Wolfman's arm,” he says. The model broke when he kicked it, and he's had a hard time fixing it.

“We could watch her shave,” Jimmy suggests. “Wayne says women shave their pussies into tight triangles so their curlicues don't show at the beach.”

“There’s no beaches in West Virginia, Jimmy.”

“But there’s *lots* of pussies!” Jimmy pours himself another Purple Jesus from the Kool-Aid pitcher.

“Please hand me that arm.”

Jimmy flicks Andrew the piece. “You ever *see* a pussy, Andrew?”

They both know his recent sighting of his mother’s doesn’t count. “No,” Andrew blushes.

“Of course not. The only pussy you ever see is the one staring back from the mirror.”

“Lay off,” Andrew tells him.

“Oh, lighten up.” Jimmy stretches himself out on Andrew’s bed, his long legs dangling over the edge.

Andrew tries wedging together the Wolfman’s splintered pieces, but already the combination of glue fumes and alcohol is giving the whole world a fuzzy edge. He drops his brush in frustration and takes another sip. “Why do they call these ‘Purple Jesuses’?”

Jimmy laughs and sticks out his tongue, which has turned a purplish hue from the mix. He wipes the corner of his mouth, reaches out and runs a finger across Andrew’s forehead like a benediction. “‘Cause that’s what you’ll be saying when you’re hung over tomorrow.” He laughs drunkenly. “‘Oh Jesus! Oh Jesus!’”

Buck wanders in, pokes his nose around curiously--first inside one of Andrew’s discarded sneakers, then over to the bed where he sniffs Jimmy’s crotch. Anymore, the only cold days Andrew’s able to let the dog inside are the ones when Momma’s not around to see. Jimmy coats the inside of a paper bag with model glue and holds it over Buck’s snout. The dog seems stunned.

Andrew’s about to tell Jimmy to knock it off when he hears Momma’s Rambler rattle up the road. Andrew and Jimmy scramble to stash the booze, to shepherd Buck to the yard, to race back upstairs and feign innocence. When Momma comes in, she makes a beeline for Andrew’s room, opening up the door without even a knock. She glances from Andrew to Jimmy, and then back again, suspicious.

“You neglected to burn the trash,” Momma tells Andrew, the look in her eyes as sharp as scissors. Her eyes cut over to Jimmy. “You, young man, had better head home.”

After he’s gone, Momma tells Andrew she doesn’t care for boys like Jimmy. She sits on the bed where Andrew’s friend lay and smokes a cigarette as she explains why the Gilmores are trash. “Just look where they live--up Black Duck Road, with the JD farm on one side and the county dump on the other. One of his brothers even failed out of Vo-Tech.” Momma pats the bed until Andrew lies down beside her. She strokes his hair like she did when he was small. Allison and the baby are still at Grandma’s, she tells him. He is all she has to hold onto right now, her little boy, her little man. “I don’t think it’s a good idea that Jimmy comes around anymore,” she says, soft-pedaling the verdict. Andrew wants to pull away. But another part of him wants to stay, lulled by the rare gentleness of her touch. “Their father’s nothing but a drunk,” Momma whispers. “Their mother, too. I’ve seen her come to church pickled on a Sunday

morning.” Momma’s fingers grow slow as they brush Andrew’s skull. Andrew leans into her, smells her perfume. She just wants someone to listen to her after a long day. “I smelled that woman’s breath once and thought I’d faint.” Momma lets out a tired laugh. “Only thing she ever passed onto her boys was fetal alcohol syndrome. You need someone else to pal around with.” Andrew wants to tell Momma that they too live up a dirt road, in a house with a front porch about to fall off and a dog chained in the yard scratching up dust. They are the ones whose Daddy ran off. But if he said those words, the comfort of Momma’s fingers in his hair would end, she’d push him away or maybe even backhand him. She’d tell him, *We may have sprung from trash, but by God, we’re climbing out.* So Andrew says nothing, having grown too fond of hanging onto his teeth. He lies in her arms and lets himself be taken in by her touch and the effects of Jimmy’s booze. A little boy, a little man, falling asleep in his mother’s arms.

Chapter 7: Home Movies

The year I turned eleven, autumn teased us with an Indian summer, warm days of waning sun followed by crisp, clear evenings. Then almost overnight the leaves along the mountainside turned like traffic lights from green to yellow to red. The good weather stopped as the thermometer on our back porch sank steadily one day to the next, a West Virginia winter coming premature and hard upon our hollow. Two feet of snow covered the ground Thanksgiving morning when I--barely more than eleven but wanting so badly to be grown up--pulled my first roasted turkey from Momma's unreliable electric oven.

Of course, Grandma Rose hovered nearby, calling all the shots, but taking pains to come off merely as my coach. She had won the turkey from a radio call-in but felt too worn out to cook it, so that job fell to me. In the months since my father deserted our family, she had been extra nice, teaching my friend Janet Lambetti and me how to cook. And once Elizabeth was born and Momma felt good enough to go back to work typing reports for the Board of Education, Janet and I spent afternoons after school sweating over Grandma's stovetop, the new baby snoozing beside us in her car seat set next to the screen door. Even when Janet and I did things wrong Grandma found a way to sing our praises or joke past our mistakes, a side of her I never saw when Momma was around. Too much pucker in the lemonade we wanted to sell? *Allison, see how fast you can fetch some mint and stevia from the herb patch out back.* Too much sugar in the blackberry cobbler we struggled to perfect? *Why girls, it's so sweet you two must've kissed each berry right as you picked 'em. Better cut the taste with some vanilla ice cream!* By the time the first frost came, Janet and I were not only five pounds heavier, we were expert babysitters and accomplished cooks to boot. Come Thanksgiving, Grandma trusted me enough not to double-check my stuffing or follow up my basting with a squirt of her own as Momma might have done. Instead, having told me what to do, she left me free to do it. I took charge of the turkey while she sat at the table working a *TV Guide* crossword puzzle and keeping an eye on Elizabeth in her bassinet.

"You're not like your mother at all, Allison," Grandma remarked as I set to work heating up the side dishes the two of us had prepared the night before. "You're at home in the kitchen," Grandma told me. "God bless your mother, but she could burn water."

I bit my lip to keep from smiling.

I was scooping a dollop of sour cream into the mashed potatoes when Momma burst through the backdoor, my brother close on her heels, lugging a Christmas tree. Andrew leaned it against the bassinet to remove his wet toboggan cap. As he brushed the snow from his shoulders, I noticed his coat and jeans were covered with needles and sap. His eyes were wet. Blood trailed from his nose.

"What happened?" I asked, fearing Momma had backhanded him for talking smart.

"Momma tried to kill me," Andrew said, grabbing a paper towel to press against his nose.

“You give me too much credit,” Momma replied. She laid down her hacksaw and took off her snowy coat. She fluffed her red hair with her fingers, reached down into the bassinet to check Elizabeth’s diaper. “Wet,” Momma said. She picked up my sister and headed into the living room, shooting me a sharp look as she passed. “She’d float away if it weren’t for me.”

I didn’t say a word about the trail of water puddling off Momma’s boots as she marched across the kitchen.

Andrew sunk into the chair next to Grandma to kick off his. I took him some hot water and a packet of cocoa. He stirred the powder into his mug as he told us what happened. “From here to Cheat River, the mountain’s covered with pine trees. But can she be happy with just any old one? No sir.” Andrew told us how Momma marched him all the way up the ridge, up to where she the sunlight evened out the branches. But even that wasn’t good enough, Andrew said. He claimed she made him climb up a thirty foot pine just to lop off the top eight feet. Grandma cracked a smile at Andrew’s story, and I suppressed an urge to do the same.

“I had to hold on for dear life,” Andrew said. “The wind’s blowing, the tree’s swaying. And like an idiot I’m saw through the same wood I’m holding onto--”

“Plastic,” Grandma chuckled, slapping her veined hand against the kitchen tabletop. “That’s why I always decorate a plastic Christmas tree.”

Andrew went on, describing how he finally cut deep enough for the treetop to snap. He had tried to tether it to another branch, but with the wind on that ridge, the treetop had a mind of its own. Down it went, and Andrew along with it. “Pine tree or saw blade, I figured I’d be impaled by one or the other. But the tree sap made me sticky enough the lower branches broke my fall.”

Grandma and I laughed at Andrew’s wild story. I suddenly felt that in spite of Daddy’s absence we would somehow manage to survive this holiday season after all. I picked up my bowl and started mashing potatoes, feeling happy.

Momma came returned to drop a diaper in the trashcan. She scooted me off the stepping stool I used to reach the pots on the back stove, then shoved Elizabeth into my arms so she could check what I was doing. Grandma rose to guard my potato bowl on the counter, peering at Momma overtop her glasses, daring her to add even a pinch of salt. “We’re doing fine,” Grandma said.

“Whatever that boy’s telling you,” Momma said, “it wouldn’t have happened if he knew how to handle a saw better.” She raised the lid of one pot after another.

“Yeah,” Andrew said, slurping down the rest of his cocoa, “and you wouldn’t be standing here if I could aim a falling tree better.” He balled up his bloody paper towel and tossed it in the trash.

“Stifle it, young man, if you know what’s good for you.” Momma tasted the collard greens on the back burner. “Not enough vinegar,” she announced, and before Grandma or I could stop her, she had poured in enough vinegar to pickle a jar of pigs’ feet.

“Katherine Marie,” Grandma Rose shouted, “disarm yourself!”

Momma put down the bottle and snatched the baby back from my arms. “Fine. I’ll leave you two be.” She placed Elizabeth back in her bassinet. “Andrew, that tree’s not going to walk its way into its stand all by itself. Hop to it.”

“Aye, aye, cap’n.” Andrew rose, picked up the tree and followed Momma into the living room.

Grandma, Elizabeth and I were left to ourselves in the kitchen. When the baby started to whine, I slipped her a pacifier. Then I got to work on my green beans and biscuits. The kitchen grew rich with the smell of my handiwork and the goodwill of Grandma’s guidance. When she told me she’d never seen a young girl work so hard, I beamed with pride enough that I nearly dropped the dish of broccoli I was squeezing onto the back of the stove. But I saved it, and the gas jet whooshed with blue fire as I turned up the heat.

There was just time enough for a quick phone call for me to wish my friend Janet Lambetti a happy Thanksgiving and to brag about how well I’d done. But Grandma admonished me the moment I picked up the receiver, telling me not to stay on the phone too long--that I had better keep an eye on my meal now that timing was crucial. I crossed my heart and dialed Janet’s number while Grandma started to fuss over the baby.

I hadn’t spent much time with Janet in a while. Afternoons lately had been full of shopping for groceries or shoveling snow. And Janet had missed school the day before. I figured she was sick, but had been too busy to think to check on her.

Janet’s mother answered the phone. “Oh, God, you didn’t hear,” she said. Her voice caught in her throat, a choked-back sob that grew suddenly distant. I heard the soft thump of her phone receiver being laid down. A moment later, someone else picked up the phone, a man who said he was Janet’s uncle. He wanted to talk to my mother. I carried the receiver to Grandma Rose instead. She started to tell me she needed neither the phone nor my foolishness, but when she saw the worry in my eyes her voice fell silent. Slowly she lifted the receiver to her ear. A chill circulated inside me as I sank into a chair and listened to Grandma Rose absorb news so awful a stranger had been afraid to tell it to a child.

When Grandma finally hung up, she sat down beside me and broke the news I already had realized. Janet Lambetti was dead. So too were her younger brother and father. All dead since yesterday morning. Grandma explained how Janet and her brother had been staying at their father’s place outside Harmon. And like every other morning that he had the kids, Mr. Lambetti got up extra early to drive them to the bus stop a few miles away. As Grandma continued to speak, I pictured it in my mind: Mr. Lambetti standing in a snowy field coaxing to life his rust-bottomed car. In the backseat sat Janet and her brother Wesley, the two of them bundled and sleepy-eyed. Their bus stop was at a gas station a few miles away. Radio reception was no good on the drive down the mountain, so they missed the announcement about the two-hour school delay. That’s why they all fell asleep waiting in the car. That’s how the exhaust fumes got them, stealing up

through the corroded floor, the car muffler pressed against an icy drift. The school bus eventually came and went, the driver paying no heed to the fogged Pontiac Lemans. Grandma Rose told me how around 10:30 the station owner knocked on the car window and made the discovery: the three of them slumped inside the poison-filled car.

I did not cry as Grandma's words played out in my mind. . Instead, I let her do the crying for me. For a long time she held me tight to her chest as sobs shook her body. I knew she was crying less for poor Janet than she was for me--her little granddaughter who had lost her friend--and I let her grief steel me against any grief of my own. When bile rose in my throat I swallowed it down, breathed in hard the smells of the kitchen. That's when I noticed that smoke singed the air. I lifted my head from Grandma's chest to see the splash of pots bubbling on the stove. I broke free and hurried to turn everything off, to take care in the kitchen like she had taught Janet and me.

* * *

Janet Lambetti's funeral was the first real one I ever attended. As I stood in line beside Momma and Andrew, waiting for our turn, I thought how hapless we mourners looked, awkward in our rubber boots, half frozen despite thick coats. Only those three bodies laid out up front, dressed in their Sunday best, their flesh painted pink, seemed warm among us: Mr. Lambetti, barrel-chested in his sport coat, his stubble shaved and his hair trimmed neat. Wesley, his suit jacket a bird-egg blue, his cupped hands curling around an invisible baseball bat. And Janet, in white lace and looking forlorn, as if she had merely missed a ride to a birthday party. I couldn't believe someone my own age could die.

We inched to the front of the condolence line. Janet's mother accepted Momma's kind words with a tired smile. I reached out to touch Mrs. Lambetti's arm, wanting to tell her how sorry I was. I wanted to tell her how I would hold onto Janet's memory the same way I had held Janet's hand the summer before those afternoons when the two of us walked to the movies and talked of boys. But the words got lost in my throat. Janet's mother seemed to understand this as she leaned down to smile at me, her lips chapped beneath fading pink lipstick. She did not cry as she touched my chin and told me how pretty I was. She left the easy remedy of tears to the rest of those gathered in the room. She didn't cry, so I didn't either.

* * *

My baby sister's first Christmas was a haunted time. Yet by Christmas Eve a tree stood before our living room window the same as every other year, twinkling with the colored bulbs Momma called fairy lights. We had ended up using Grandma's plastic tree after all. Once we had learned about poor Janet, none of us felt like decorating the tree Andrew and Momma had cut down, so day after day it had slumped in its stand on the back porch shedding needles. On Christmas Eve, Andrew finally assembled the plastic one, and together the two of us decorated it with arts-and-crafts decorations we had made over the years, crude combinations of Popsicle sticks and yarn, wrinkle-edged snowflakes cut from construction paper. Come Christmas morning, Andrew and I rode out our usual disappointment at not getting what we wanted but

what Momma thought we needed. We had grown used to it. And truth was, I wasn't sure what I wanted anyway. The year before, I had wanted a new Barbie, but made do with knock-off from the Dollar Store. Now, with a new baby around, I didn't need such things. If anything, I wanted a record player and some 45s, maybe some grown-up teenage fashions--certainly not the thrift shop school clothes Momma had picked out. But she had done her best, I decided, and anyway, what I wanted most of all she couldn't give me.

For as long as I could remember, Christmas had been our family's day for showing old McKenna home movies on the wall across from the couch, Daddy manning the projector while the rest of us sat eating popcorn and candy, laughing together like a family on TV. Huddled around the projector's bright beam, all our moods would grow soft and warm. Momma would relax into the crook of Daddy's arm, snuggle her feet inside his. Year after year, the one present Andrew and I had always been able to count on was that happy time in front of the projector, laughing at old hair-dos and hammy smiles, and this year we craved it more than ever. So Momma shouldn't have been surprised when, after opening our presents, Andrew offered to fetch Daddy's old eight-millimeter projector from the attic. We should have known better. Momma's mood soured. She told Andrew we were through with that.

If Momma couldn't bear the memory of our father, we couldn't bear to let Christmas pass without him, even if all we had left were washed-out images spilling from a rickety projector. When Grandma Rose stopped by I thought about asking her to help us sway Momma, but before I could say a word, she pressed a red-bowed box of Florida oranges in my hands and told me she was late for dinner at her sister's. Watching her drive off, I felt abandoned yet again.

Later, when Momma lay napping with the baby on the couch, Andrew and I stole to the attic where we dug out the old projector and a stack of silver film canisters. While Andrew set up the equipment, I thumbtacked an old bedsheet to the wall. Soon Andrew flipped a switch and a tiny motor whirred. History unwound before us in grainy black and white. In silent conspiracy, we watched the images flood the bedsheet as the sluggish projector clicked like a cicada shedding its shell.

Our parents' wedding. Did Andrew choose that reel on purpose?

First, Momma before the ceremony, the camera wobbling in a bridesmaid's shaky grip. Grandma Rose fixes baby's breath in her daughter's hair, grins, mouths, *Are you sure about this?* My mother does not look sure, but she nods *yes* nonetheless--smiles, waves at the camera, fusses over make-up. She is at a point beyond advice, a moment poised, ready to happen, beautiful in her white lace dress and gauzy veil. Out on the wet church steps, Daddy mugs with Lew Pingley, his groomsman--the sky gray, the church gray, even their very movements a blend of white and black as they drink a toast from a bottle pulled from Daddy's pocket. The ceremony slips by--a streaky apparition, overexposed, washed away in tricky complications of light. Spliced footage takes over. Our parents rush down church steps, pelted by rice and good intentions, the handful of well wishers mirrored in sidewalk puddles from a December drizzle that's

begun to fall. My mother's skin is a pitcher of cream age has not yet begun to curdle, my father handsome and sporty in his nice suit and Elvis sideburns. Momma wants to hurry; the rain is melting her upswept hair-do. But someone urges Daddy to grip his new bride and pose for a picture. The trapped look on Momma's face darts behind an improvised smile. Daddy grins, monkeys for the camera, waves goodbye. At his wrist, his hand swings, a well-oiled hinge. Finally, together my parents hurry to their finned auto, decorated with soaped announcements that blur in the rain as they wheel down the wintry street, flashing headlights and trailing cans.

All too soon the film ran out. Andrew began to thread on another reel, but suddenly Momma called from downstairs, a drill sergeant bark that ordered us to get down there quick. We worked double-time shutting the projector off and hiding it beneath a blanket. As my feet hit the attic stairs, I heard Momma's voice slip into the gentler tone she used when company came calling. Turning the bend in the hall, I heard another woman's voice saying *yes* to Momma's offer of coffee and gingersnaps. I knew that voice. So I wasn't surprised when Andrew and I hit the landing at the foot of the stairs to find Janet Lambetti's mother hanging her coat on the rack inside the door. At Mrs. Lambetti's feet sat a plastic garbage bag filled with the reds and greens of Christmas wrap.

A strained silence asserted itself in our living room. Finally Elizabeth squealed in her bassinet and Momma looked almost relieved as she lifted the baby and put a pacifier in her mouth. Momma forced herself to make small talk with Mrs. Lambetti awhile. Finally Mrs. Lambetti set her coffee cup down and folded her hands. "I suppose I should tell you why I've come." Andrew and I stopped squirming as she reached down and pulled a present from the bag.

In a slow, careful voice Mrs. Lambetti explained how she had bought these gifts over the last six months, anytime something caught her eye or went on sale. A habit of hers, she explained, a way to avoid the lines later on. She handed a box to Andrew and then one to me. Mrs. Lambetti glanced at my mother. "I hope you don't mind."

Momma swallowed hard, dropped her eyes and pretended to fret over the baby. She shook her head no, she didn't mind. The reindeer wrapping paper on the box Mrs. Lambetti gave me had a ragged white spot from where a tag had been torn off.

Despite the draft from the front door, beads of sweat had broken out upon Mrs. Lambetti's brow, and she daubed at them with her tissue. "I thought about taking everything down to the Good Samaritan Center," she continued, "giving everything to needy kids." She smiled at me. "And then I remembered how pretty you looked at the funeral home, Allison, how much Janet liked you. So I thought I would give them to you kids instead."

I looked down at the package in my hands. I wanted to run from the room but couldn't. Slowly my fingers sliced through the shiny paper as Mrs. Lambetti began to unload armfuls of presents--a pile for

Andrew, a pile for me. Never in my life had I so slowly unwrapped a Christmas gift. Momma must have known I wanted to bolt; she reached her leg over and prodded me until I moved closer to the pile.

Beside me, Andrew tore through his presents with unsentimental abandon, exclaiming good-naturedly over each Star Wars action figure, smiling politely over the Matchbox Cars I knew he didn't care for. Slowly I laid out the stack of pretty boxes before me. The ghost eyes of Janet watched me open her toys one by one: Colorforms, Nancy Drew Mysteries, even the Barbie doll my own mother had not been able to afford the year before. Santa had an awful way of making dreams come true.

I pulled the doll from the box and ran my finger over her face. I looked up at Momma holding Elizabeth in her arms. I wanted to grab my sister and run. But there was more to open, boxes full of sweaters and jeans my friend would have worn to school come the new year. At Momma's prompting, I held a lavender dress up to my chest. "Go slip it on in the kitchen," she urged, nudging me once more with her foot. Andrew avoided my eyes as I passed; Janet's brother had been several years his junior, and it was clear from the first opened T-shirt that none of the dead boy's clothes would fit him. My ears burned as I left the room.

In the kitchen, I slipped out of my jeans and sweatshirt and into the fancy dress meant for Janet. The fabric was smooth and soft, but still it made my skin itch. In the other room, Momma tried to fill the awkwardness that hung in the air, telling Mrs. Lambetti how much she appreciated her gesture, how all these extra toys would take the burden off needing to buy so much for our birthdays come summer. I sucked in my breath to make the buttons on Janet's dress fasten, feeling sad and stupid inside clothes that were too small for me as well. The gingersnaps Momma had forgotten to take in sat in an open box on the table. I snatched a handful and stuffed myself to keep from crying.

Then Momma called my name. I wiped the crumbs from my chest and hurried to rejoin them. Back in the living room, Momma made me model the dress, pirouetting like Miss America in the evening gown competition. "How pretty you look," Mrs. Lambetti said. And it was at that moment I noticed Mrs. Lambetti was finally crying. She was smiling and crying and looking at me.

Chapter 8: Jimmy Gilmore

Andrew – Seneca, Spring 1983

All year at school, Jimmy Gilmore has been Andrew's best-kept secret. Andrew guards him well, though Jimmy barely talks to him, asks Andrew not to tell anyone about his brother giving them rides home in his truck. Jimmy's got a tough guy reputation to keep, doesn't need a squirt like Andrew revealing his softer side. So Andrew leaves him be on the playground and stands lonesome against the hurricane-wire fence, watching Jimmy and nine other boys play a game of pick-up basketball on the middle school's uneven blacktop court.

Shirts versus Skins. Jimmy plays on Ricky Pierce's team today, the boy who held Andrew's head underwater last summer at Open Swim. They move in a bare-chested blur among their teammates and opposing players, working up a healthy sweat on this cool, sunny day in late April. Andrew watches the way their bodies move as they run and twist, raising sinewy arms to throw or block the ball, their skin already golden and gleaming despite the earliness of the season. The Shirts part the Skins' forward guards as Sam Burnside, the Shirts' high scorer, brings the ball up the center of the court. Loping flank to flank, Ricky and Jimmy close in tight around him. Sam tries to pass but Ricky dives in, arm uncoiling to steal the ball. Ricky snakes through the throng of boys, hotdogging past the opposing center toward the Shirts' net, refusing to pass the ball when the guards close in, refusing to pass even when Jimmy shouts he's wide open.

Jimmy's dark hair is damp, and sweat draws a river of reflected light down his spine each time he shifts his body. Looking at him is like looking at the sun, and Andrew has to turn away, look to the other boys. And that's when he sees it. A flash of hands, a lurch of bodies. Ricky and Sam collide, fall hard against the rough asphalt, becoming a tangle of elbows and knees as they mutter *fuck* and *damn*, voices low so teachers can't hear. Andrew watches them squirm and shove each other as they pull themselves apart and rise to their feet.

"You fouled me, you pussy," Ricky snaps at Sam. "I get a shot."

"You liar. I never touched you." He massages his side with his fingers. "*You* ran over *me*, Speedy Gonzales."

"No way, faggot," Ricky counters. "You practically felt me up." He stoops to pick up the ball. "Who the hell do you think I am? Your Mom at a truck stop last Saturday night?"

"Fuck you, Ricky."

And that's when Jimmy Gilmore steps between the two older boys, pushing them apart, his tongue wetting his lower lip as he tries to think of what to say. "Guys, come on. You want 'em to bust up our

game?" They argue awhile longer, neither Ricky nor Sam backing down. Andrew watches Jimmy's peacekeeping efforts from afar as he gently bounces his weight against the loose sag of the hurricane-wire fence. He hears Jimmy tell his friends this grudge match can only be settled by an outside observer.

"Who?" Ricky and Sam both want to know.

Jimmy points at Andrew.

Andrew swallows hard.

He feels his face go red. What does Jimmy want from him? To tell the truth? To lie? Andrew bites his lip as his mind flips backwards in time, to the sight of Sam swooping in, blocking Ricky's approach to the basket. To Ricky's elbow shooting out in a dirty spike towards Sam's belly. Ricky's own momentum had sent him toppling over the other boy. Should Andrew tell all that, let Ricky's cocksure bravado cost Jimmy and the other Skins a free shot, a couple of points, maybe even the game?

"Who fouled who?" Jimmy asks, his eyes squinting in the sun, hard to read.

Andrew takes a deep breath and speaks. "Ricky elbowed Sam. I saw it."

"Fuck!" cries Ricky.

"Yes!" smiles Sam.

Jimmy wipes the sweat from his eyes, turns away from Andrew, his expression inscrutable.

"He's wrong," says Ricky. "I'm taking my shot." He moves into position and bounces the ball--once, twice--against the court. Sam and the other Shirts cry *no way, uh-uh*. Tension rises up from the players like a bad smell, like the fart Ricky let loose with mischievous glee the time Andrew had to stand behind him in lunch line. A fight's about to happen, and a part of Andrew is glad. But at the last minute, Ricky gives in, says *fine*. He backs off, raises the ball above his head like he's finally decided to throw it to Sam.

Instead, his body snaps like a spring, twisting to hurl the basketball right at Andrew's head.

There is no time to duck. There is only the ball's meteoric approach, its impact, the snap of Andrew's head against the wire fence, the rollercoaster rush of asphalt coming fast toward his eyes. By the time he hits the ground, pinpoints of white light dazzle his vision, and he thinks, almost lucidly, that these must be the stars people always talk about, the ones that orbit the head of cartoon coyotes. Then laughter washes in from the court. Pain shatters through Andrew's shock. The throbbing of his left eye tries to outrun his pulse. He hurts.

And then, suddenly, Ricky's hands are upon him. His fingers grip Andrew's shirt and pulls it tight around his neck. Ricky's weight presses as his curse words ring out crystal clear. "You lying asshole prick...." He thrashes Andrew against the ground. And Andrew looks up at him, accepting all this, his arms frozen. Andrew lies there and shows he can take these blows, can take *anything*.

At last Ricky is pulled away by another boy--Jimmy--finally coming to Andrew's rescue. He yanks Ricky back, leverages the taller boy against the fence, pinning him to it with his weight. Ricky fights

him off, and they scuffle to the ground in a knot of fists. The other boys have grown silent, transfixed by Ricky's rage. But it is only the approach of an adult that makes Ricky's fists unclench, makes him stand up alongside Jimmy to wipe dust from his jeans.

As one, the boys slink back toward the court as the Coach Wyatt arrives. He squats down beside Andrew and checks for damage. With a callused thumb, he wipes a little blood from Andrew's lip. "You'll live," he promises, helping Andrew to his feet. He calls for assistance from Miss Fehlinger, who gingerly picks her way through the clutch of boys, her eyes nervous behind her pink cat's-eye glasses. Andrew sinks against the wire fence as Coach Wyatt turns to chew out the boys. Germaphobic Miss Fehlinger shakes her head, mouths a fretful *oh my*, not touching Andrew, unsure of what to do with such a bloody mess of a boy.

After school, on the bumpy ride home in the back of Wayne's truck, Jimmy asks, "What were you thinking, man? You're supposed to be on my side."

Andrew can't look at him right now, and not because of his swollen shiner, throbbing gently now thanks to the Tylenol capsules the school nurse gave him. Andrew can't look at him because he can't bear the sight of Jimmy's anger. He has only a couple hours to spend with his friend before Momma finishes grading typing tests in Harman, then picks up his sisters from Grandma Rose's house on her way home. He wants this time to count for something. Anything but arguing.

Wayne's pick-up jounces to a halt at the foot of Andrew's dirt road, where the boy leaps out. Forbidden by Momma to invite Jimmy to the house anymore, Andrew suggests a hike along the wooded mountainside, the same as he's done every day this spring when Wayne and Jimmy have given him a ride home. Andrew looks up at his friend, afraid today he will choose not come. But Jimmy sighs, drops down beside Andrew, smacks the truck and waves Wayne on. Andrew wonders: If Jimmy didn't live in such an out of the way place, if his brothers had more time for him than just a truck ride home, would he still be here, walking into the woods?

Andrew contents himself with their makeshift togetherness as he and Jimmy grind a fresh path up to the ridge that winds toward home. Breaks in the tree line now and then reveal flashing silver glimpses of Cheat River below. Andrew starts to feel better.

On such days, Jimmy Gilmore gets Andrew to do things. Since last fall, when their secret kinship first began to percolate between them, Andrew's desire to be with Jimmy has slowly steeped, cooking him from the inside out. Now the long winter has gone away, and Jimmy's pent-up orneriness slides free like melted ice. He is eager to find sweet release in adolescent mayhem. When the two of them are not working on monster models in Andrew's tree fort, they're up to no good: During school, drawing nude caricatures of teachers on the stall walls of the boys' bathroom; on the way home, teasing the retarded guy who thinks he's a super-hero and delivers newspapers to the mailboxes at the foot of Andrew's road. Just last week, at Jimmy's prompting, Andrew stole a bottle of lighter fluid from his garage and carried it to the woods so

Jimmy could douse formations of plastic army men, then afterwards flick matches at them in a game he dubbed Napalm Attack. The two boys had to work overtime to stamp out the blaze before the whole forest went up in smoke.

Today Jimmy opens his backpack to show Andrew the bag of balloons and the can of shaving cream he swiped from the Mountaineer Mart a few days before. He shows Andrew how to work a rock through the mouth of the balloon, then fill it full of foamy Barbasol until it swells into a bomb. He leads Andrew to a train overpass that crosses the highway, where together the two boys let loose their arsenal on a car passing below. As the driver blasts his horn, the boys bolt away, giddy with guilt as they run into the woods. They run until Andrew fears his heart might burst. They run all the way to Cheat River. There they sprawl on the bank beneath Sadie's tree, exhausted and more than a little drunk on their laughter. Overhead, the wild magnolia's first blooms have started to burst from fuchsia to white, and already their sweet redolence fills the air. Andrew breaks off a branch and fans Jimmy's closed eyelids, the flower petals as meaty and smooth as skin. Each moment beside his friend chips away at the boy Andrew is, and he wants to stay in these woods forever. But too soon the shadows deepen and join. Dusk beats steadily into the sky, and the two boys stand up, wipe the dirt from their pants, skip a few rocks across the river. Slowly they head back up the steep grade to the ridge. They walk together for a while. But soon the path forks and they must part company, each of them striking out across separate hills home.

* * *

The spring day school pictures come out, Andrew slips one to Jimmy when he cuts in front of him in the lunch line. At fourteen, Jimmy declares such things stupid, but Andrew wonders if Jimmy's parents can afford the slim manila package containing two eight-by-ten photos and a score of wallet-sized. Andrew's family's not rich, but there are kids worse off. He's noticed how the matronly cook who collects lunch money crosses Jimmy's name off the list of those whose bills are footed by the county.

Jimmy has deigned to sit at Andrew's table today, and Andrew's not sure why. Have the older boys been keeping their distance since the incident on the basketball court? When Jimmy swipes Andrew's pen and begins blackening out Andrew's teeth in the photo he just gave him, Andrew almost wishes Jimmy hadn't sat down. Andrew tells him to cut it out, but Jimmy just says he's trying to make Andrew's teeth match the black eye Andrew had back then, the one that the photographer has managed to airbrush to a light green. But then Jimmy draws a bow on Andrew's head, adds spidery eyelashes and curls to his hair. "Andrewscilla!" he announces, waving the picture.

A kid across the table snickers, and Andrew shoots him a glare.

"Don't have a shit fit," Jimmy cajoles, scooting closer. He reaches into his back pocket and pulls out a wad of plastic wrap containing two white tablets the size of quarters. He hands them to Andrew. "Merry Christmas," he says.

“Are these drugs?” Andrew has heard older kids whisper about such things with a mix of awe and glee, but he’s never seen anything truly illegal up close. Across the table, the freckle-faced kid’s eyes perk up at the mention of the idea.

Jimmy shakes his head. “Alka-Seltzer is all. Special snack for Miss Fehlinger’s parakeet.”

“Canary,” Andrew corrects him.

“It could be a pterodactyl for all I care,” Jimmy whispers. “Just make sure you slip it these during Music Appreciation.”

“That’s supposed to make a bird’s stomach explode,” says the kid across the table.

Jimmy shoots him a look. “Do you mind shutting up?”

Andrew hands the tablets back. “No way.”

“Yes,” Jimmy says, forcing the antacid back into Andrew’s hand. “Poindexter over there doesn’t know what he’s talking about. My brother fed it to a pigeon once, says they only get a bellyache. But it’s cool how they squawk from it.”

Despite Jimmy’s explanation, Andrew isn’t convinced. “I won’t--”

Jimmy punches his shoulder. “Yes, you *will*. You got to. You sit next to the cage.” Jimmy leans in close, his eyes burning into Andrew’s. “I just want to see Miss Fehlinger panic. Come on. Do it for me.”

There’s a power in his gaze Andrew hasn’t a name for. He watches Jimmy draw back, comb his cowlick with his fingers. Jimmy smiles his chipped-tooth smile.

Andrew has no choice anymore.

* * *

After recess, Miss Fehlinger puts on a fresh pair of latex gloves and gives the record player in the music room a quick once-over with her can of Lysol. In celebration of summer being just around the corner, she announces that she’s decided to play Vivaldi’s *Four Seasons: Concerto No. 2*. Flushed students--stomachs still cramped from the cafeteria’s hamburger casserole--rest their heads on scarred desktops as the first note grinds out. Near Andrew, Tweety flitters in his cage on the shelf in front of the open window.

Andrew keeps his head low to his desk as he scopes out the room. He can feel Jimmy’s eyes on him as he watches Miss Fehlinger—dressed today in a pink polyester boat-neck dress, white Bolero jacket and matching white glasses. She moves to her desk, sits down, and takes off her gloves. She opens her latest issue of *Women’s Day*.

Now is his chance. Andrew rises up, stretches his arms back, drops an Alka-Seltzer tablet into Tweety’s cage. Maybe half a dose will do no harm.

He quickly puts his head back down, shifts around, his eyes focused on the cage. The canary’s little pipe-cleaner feet curl around the cage wire as he slowly walks to the newspaper-covered bottom, twitching his eyes at this unexpected surprise. He dips his head towards yesterday’s headlines and begins to gobble up the evidence of Andrew’s handiwork. Andrew shoots a glance up to Jimmy. The older boy’s

cheek lies flat against his desktop, but his head is twisted back, his eyes watching, his mouth spread into a smile.

Andrew closes his eyes and pretends to sleep. The blend of static and melody from the old record player draws him in. He pictures Jimmy, spread sleepy-eyed on the grass by the river, a cushion of magnolia petals beneath his head. Andrew is drifting toward sleep himself when a funny squeak and the sound of thundering of wings suddenly yank him back to his senses. He jerks upright, shakes off his stupor, looks hard at the bird. Tweety ricochets off the metal bars of his cage, yellow wings flapping, his tiny body zooming like a pinball. He makes a funny squawk. But not as if he's about to explode. More like he's just trying to burp real hard.

Andrew can't help but laugh. Miss Fehlinger looks up, tells him to settle down, pay no mind to Tweety's hyperactive shenanigans. She goes back to reading her magazine.

Still, Tweety's outburst has drawn attention. The Lachlan twins have curled their heads around to watch the display with their impassive eyes. Jimmy mouths to Andrew, *Give him the rest.*

No! Andrew mimes back.

Jimmy crumples a page of loose-leaf paper from his binder and throws it at him. *Do it!*

Andrew shakes his head. *No way.* Behind him, Tweety's burping has begun to sputter out.

Jimmy's face reddens, and his jaw locks in anger. In a flash of rage, he throws his whole binder at Andrew's head.

Andrew dodges. He turns just in time to see the binder hit the birdcage, which pitches backwards onto the windowsill. It wobbles like a basketball on the rim of a hoop, trying to decide whether or not to fall out or fall in. Then the birdcage disappears. A second later comes the clang of metal against pavement.

The Lachlan twins scream in unison. A few other kids look up, compare notes, start to giggle. Miss Fehlinger leaps from her chair, forgetting to put on her disposable gloves as she hastens to the rescue. Jimmy Gilmore laughs into his shirtsleeve as she passes.

Andrew feels sick inside, like he's swallowed Tweety's other tablet and his stomach's about to explode. He goes to the window alongside Miss Fehlinger, where he sees Tweety's cage rolling across the faculty parking lot. If the Alka-Seltzer hasn't killed him, the fall certainly has.

Andrew throws up. He tries to make it to the trashcan by the teacher's desk, but ends up missing by mere inches. Half-digested tuna casserole lands on the music room's orange carpet and the issue of *Women's Day* Miss Fehlinger let fall to the floor. Andrew glances back at her, still standing at the empty windowsill where Tweety's cage once was. Poor Miss Fehlinger hangs her head as she sends the Lachlan twins across the hall to fetch Coach Wyatt. A nerve has grown lively among the wattles of her neck. Behind her white cat's-eye spectacles, her eyes blink from student to student, anxious for an explanation. No one says a thing. Andrew looks away from her as he wipes his mouth and collects himself. Beside him, Jimmy Gilmore sits laughing in his chair.

* * *

All afternoon Andrew loafs on a cot in the nurse's office, too ashamed to return to any of his classes. Never before has Andrew helped kill a living thing bigger than a bee, and now guilt weighs heavily on his soul. What if Jimmy tells on him? What if he were to go to Biology class right now, just in time to find Mrs. Schoonover finishing a bird autopsy that will incriminate them both? All afternoon Andrew thinks of things like that, trying to make himself feel as awful as he can.

At the end of the day, Jimmy finds Andrew at his locker and punches him hard in the shoulder. He claims to feel gypped that Andrew got out of class and he didn't. The Lachlan twins ratted him out for throwing his notebook, and now he has detention for the next two weeks. He tells Andrew to forget about Wayne and any ride home. So Andrew takes the school bus instead, sitting by the emergency door-- considering whether or not he should yank the latch and hurl himself like a shaving cream bomb into oncoming traffic.

At dinner, Momma takes a break from feeding the baby to compare Andrew's school pictures to Allison's. "I paid good money for these?" She swallows some iced tea, looks at Andrew's eight-by-tens and then at the boy himself. "Yours wouldn't be too bad if your left eye wasn't bruised. But why do you have to pout your lips out?" Momma brushes a strand of hair from her face. "You should've been born a girl, and Allison, with her big bones, a boy." She shakes her head. "Leave it to your bastard father to give me kids ass-backwards."

Andrew hacks away at the Hamburger Helper Momma's made, as gooey and unappealing as anything the school cafeteria serves.

Momma stuffs the photos back in their envelopes. "Eat up, young man," she says. "You need to grow a little, so we can tell who's the guy around here."

Andrew's sister keeps her eyes low as she finishes wolfing down her food, then picks up her plate and carries it to the sink. When she returns to the table, she begins fussing over Elizabeth in her highchair.

Andrew thinks of Jimmy Gilmore defacing the school picture he gave him. How the people he loves all make fun of him. He wants to disappear.

The baby knocks a spoon to the floor.

"Don't you start giving me trouble too, sweet pea," Momma coos, and Andrew about throws up for the second time in a day.

Chapter 9: Wild Onions

By the time I woke up in Andrew's apartment that first day in Philadelphia it was early evening. I started to clean. First myself, in that awful shower of his, which I cleaned while standing inside the tub once the water had revived me. And then, even before I had even dressed, I moved on to cleaning the apartment. I found trash bags beneath the sink and filled them with anything that smelled or had no recognizable purpose. I scooted the wooden futon frame into the bedroom and hoisted the mattress atop it. I cleaned the dishes, the stovetop, the food from the refrigerator, and when I was done I swept from one end to the other. Along the way I found things. A ring of mystery keys, which I pocketed. More sketchbooks and journals and paintings. Behind an oversized portfolio, I found a two-person bicycle, an old Schwinn tandem from the '60s or early '70s that--other than a front flat--appeared to be in good enough condition to ride. I also found a stack of dog-eared dirty magazines in a milk crate by the bed. I flipped one open, thinking of those underwear model catalog pages I had found years before in the tree fort that had turned out to be Andrew's. But the men here didn't even have on their tighty-whities, and they were doing such things to each other that my ears began to burn even though no one else was around. Embarrassed, I threw the magazines away, then stacked Andrew's drawings and writings by his bed to look through later.

It was a good thing I was done because the evening light had started to fade. The apartment would be dark soon. I rinsed off again, wondering anew about the garden hose in the shower that led out a small window there. Once I towed off, I found an oversized T-shirt in Andrew's closet and a pair of loose sweat pants to change into. I carried the trash downstairs to a dumpster out back, then stopped in AppleJack's Deli and bought candles, a Diet Coke and a much deserved sandwich, my first Philly cheese steak, the kind of thing I hadn't allowed myself to eat in years.

Upstairs, I couldn't decide where to eat it. Andrew's apartment was finally clean, and I didn't want to mess it up again. I had a foolish hope that Andrew might walk through the door at any moment. So I went to the back balcony and climbed to the fire escape to the roof. Someone had created a garden there. Had it been Andrew? I caught sight of the green garden hose, curled at the far end, and figured it must have been. Perhaps my brother and Steven, working together. I thought of all the effort it must have taken to haul everything up. The planters framed an Astroturf carpet, which led back to more pots in the nook between Andrew's building and the next. I took a hose and gave everything a good watering. The flowers were beyond recovery, but the herbs and perennials still showed signs of life.

As night started to fall, I settled into an old beach lounge chair and watched the lights come on in Andrew's city, first the older buildings lining Broad Street with their filigreed cornices and old-fashioned tops, and beyond them, the high, new skyscrapers of the business district. I've since learned the names of the most striking pair, Liberty One and its little brother, Liberty Two. But right then, they gleamed

unfamiliar and Oz-like in my eyes. I felt I had crossed into another world, one Andrew hadn't intended to show me, but had led me to nonetheless.

My sandwich was gooey and good, but its grease left me feeling ill. In the planter beside me, a few hardy herbs had clung on through the August heat. My recent dowsing had released their pent-up fragrances, making me think of home. My stomach churned at the thought of calling Momma. I had left a note at work when I left, but still she'd be sick with worry and mad as hell. I'd deal with it tomorrow, I told myself.

I pinched off a few peppermint leaves and slipped them on my tongue, hoping they'd make me feel better. Their smell reminded me of the herbs Grandma Rose used to keep out back. I thought of her, and the other world she had shown me as well, long ago, the spring I was eleven going on twelve, when she took me and Elizabeth to her secret place in the woods.

* * *

Beneath our footfalls, the swinging bridge bucked and shuddered. I held my baby sister tight in my arms and followed Grandma Rose over the worn gray planks. Far below us Cheat River bent like a broken arm as it carved its path around our West Virginia town. With each step, every breath, the bridge jangled and swayed, and I wondered if spring floods had weakened its struts. Ahead, Grandma Rose moved toward the center of the span, spiriting us away to gather wild ramps--her name for spring onions that liked to nurse on creek water in the shade of the woods. Down her back alley we'd come, following a weedy trail past old train tracks and an empty lot where the carnival set up each fall. Houses and electric lines grew small in the distance, while above our heads, the late-May sun burned brilliant inside a flawless blue. Beneath us, light glinted off Cheat River, pulling our eyes to the catfish there. When my grandmother stopped halfway across the bridge, I did the same.

The planks beneath us eased their tremors. From nests on the far bank several ducks paddled into the water, eager and expectant as they headed our way. Grandma Rose pulled a piece of bread from the apron she wore, crumbled it, let the pieces fall. She had done this before, I could tell. The ducks' heads flashed iridescent green as they fought. Elizabeth kicked me with the heels of her feet. The swinging bridge rocked as I sat her down. Not yet ten months old and already she had taken her first couple of steps, would try to walk awhile if I helped hold her up. She leaned against a low support rail and stared down. Grandma Rose helped her drop some bread, and my little sister laughed at the frenzy she caused.

Bread gone, Elizabeth let me hold her again as I followed Grandma Rose back onto the sureness of land. It was late afternoon, and our shadows stretched before us. Half a mile on we found the right spot. Creek dampness flooded the mountain's shady base, water twisting through fowlgrass and fern. Further back, beneath oak, maple and pine, the ground grew rocky in a steep upland rise. As we moved beneath the tree shade Grandma Rose turned to me and said, "We're here." I followed her to a hillock grown thick with green plants nearly as long as my forearm. I sat Elizabeth down on the blanket I'd brought, left her to pull

at the yellow lure of dandelions while I helped Grandma pick an apronful of the spring onions I had long heard her praise.

Without a word of complaint about the arthritis in her knees, Grandma Rose squatted low and began to teach me how to thin a ramp patch so the bulbs left behind could grow plump and divide, sending up more shoots come the following spring. Skin hung loose on her cheeks, yet still I could make out the planes of her face, the mix of Scotch-Irish and English in her blood. Behind her glasses, the smoky darkness of her eyes drew me in--a touch of Melungeon Daddy used to say; he could sniff it out in her pedigree, all those Guinea relatives of hers over in Phillipi. He had talked like he didn't much trust that part of her, but I was suddenly glad for the history that circulated inside my grandmother's blood, the way she knew to show me this.

The ramps were slippery and cool to the touch, white bulbs caked in dirt at the roots. We washed them in the creek, then slipped them into an old potato sack Grandma had tucked into the string of her apron. I listened to her describe the ramp suppers she used to go to in Helvetia, a tiny hamlet cradled among the mountains of Randolph County where each spring women of Swiss descent kept hand-me-down menus alive. "Ramps raw or fried to golden perfection," Grandma described, "biscuits slathered with whipped butter, brown beans cooked in fatback and their own sweet juice..." The words hung loose in her mouth, as if she were savoring the taste of each one. "We'd pour the drippings over crumbled cornbread, mix it up, eat it down." She smacked her lips so hard that she had to adjust her dentures with her thumb. I almost laughed, but caught myself. "Your Uncle Neil used to drive your Momma and me there, used to complain how the dust clung to his car. Good lord, how long ago was that?" Grandma Rose wondered aloud. Her eyes clouded over. I knew she had lost that son; her sister, Great-Aunt Inez, had told me so. One Christmas Eve, just weeks before Uncle Neil's twenty-third birthday. Juvenile diabetes.

"Oh, never mind that now," Grandma said, quick to pull the smile back on her face. "Let's make us a fancy supper like that tonight. I'll show you how." Her efforts redoubled as she pulled at the shoots. "Won't your Momma be surprised!"

Soon we'd amassed a worthy pile. I turned to find Elizabeth sticking a dandelion's fluffed head into her mouth and hurried to take it from her. "Poison," I warned, throwing the weed away. Elizabeth began to bawl.

"Not so," Grandma Rose said. She lifted Elizabeth into her arms, hip jutting to bear the child's weight. She pulled a juice bottle from her apron pocket and slipped it into my sister's mouth. She explained to me how something as simple as a dandelion could be cooked up if you knew how to do it right. "Not once they've gone to seed," she told me as she soothed Elizabeth. "But when the blossoms are still young they can be fried in cornmeal if you like. Yet if you ask me, their leaves taste even better." She juttied her chin at the sprawl of dandelions. "Gather up some of those," she urged as she tossed me a handkerchief from a pocket in her apron. "We'll cook 'em up like collard greens."

Off I went. I picked all the dandelion greens I could find while back beneath the shade Grandma sat on the creek bank and rocked Elizabeth to sleep. The sun grew hot on my back. I lifted my hair off my neck, fixed it with a tie. By the time I presented my haul for inspection, my fingers hurt from pulling so much. Grandma Rose showed me which ones I'd pinched too low, and I snapped off the stalks, leaving only the freshest green. "Wash the dandelions as well," she instructed. "I don't want you muddying my ramps when you put them in the sack."

A curve in the creek had carved out a small pond. Butterflies frenzied among the pickerelweed there. I made sure Grandma Rose wasn't watching, then took off my sneakers and turned up my jeans. Stone to stone I stepped, out through muddy ringlets into deeper water. I worked my way to a tiny waterfall at the mouth of the pond, a better place to rinse. The water's surface glow like a giant mirror. Momma would be returning from her work soon, walking through Grandma's door, wondering where we were. But right then, time felt frozen.

I perched atop a mossy stone, braced myself against embankment rocks and leaned into the clear spill to douse the greens. Below me, the mirrored trunks of trees pitched so perfectly against their reflections that I felt poised between worlds. I fumbled, dropping a handful of dandelion leaves into the water. I sank to my knees and reached in. Minnows scattered. My fingers stretched, but not far enough. So I took a deep breath and stepped down into the chill of the pond.

Leaf-litter tickled the soles of my feet. The water felt so good I wished I could sink my whole body in, live in that world like a fish. I scooped up my dropped greens and swished them around. Muck stirred, clouding the water.

Happiness and sadness shifted through me. I wished Janet could have been there beside me. I thought back to the winter before when she died. While all the other grownups had tiptoed around any mention of mortality, Grandma's sister, Great-Aunt Inez, had sat with me in the back row of the funeral parlor and told me about the death of my grandfather, Caleb Chenoweth, whose solemn face I recalled from old family photographs. He had been less than Daddy's age when he died, a young man hard to picture as a grandfather. I listened close as Aunt Inez whispered in my ear the lurid details Grandma Rose had always refused to divulge--how years ago my grandfather had been found dead inside a coal mine. 'Fumes from a faulty generator stole him away,' Aunt Inez told me, 'the same way your friend up there died from carbon monoxide.' She jutted her head toward Janet's casket. 'Invisible killers are all around,' Aunt Inez warned, and I wondered why she hadn't imparted that advice to poor Mrs. Lambetti, who sang with her in the church choir. 'So say your prayers and always ask for forgiveness,' Great-Aunt Inez warned, 'cause even children like you can die in their sleep'. I knew Andrew long considered Aunt Inez a crackpot who took perverse pleasure trying to scare us closer to God. But sitting beside her in the pew I couldn't help but believe her. I asked her to tell me more about my family, my dead relatives, the line between life and death.

But just then her husband neared, and she sat up straight against her seatback. She patted my hands back into my lap. ‘That’s enough for now,’ she whispered. But I knew it wasn’t.

* * *

In the pond, a crawdad scuttled across my toe and I yelped. When I looked up I found Grandma Rose shaking her head. “You be careful, Allison. Snapping turtles mate in that water. Liable to bite off your toes.” Was she teasing or telling the truth? I couldn’t tell. I wasted no time gathering the greens in the handkerchief and starting back toward her.

“Hold on there, Allison!” Grandma cried. “Watch your step.”

I froze. Turtle, I thought--she must see its craggy shell creeping close. Where was it? In my mind’s-eye I pictured a sharp snout ready to blade through bone. But that wasn’t it at all, I realized, once my grandmother reached my side. She drew my eyes down to the shallow puddle where I stood.

“Girl, look around you. Watch what you’re doing.”

Elizabeth stirred in her arms, rubbing her eyes with a chubby fist, as Grandma stooped to lift a stalk of grass from the water, careful not to break it off. Dark jellied bumps clung to the reed like soggy peppercorns. “See here?” Grandma asked. “Them’s toad eggs. You’re stepping on babies.” Gently she returned the unhatched eggs to their underwater incubation.

“You hear those frogs singing ‘round your house the last month or so?” she asked. “They’re mating in spots like this, springtime pools where all you need to see life coming into the world is clear eyes and open ears.”

She handed me Elizabeth and scooped up some water. I looked close. What I had previously mistaken for bits of twig now came to life as tiny tadpoles in Grandma’s cupped palm, their bodies plump and greenish brown, their tails flickering. “Bullfrogs and treefrogs’ll start mating soon as the snow melts,” she told me. “By June, these buggers’ll sprout legs and lose their tails, head upwoods to munch on insects.” She puffed out her cheeks, which made me laugh. Opening her fingers, she let the tadpoles stream home.

Next, she directed my gaze to salamander hatchlings, which darted for cover as she stirred the pond with a long stick. She used it to upturn a rock to show me what they’d become--funny flickering things, black bodies decorated with mustard spots as they scampered away. Grandma started touching plants and buds, reciting their names to me, and I let my ears attune to her lesson. Around us, the sound of the woods took on layers, became thick with a chorus of chattering birds and trumpeting toads.

“How do you know all this?” I wondered aloud. She told me how as a child she had come to places like this with her brothers, gathering by lantern light nightcrawlers for fish bait. With her stick she skimmed away algae to point out diving beetles and dragonfly nymphs. I held tight to Elizabeth and followed close, ever heedful of Grandma’s warning to watch out for ‘Old Snapper’ as she’d come to call her mystery turtle. When she rolled over an old log, a sharp exclamation escaped her. I flinched. But it wasn’t Old Snapper that she’d found, just a toad. He blinked his eyes and hopped away. Another toad lay beneath him, and still

another beneath that, a sad-eyed female--belly up and head pinned underwater--too tired to fight her late-mating suitors. At least that's how Grandma explained it as she poked the second male in the belly until he let his bride-to-be go. The female twisted upright to gulp down air. "They'd sooner see her drown than let the other have her," Grandma said.

Grandma stretched upright, massaged her spine. Looking at the sky, she told me it was time to go. I could tell all this bending had worn her out. She leaned hard on her new walking stick as she started for the trail. I shifted Elizabeth in my arms and followed.

We retraced our way to the river. Near the bridge, Grandma Rose paused. She touched my shoulder and pointed out fresh tracks in the mud. Reptilian footprints inscribed the soft earth, a fresh nick of claws underscored by the sweep of a tail.

"Old Snapper's been here," Grandma Rose told me. "He's heading to Cheat River." As we continued on, she explained to me how such creatures liked to creep up behind ducklings and swallow them whole. I squeezed Elizabeth tighter and picked up my pace.

* * *

Back in her kitchen she taught me more. How to wash the ramps and greens a second time in her rust-stained sink. How to light a gas stove with farmer matches, how not to flinch when the blue flame sparked with a whoosh. She taught me how to grease an iron skillet with lard scooped from her drippings can, how to test the pan's heat by dancing a bead of water across the metal. She taught me how to cook ramps until their sharpness softened, though Grandma Rose liked to eat a few raw. When I tried to do the same, the ramp was so strong my eyes watered, and I had to drink a glass of milk to get the taste off my tongue.

Sitting at the kitchen table, Grandma Rose rubbed the soreness from her feet and left me to check on things--the cornbread in the oven, the pot of beans on the stove, the dandelion greens simmering inside a covered Pyrex dish, ready for a first tangy dose of red wine vinegar. An easy gladness sifted through the tiredness in my grandmother's voice when she spoke to me. "Your Momma will certainly be surprised by all this." She gave Elizabeth, in the highchair beside her, some milk from a sippy cup, then began tearing coupons from last Sunday's paper. "I only wish we had the makings for some snapping turtle soup."

I shot her a look.

"You never heard of that?" she asked, feigning surprise. "Why, I can taste that soup now. Whenever your great-grandfather brought a hunk of turtle meat to the house, your great-grandmother would cook it in a big copper pot." She went on to tell me how her mother would make her and Inez chop onions till their eyes teared. Next came peppers, tomatoes, boiled eggs. In it all went, to a pot simmering with beef stock. Come nightfall, they are it along with fresh baked bread, the whole family sitting on the front porch while the house cooled down. I don't know what amazed me more: the idea that soup could be squeezed from a tough old turtle or that a family could seem so happy together.

"How'd you pry the meat from its shell?" I asked.

“Oh, that was Daddy’s job. At least till he showed my brothers how.” She sighed. “I was a girl, so I only got to do was watch.” She described how whenever her brothers caught a snapper they’d take it to the barn and pin its head under a notched board; they all wanted to walk out of there with the same number of fingers they came in with. Her father would chop off its head, then secure the turtle belly-up to on a board with a spike nail. As the little ones worried the severed head with a stick, he’d cut the meat out of the shell.

“Sounds awful,” I said.

“Oh, it wasn’t that bad.” She pulled her cigarettes from her apron pocket and lit one, the first I’d seen her smoke all day. “Kids today have it easy, not having to look to the land for food.” As she went back to clipping coupons, I let her story sink in. Despite its gruesomeness, I felt close to her in the steamy kitchen, close to Elizabeth as well. I looked at my sister. A trickle of milk pearly past her lips as she drank from her sippy cup. I couldn’t wait for the day when I could teach her to cook the way Grandma was teaching me—*me* and not Momma, whom my grandmother claimed would starve to death if it weren’t for Kraft Macaroni and Cheese. As soon as my sister reached a remembering age, I’d show her everything I’d learned--how to thin a ramp patch right, how to tell tadpoles from swirling bits of leaf. Everything. My lips wouldn’t zipper tight when it came to her, no sir. Secrets would be shared because that’s what made sisters strong. Even when the truth hurt it had to be known, worked out like a splinter.

I’d tell her the story of her birth, how Daddy ran off scant weeks before she came into this world, how Grandma Rose had been the one to ferry Momma to the hospital. I’d tell her how Momma’s contractions came on so fast the doctor couldn’t give her an epidural. How Andrew and I listened down the hallway as she screamed, cursing first Daddy’s name, then my brother’s, as if it was Andrew’s fault their love had gone wrong. I would tell Elizabeth how tightly Andrew held my hand as he fought not to cry. I’d make all our lives fit into words, so my sister could be sure of who she was in a way I feared I might never be.

I looked at Elizabeth, but she was looking past me now. I turned to see Momma in the archway of the kitchen, lured to the back of the house by the smell of my cooking.

“What’s this?” she wanted to know.

In her hands was a take-out bag from the Tastee-Freeze. Redness rose to her face, but she swallowed it down with a quick constriction of her throat. Her surprise had been trumped. She dropped the greasy bag on the table and Grandma’s coupons scattered.

Chapter 10: Bride of Frankenstein

Andrew – Spring 1983

Jimmy Gilmore doesn't stay mad at Andrew for long. Less than a week after Jimmy's detention runs out, he's back at Andrew's side, anxious to start work on their latest model masterpiece, a King Kong Andrew has stashed in his tree fort in the woods--their Fortress of Solitude, Jimmy's come to call it, stealing the name from the *Superman* comics Andrew's given him. Jimmy even carved the name into the trunk of the tree with his pocketknife. So on a day late in May, the two boys forego their usual pranks and race to the woods after school, where they scatter plastic limbs and tiny paint vials across the old fort's wooden planks. But when King Kong's head falls to the tangled brush below, Jimmy grows frustrated, his attention wavering as he once more harps, "How's your mom, Andrew?"

"Busy with the baby," Andrew sighs. "What color should I paint Fay Wray's dress?"

Jimmy shrugs, his KISS T-shirt stretched tight across his broadening shoulders. The day has grown hot, the air thick and still. Though it was Jimmy's idea to work on King Kong today, Andrew can tell his friend is already bored with trimming burs of plastic from the model parts against the blade of his knife. He folds it away, picks up the machete he swiped from his father and starts hacking the plank he's sitting on. Once again he steers the conversation toward sex.

"Did you know a pussy's just like velvet?" Jimmy asks. "Wayne told me so. Only real wet. He throws an empty bottle of glue at an old bird's nest tucked in a high branch of the tree. Didn't killing Tweety teach him anything? Andrew is glad when Jimmy misses.

"You ever touch velvet?" Jimmy asks.

"My Daddy once brought a painting of Elvis back from Gatlinburg," Andrew tells him. "That was velvet."

"Don't say 'Daddy,'" Jimmy scolds. "Say 'Dad.' 'Daddy's' for pussies." He throws the glue bottle lid at the metal box Andrew stores their unfinished models in. The lid bounces off a Farrah Fawcett sticker. Jimmy goes back to hacking with his machete. "You ever seen a pussy up close?"

Andrew blushes, shakes his head no. In the past ten months he has learned something of the subject, Momma having taught him to change his sister's diaper so he can help out whenever Allison isn't around to do it. A girl's pussy, even a baby's, seems bizarre to him. Every time he centers Elizabeth's chubby legs over a fresh diaper, her tiny folds of secret skin fix him with a sideways smirk. He's afraid to touch his sister with a baby wipe, is mortified when she dribbles pee across his fingers.

But Momma says that they all have to pitch in since Daddy--*Dad*--left, so Andrew no longer complains when she asks him to do it. After all, it was only a few months back when Andrew found her

hunched over the kitchen table crying--no sound at all, just her shoulders shaking. For a moment the fist Andrew had kept clenched inside himself for so long started to relax. Reaching out, he touched her shoulder. But Momma flinched, drew back in her seat and glared. "What the hell you want?" she hissed. Whatever comfort Andrew might have offered slid back down his throat.

"Fuck!" Jimmy yells. Dark blood stains his thumb from where he's nicked himself.

If Jimmy were a baby like Elizabeth, perhaps Andrew could brush his lips against the wound and kiss it better. But they're both too old. Even cutting his own finger and asking to become blood brothers would seem silly now. Jimmy wants to touch velvet.

The older boy's eyes narrow as he sucks at his thumb. With a sweep of his arms he begins scooping model parts back into the footlocker that had belonged to Andrew's father back in his army days. Andrew still remembers the day he hauled the box to the fort in his little red wagon, the one he's had since childhood, the one that bore Sadie the day she got put down.

Jimmy jumps to his feet and scoots the metal box back to its corner, then swings off the side of the fort to dangle above the ground. "Let's skinny-dip!" he screams before dropping.

Andrew follows. All around them, spring is rolling headlong into summer. Jimmy hacks down new growth from the path as they walk. School will be out soon; Andrew wonders if he'll still see Jimmy. He tries not to think about it. A breeze whips Andrew's hair into his eyes. He hasn't been back to the barber since his father left. How much longer can he dodge Momma's clippers? Beside him, downy fuzz shines on Jimmy's jaw as he stops at the river's edge and jerks his head back to spit. Andrew rubs his own chin and wonders, without a father who will teach him to shave?

Across the river, willows droop to graze the Cheat's surface, still running heavy from springtime thaw. Here at the swim hole by Sadie's tree, the river appears only five or six feet deep, but Andrew knows this time of year such shallowness can be deceiving. His father once told him why the Indians who wintered here gave this river its name, how the water ran so clear a young brave could count the rocks lining the bed, how he might jump in expecting to wade across, only to discover a sudden shift in the current caused by a thunderstorm upriver. Cheat River could flood fast and hard. Lives have been lost, Andrew wants to tell Jimmy.

But Jimmy is already shucking his shirt in favor of bare skin. Andrew's fingers work to undo his shirt buttons as he watches Jimmy kick off jeans and socks. Only May, but already the sun has etched a phantom T-shirt onto Jimmy's chest. When Jimmy pulls off his underwear, Andrew catches a glimpse of his crotch. Andrew looks up, blushing as his eyes lock with Jimmy's. Jimmy just laughs, shrugs it off. Andrew turns away to drape his pants and his shirt over a branch so Momma won't complain about dirt on his clothes. He takes a deep breath and hoists his jockey shorts down. By the time he turns back, Jimmy is already canonballing from the large rock that overhangs the river. Andrew hurls himself after him, screaming.

Fierce coldness shocks Andrew's skin as he explodes down into the Cheat. His heart leaps high in his chest. Below the surface, he holds his breath and opens his eyes, eager to steal another glance at Jimmy. The river water isn't so clear now as it is said to have been in the Indians' day. But still Andrew can spot Jimmy's pale legs ahead, scissoring against the current. His cock and tight scrotum peek out from beneath his hard belly as Andrew swims almost close enough to touch. Above, Jimmy's arms move in steady strokes; beyond that, his head disappears above the surface, leaving only Jimmy's body shimmering below.

Andrew breaks the surface and gasps down air. Jimmy splashes him. Neither can handle the freezing water, so they swim to shore and climb up the steep bank. The two boys shiver as they dress. When it gets warmer, Andrew tells Jimmy, they can come here again, jump in the water from tire swing he plans to attach to the magnolia tree. Jimmy finishes drying first and starts up the path. Andrew races after him.

For a long time the two boys walk through the marshy lowland by the river. Jimmy hacks a new path with wild arcs of his machete. Soon it will be time for Andrew to head home, to explain damp clothes and muddy shoes to Momma. At a small clearing, Jimmy halts and seizes Andrew by the arm. "Snake," he whispers gravely.

Andrew used to see plenty of snakes during walks with his father. Before the man left, he taught Andrew the places one might lay looped like a snare. Andrew's father was once bitten by a cottonmouth, and the venom left a stiffness in his joints he still claimed to feel when the weather was wet. Andrew recalls the spring day his Daddy pointed out a black snake curled like a busted inner tube on a rock in the sun, its puffed scales drawing in heat. Andrew had lifted a heavy rock from a dry creek bed and given it to his father, expecting him to crush the snake's skull. Instead his father took a swig from the flask he carried in his vest pocket and shook his head no. He dropped the rock drop back to the ground. He told Andrew there was nothing to fear if you went your way and let the snake go his.

The snake that catches Jimmy's eye isn't black, but yellowish-brown and long, straddling a mess of hatchlings in a cavity beneath a moss-covered log. The two boys crouch behind a tall bush to watch. On a pile of old leaves lies a mass of elliptical eggs, some whole, others broken from where the newborns have slashed free of their shells. A thin, jellied skin still clings to the burst eggs. Inching closer, Andrew sees that several of the hatchlings remain connected to their eggs by a delicate cord, drawing the last of the nourishment in. Their blue-black scales glisten like links of chain. The brown snake, as thick as Jimmy's forearm, curls around the pile like a noose. A baby no sooner wriggles free of the clutch than this large snake scoops it up in its mouth, swallowing it whole.

"Milk snake, I bet," Jimmy whispers over Andrew's shoulder. "My dad's always finding them when he cleans out the barn at the detention farm. He says they'll curl 'round a cow's hind leg to suckle on its udder."

"You got suckling on the brain," Andrew boldly tells him. "That's no milk snake."

Andrew studies its pale hide and sooty crossbands, how the snake's body tapers and darkens at the tail, catching the light like metal. The tail moves and the two boys hear a sound like loose BBs shaken inside their box. Andrew's knees buckle. "That's a timber rattler."

"Shit," croaks Jimmy.

Neither boy has to tell the other how poisonous they are.

"I guess she doesn't like us here, scooping up her young like that," observes Jimmy in a low voice. "Dad says snakes hold them in their bellies when they sense danger."

"Your dad doesn't know anything," Andrew says, feeling suddenly brave beside Jimmy, whose fingers have gripped tight around Andrew's shoulder. "A rattler's babies don't come out looking like that." Andrew remembers the pictures from the wildlife exhibition trailer at the town fair. "Them's some other snake's babies." Andrew glances back at Jimmy, watching slack-jawed as another baby gets swallowed up. He pries the machete from Jimmy's hand and steps forward, pushing past the camouflage of the bush. "Snakes don't care a whit about their young. That's why they have so many."

As Andrew edges closer, the rattler jerks back. Her tail shakes again as the drab spade of her head slowly rises, jaw gaping wide to display hooded fangs. The snake's eyes focus Andrew's way, her pupils black as if burned.

The snake could bite him, but Andrew doesn't care. He can sense Jimmy behind him, and the other boy's fear fuels him, makes him feel as dangerous as a movie monster. He hates that rattler, hates that his daddy got bit, hates that a snake would swallow another's young. He raises the machete above his head. Andrew's blood seethes. His fingers tighten their grip.

"Leave it be!" cries Jimmy, but the voice Andrew hears is his father's.

Too late. The blade arcs as the rattler strikes, flashing its fangs and its petal pink throat. Andrew cleaves the snake's head from its body, watches it fall to the ground, jaw flexing, gasping for life. The snake's thick body lashes like a whip at the delicate clutch of eggs.

Andrew's rage is fluid, engulfing him. Again and again he strikes, the air thick with the sound of his blade. The snake spasms. Andrew holds his breath as the metal grows stained with blood.

Then silence. A hatchling no longer than a licorice whip crawls free from the rattler's split belly. Andrew falls to his knees, cuts it to pieces, and then hacks the remaining eggs as well, as if clearing a path through the slime of their birth. Finally Jimmy grabs his arm, wrestles the machete away. Andrew looks down at his empty fingers, still molded to the fit the wooden handle. Blood and bits of shell streak his shirtfront. In the dirt lies the snake's busted rattle, too tattered to be a trophy. Andrew no longer feels brave—just desperate and small, having shrunk back down inside himself. "Wash off," Jimmy tells him, but Andrew shakes his head no. It is better this way--the smell of blood a coppery reminder.

* * *

As punishment for ruining his school clothes, Momma grounds Andrew to Grandma Rose's house after school all through the next week. But by the following Monday he is finally paroled, free to ride home with Jimmy and his brother again, free to steal into the woods beside his best friend. The day is warm and good. Jimmy helps Andrew finally hoist his tire swing up into Sadie's tree and tie it there. And after a few minor adjustments of height and the strength of the knot, the two are able to ride it out over the water. Leaping from the tire is much better than leaping from the embankment rock. Again and again, the swing's arc sends them soaring.

But then comes a Friday afternoon in June right before school is to end. The sun should be shining bright to match the lightness in Andrew's chest. Instead a smoky grayness striates the air—rain clouds coming in fast and low. Andrew knows what spring rains can do to Cheat River. He tells Jimmy they should forget about swimming today.

Despite Momma's rules, there is no place to take Jimmy but home. Andrew leads Jimmy back across the mountain and out onto his family's dirt road just as the sky breaks. The boys make a run for the house in the distance. The rain falls in a hard curtain, big drops that hammer against Andrew's face. Lightning crackles in electric zigzags that flash against the upstairs windows as the two boys try to outrun the downpour. At the house, Buck has stretched his chain to the limit, staying dry beneath the front porch. He barks as the two boys race up the steps. On the porch they shake the water from their hair and catch their breath between bursts of laughter, both of them soaked down to the bone.

The raw scent of woods and rain follows them into the front hall. A sudden back draft slams the screen door shut like something out of a *Chiller Theater* movie. Jimmy raises his eyebrows and lets out a laugh. Lightning flickers through the front window, accompanied a few seconds later by a volley of thunder. When Jimmy starts to strip off his wet shoes and shirt, Andrew follows suit. When Jimmy lets out a crazed whoop, Andrew can't help but follow with a yawp of his own.

Wearing only wet jeans, Jimmy tears full-pace into the heart of the house, daring Andrew, only in his underwear, to chase after him. Down the hall, past the pantry, through the kitchen Jimmy goes, while Andrew follows close behind, a little fearful of what Momma will say when she finds their trail of water winding through the house. In the living room, Jimmy bounces from couch to recliner, then Evel Knievels over a laundry basket before returning to the hall. Jimmy scoops up his clothes and races upstairs. There he thwacks open the door to the room Andrew shares with Allison and dive-bombs onto Andrew's unmade bed. Andrew leaps after him, their bodies colliding. Too quickly, Jimmy bolts up, crosses to Andrew's dresser, examines the completed monster models Andrew now keeps there. Frankenstein, The Munsters, The Creature from the Black Lagoon....

"What the hell happened to Dracula?" Jimmy asks.

Last week while grounded Andrew tried to fix the vampire's uneven eyebrows with a Q-tip soaked in paint stripper. Dracula's head melted somewhat as a result. "Exposed to daylight?" Andrew offers weakly.

Jimmy rolls his eyes.

"Want to work on the Bride of Frankenstein?" Andrew asks, holding up the only unfinished model he hasn't yet squirreled off to his tree fort. The shared room is too small, no space for his things.

Jimmy ignores him. "This display needs something," he says. He runs his finger across Andrew's dresser top, which is mottled now with unicorn decals his sister Allison recently applied. "These monsters need to be floating on a moat," Jimmy suggests. "A lake of blood." He looks Andrew's way. "Got any red cloth?"

"In Momma's sewing kit," Andrew says, and knows at once he should have kept his big mouth shut. Jimmy insists the two of them go into Momma's room to get it.

Gray light falls from the far window as Andrew opens Momma's door. Outside, rain still clatters against the tin roof of the back porch. Next to Momma's bed sits a card table stacked with school papers and beneath it her sewing kit. Floorboards creak beneath Andrew's weight as he creeps in. Jimmy laughs and breaks past to hurl himself atop Andrew's mother's bed. He stands and starts to bounce on it like a trampoline.

"Knock it off," Andrew pleads. He pulls Jimmy off the bed and carefully smooths out the wrinkles.

Andrew digs out Momma's sewing kit, as big and bulky as the tackle box his father used to squeeze behind the seat of his pickup. Andrew sets the kit on the bed and glances at Jimmy, who has started rifling through Momma's dresser drawers. Jimmy runs his hands through her panties, presses a bra against his nose. "Fresh and clean like the great outdoors!" he jokes.

"Gimme that."

Jimmy lobs the bra at Andrew's head. Andrew folds its straps as best he can, then puts the bra away so he can finish rummaging through Momma's sewing kit. He wants to get out of here.

Finally he finds a square of red velvet.

The moment he holds it up, Jimmy yanks the material from his hand. "That'll do," he says approvingly. "The color of fresh blood!" He rubs the cloth against his cheek, wiggles his eyebrows up and down. "Soft as a baby's butt," he chuckles. "Or a *pussy*." His face slips into a sly grin. "Here, Andrew. Feel it."

Jimmy draws the material across Andrew's face like a scarf. Andrew's crotch starts to harden, and he feels embarrassed. Jimmy's voice wavers up and down, as delicate as a leaf about to fall. "Soft and warm," Jimmy breathes. Outside, thunder blows holes in the sky, while inside Andrew closes his eyes as Jimmy slowly skims the material across his lips and chin, down Andrew's throat and across his bare chest.

“Let’s play Bride of Frankenstein,” Jimmy suggests, the words sounding like a hypnotist’s command.

Andrew opens his eyes to find Jimmy tossing the velvet onto the bed. Then he reaches past Andrew to take his mother’s slip from where it hangs on a peg on the back of her door. Jimmy bends his face close to Andrew’s, his lips nearly brushing his cheek. “Put this on,” he instructs. The silken material shimmers in folds.

Jimmy’s grin softens as he pushes Andrew’s underwear down to the floor. Andrew swallows hard as he steps out of them. Jimmy says nothing at the sight of Andrew’s erection, only smiles deeper as he lifts Andrew’s arms above his head so he can lower the slip, the material strange and cool as it glides down Andrew’s skin. Jimmy backs Andrew against his mother’s vanity. Cosmetics scatter the surface, silver lipsticks and glass boxes that glint like implements in a mad scientist’s lab.

Jimmy pivots Andrew toward the mirror, his face looming in the crook above Andrew’s shoulder. Jimmy uncaps a lipstick and begins to paint Andrew’s mouth. Then he powders Andrew’s face and brushes rouge across his cheekbones. Jimmy’s smile condenses into something serious as he works. In the mirror, Andrew watches the older boy’s hand strain to draw eyebrows as perfect as his mother’s, only to wobble north, producing harsh Dracula angles. Then, in upward strokes, Jimmy runs a brush through Andrew’s hair, creating a beehive he cements in place with Momma’s can of Aqua Net. Andrew is mesmerized by Jimmy’s ministrations, the older boy’s uncommon, delicate touch. As Jimmy tickles Andrew’s throat with a spray of perfume, Andrew closes his eyes again, lets his body loll toward Jimmy’s, his head grazing Jimmy’s collarbone. When Jimmy takes a half-step back, Andrew almost falls.

Instead, he catches himself on the vanity. His eyes shock open to the sight of himself transformed, a cross between Frankenstein’s reluctant bride and his very own mother: hair sprayed up as if electrified, eyes hollow and dark, brows ragged as stitches. A monstrous mockery of Momma.

But Jimmy doesn’t care as he suddenly presses his body against Andrew’s. Hard through rough denim he is, rocking against him, grinding against the softness of Momma’s slip and the resistance of Andrew’s skin beneath. Andrew should cry out, but none of this is happening to him, only to the monster bride in the mirror. Jimmy’s grip tightens, his fingers sure to leave marks. Andrew feels Jimmy unfasten his jeans....

Downstairs the screen door slams open. Jimmy stops. Andrew’s heart freezes. The sound of feet pounding upstairs carries through the half-open bedroom door. Momma’s voice booms at a high decibel, instructing Allison to put Elizabeth in her playpen then help close the windows.

Jimmy shoves Andrew away. Andrew falls against the vanity, rattling compacts and combs. Catching himself, he turns to see Jimmy yanking up the sash of the window. Jimmy throws the screen to the floor and slithers out onto the back porch roof. Andrew goes after him, leans his head out into the sting of rain. He wants to follow but feels suddenly leaden. In the distance, the trees of the old orchard swoon as

if they might break. Andrew places his palms on the cold roof and tries to lunge forward, but Momma's slip catches on the window sash and snaps him back. He loses his footing and falls.

Andrew's eyes light on the bedroom door just as Momma flings it wide. Her clothes are soaked and her hair is coming undone. Andrew can hear Jimmy scrambling down the drainpipe, abandoning him.

The light in Momma's eyes shrinks at the sight of her dolled-up son. Her face draws into a knot. "What are you doing?!" she screams, vaulting toward Andrew. Andrew tries to push the vanity between them, and Momma's instruments of beauty topple to the floor. She grabs Andrew's shoulders and pulls him to her, shaking hard.

Andrew tries to move away, but all his strength is gone.

"Why are you dressed like this?" Momma slaps his face. "What the hell has got into you?"

She jerks Andrew's face toward the mirror. "Look at yourself!" She shoves him hard against the glass.

Pain shoots through Andrew's forehead, giving him something to hold onto. When Momma pulls his head back, an ugly imprint of blood and make-up stains the cracked mirror.

"Go ahead, make fun of me!" Momma cries.

She seizes an open lipstick tube and draws rough lines across Andrew's face. When he tries to tell her to stop, she grinds the lipstick into his open mouth, causing him to gag. Andrew catches sight of Allison, standing in the doorway, tiny Elizabeth cradled in her arms. Allison's eyes drop from Andrew's.

Momma pushes Andrew hard against the footboard of her bed, and her sewing kit topples. Colored spools clatter against the floor. She tries to yank the slip over Andrew's head, and a side-stitch rips as she jerks his arms upward. The fabric bunches, knotting around Andrew's wrists.

Andrew feels sick that Momma can see him naked. She whacks his stomach with her fist, sinks to her knees and hits him again. "You want to be a girl?" Momma screeches, pinning Andrew against the footboard. Hands above his head, Andrew's shoulders ache in their sockets. The slip slides into his eyes, making it hard to see.

Then the cold chill of metal. Andrew brushes the slip aside, looks down to find the sharp points of Momma's sewing scissors pressed coldly against his crotch.

"You want me to cut this off?" Momma seethes, squeezing the blades until Andrew feels the pinch.

Andrew swallows back tears and shakes his head no.

"Cause I can make you as ball-less as your goddamn father."

Andrew struggles to free his arms.

"You want that?"

Andrew shakes his head again.

"Say it!"

Kneeling there on the floor, Momma begins to cry. Andrew looks away from her, concentrating instead on the mirror, at the monster staring back. No special effect, just him. “No,” he finally chokes.

“Louder!”

A soft rustle comes from the doorway. Momma swings her head toward Allison, who has started to cry. Elizabeth, in her arms, has begun to cry too. “Stop it,” Allison pleads.

And then something happens. Momma’s face unclenches. Her grip relaxes and the scissors fall, smacking against Andrew’s feet. A wet sigh rises from her as she slumps against the floor, shoulders sagging and head dropping low as she shakes with sobs that make no sound.

Andrew rips the binding from his arms, then clutches the ruined slip against his body. The material ropes down his chest, hiding his crotch and bruised skin. Momma cries, but Andrew only has eyes for the freak in the mirror. Against the freak’s skin the white slip stands out like a scar that runs from neck to groin. Slowly Momma looks up, her face sorry and melted. She raises her arms to offer an embrace. Andrew goes to her, as always.

Chapter 11: Turtle Soup

Back when the one-year anniversary of our father's leaving came, Momma announced it was cleaning time, told Andrew and me to gather up everything we no longer wanted or needed. A yard sale, I figured, as Andrew and I hauled load after load of old toys and clothes onto the front porch. I had just carried out my old Easy Bake Oven when Momma appeared at the screen door and told me to go help Andrew clear out the garage. It was July, and the woods around our house exuded an almost narcotic quietude, so hot it was. Sweat sluiced down our backs as my brother and I lugged out tools that had long hung from Daddy's pegboard, followed by junky boxes of odds and ends, boxes I doubted had been opened since Uncle Si and Aunt Adalene were alive. Once in a while Andrew filched things from them--a bag of Daddy's old marbles, a couple musty comic books, other things he wouldn't let me see--sequestering his haul out back in his old red wagon.

When Momma came outside and caught him slinking off, she barked fiercer orders and stuck around to supervise. Andrew and I worked double-time to please her, lugging out everything Daddy had let pile up: busted storm windows, shadeless lamps, two mismatched kitchen chairs. Cobwebbed fishing rods came next, then a dust covered wagon wheel, treasures Daddy had purchased long ago at auctions. Momma set aside only the most essential of items: hammer, screwdriver, pair of pliers, an old shotgun she could use to shoot at the raccoons who snuck past Buck to paw through our trash. All the rest of Daddy's things we piled on the cement driveway and watched, spellbound, as Momma carried from the house armload after armload of Daddy's abandoned clothing: blue work shirts, winter coats, the Sunday suit he wore the time we drove to Elkins to have our family portrait taken at Sears. The twelve-by-sixteen wooden-framed result of that trip Momma tossed on as well, and soon the mound on the driveway had grown into a small hill. As she and Andrew struggled to carry Daddy's green recliner out the front door, my throat grew tight. I knew what Momma was up to, and it wasn't a yard sale.

I cradled Elizabeth beneath the maple tree's shady canopy, sad that my she would never see the tacky Hawaiian shirt draped over the pile animated by our father's lean torso, never feel his steady grip close around her wrist and ankle as he lifted her in the air and flew her like an airplane in dizzy circles above the grass. For Momma had taken it upon herself to complete his vanishing act by eliminating every reminder, every souvenir, every last iota of his presence she could find. Her anger felt more real to me than the man himself. The sight of her, in old jeans and knotted blouse, squeezing lighter fluid onto the pile, branded itself upon my brain. In silence I watched her strike a farmer match against the drive and light a wad of paper. She threw the crumpled ball onto the pile then stood there, arms folded and head low, eyes tired and mouth slack, like she wasn't sure whether she was experiencing victory or defeat.

Momma and Daddy. I didn't want to love them, either one.

For an hour and more I watched the fire blaze, charring down into ruinous embers and scattered pieces of metal atop the scorched driveway: hammer heads, shovel scoops, the coiled springs of Daddy's chair. Momma sat nearby, lips twisted tight, as if something that should have tasted sweet had turned out curdled instead. I clutched Elizabeth like a rag doll and cried into her fine blond hair--cried that I'd never again be able to sneak into closet, press his shirtsleeves against my nose and mouth, and inhale the sturdy scent of him.

I tried not to think about Daddy much after that. But once in a while I overheard things like Momma talking to Great-Aunt Inez on the phone, whose daughter Helena had seen Daddy stumbling out of Wimpy's pool hall one night, drunk and with blood staining his shirtfront. Word of his fighting and carousing trickled through to us, like a message through the tin-can phone Andrew and I had played with as kids. We didn't talk about it with one another. Summer passed. Grandma Rose and I kept up our walks, and I learned the names of every wildflower and herb she showed me. Momma sent Andrew to Bible school to shake some sense into him, and when it was finally over, he got a part-time job at the Y. Elizabeth took her first steps without me holding onto her.

Come August, a week before my twelfth birthday, Grandma Rose took me to the pond by Cheat River for what would be the last time. Even now I remember how heat thickened the air of that bone-dry afternoon. Momma had been in a cross mood all morning, rushing to drop me off at Grandma's, to ferry Andrew to the Y, to take Elizabeth to her vaccination appointment. So I hadn't told her about the circles spinning inside me the past few days, pain pressing like doubled-up fists against the wall of my stomach. I didn't mention the spot of blood I had found that morning when I changed my underwear. Or how last spring at school the girls had gossiped behind Marie Wilson's back when she was the first among our class to experience the change--that fleshy transformation older girls whispered about while waiting for the bus, their voices hushed and reverential as they drew their heads together behind a wall of three-ring notebooks. With growing worry I recalled how, by the time yearbooks had come out, Marie no longer looked like the string bean girl in her photograph, but instead stood pimply-faced and towering above our heads, an object of ridicule and crude comments by boys, betrayed by the early-bird awakening of her body. Was I now transforming that same awful way?

I would tell no one, not even Grandma Rose, though the silence between us was roomy and ready to be broken as we stepped off her back porch and started towards the pond. It had been over a month since our last walk together, and I refused to let anything spoil it. So I ignored the wadded toilet paper that scratched my thighs as we made our way down the alley and over to Cheat River, its coppery water so low I could see the silver shapes of fish darting around an upturned shopping cart someone had pushed in. Crossing the swinging bridge, we did not stop to feed the ducks this time. I wanted to know why we weren't doing so but knew better than to ask. When we had left the house I had asked if we were off to pick more ramps, but Grandma said they were out of season now, we'd have to content ourselves with dandelion

greens and whatever herbs we could find. I asked why she needed such a big sack, but she shushed me, as she'd done earlier that morning when her phone rang, when I had watched her respond tightlipped to the questions her doctor asked over the phone. Her mind seemed far off as I followed her.

With her walking stick, Grandma Rose pushed aside the brush that had sprung up since our last passing. Lance-leaved goldenrod flowered at heights from a few inches to a foot, parched looking blooms that seeded the air in the wake of our passing. In some spots the weeds had gone brown and thin, revealing sun-scoured patches of dirt. Looking at it all left my tongue feeling dry.

Overhead, the sky burned an excruciating blue. How long had it been since last it stormed, I wondered, as pain shot up anew inside me. But it was more than clouds and rain I was waiting for. More than a change of flesh and bone. I was waiting for something to come that wouldn't. I was waiting for something I might have to leave these mountains to get.

Why the hell were we going to the pond now, when every sprinkler-soaked, unmowed backyard held more than enough dandelion greens to fill any countrywoman's pot? Maybe Grandma longed for something too.

Past the river, at the foot of the hillside where the pond lay, the treetops had grown thick enough to wall out the sun. Their shade felt comforting, but it wasn't enough to ease my shock at finding Grandma's pond shrunken to half its size, a casualty of the past rainless month. A crust of mud circled the pond's border where ringlets of water once stood. The grasshoppers were hushed, the katydids quiet. The treefrogs had taken their high trill elsewhere.

Other insects had taken over. Annoying aerialists—mosquitoes, dragonflies, bees—now swarmed the stagnant surface of the pond. I felt the pocket of my cut-offs for my EpiPen, then looked at Grandma Rose, wanting to ask how this change could come to be, but my throat felt sandy and my voice wouldn't come. A bee zoomed by her face, but Grandma ignored it as she gave the sad sight of the pond a wry half-smile before shuffling off to gather greens.

I cut through limp tussocks to the water's edge where I overturned rocks, eager to see what life remained there. All I got were spiders and worms. The creatures I had my heart set on had already hopped or slithered away. A fresh wave of pain sharpened within me, and I had to steady myself against a tree. But I wouldn't buckle beneath it; I felt better out on the sunny hillocks, even gladdened when I found a clump of fiddlehead ferns I could pick.

Fifteen, maybe twenty minutes had passed when Grandma called out, startling me. "Allison! Come quick!"

I looked over to find her mouth agape and eyes wide. "Old Snapper's here!" she hollered. The clouds overhead seemed to stop then start again.

I ran to the pond, let my eyes follow the sight line of her stick. No more than a dozen feet away lurked a snapping turtle just as she'd said. Neck deep he stood in a still wet spill of mud, his hooked jaw

frozen mid-munch around a mouthful of pickerelweed. His beady eyes seemed to appraise our role in his world--predators? Prey? Mere passersby? The turtle lowered his head to the water and swallowed hard but grazed no further. I glanced up at Grandma Rose. Her own jaw shifted, resetting the dentures in her mouth. She drew her tongue across the red line of her lips. An idea was working up inside her, one she could almost taste.

Old Snapper must have realized he was in trouble. His clawed forelegs pushed against the mud. He jerked sideways, laboring toward the safety of deeper water. At the same time, Grandma rushed forth quicker than I thought she could, shoving aside grass and weeds as she chivied up behind Old Snapper in a sneak attack. I started to laugh but caught myself. The turtle's algae-green shell swallowed the sunlight. How old could he be, I wondered, and just how big? Well over twenty-five pounds, I reasoned, but still Grandma acted as if she could take him. She inched forward. Old Snapper curled his tail to his side, trying to tuck it beneath his shell.

Brush strewn across a cobblebar blocked the turtle's clean getaway. He would have to go around it, but a steep rise precluded any movement to his left and Grandma's jabbing stick cut off his right. She bent down and crept even closer. The turtle rose up on his forelegs, opened his mouth and let out a cry--the heavy hiss of a crudely slit tire.

Dragon's warning, I thought. I pulled back. The turtle lunged, but Grandma dodged his move and thrust her stick in his face. Lightning quick, the turtle's beak clamped down, snapping the wood with a hollow crack. In the second it took for the broken tip to hit ground, Grandma's hand shot out to grab the turtle's half-hidden tail. Her fingers locked around it. With a grunt she pivoted him ass-end up, pinning the turtle's head to the ground with what remained of her stick. For the first time I saw the pale gray of his belly and the shy proof Old Snapper was indeed a male.

He was mad as hell, and bucked and hissed to prove it. He tried to crane his pinned neck, but couldn't wriggle far enough to do any harm. "Reach me my sack," Grandma said, and I did as told, setting the burlap bag on the ground in front of the turtle then lifting the material's mouth with a little stick of my own up and over his head. Old Snapper jerked hard, but Grandma Rose was stronger. Like her brothers before her, she was determined to take home her prize. She nudged the turtle deeper into the sack, onto the cushion of dandelion greens already there, guiding him with her broken stick while I pulled the coarse burlap over his kicking legs--both us careful to avoid the snap-trap of his jaw.

When we were done, Grandma Rose laughed like a young girl, high and sweet--the sound growing gravelly again only when her breath ran out and she had to cough hard to draw it back in. In our shared excitement, I had forgotten the pain taking root in my body, and only now did it step back in. I thought again of the ruined underwear I had hid from Momma that morning, its blood-red proof I was becoming a woman. Breathing slow and steady, I watched Grandma Rose wipe the sweat from her brow, lift her burlap sack and start for home.

By the time we reach her backyard, both of us were exhausted from taking turns carrying the burden of our catch. We heaved the sack atop Grandma's picnic table. The burlap writhed and wriggled anew, and I was dismayed that Old Snapper hadn't been knocked unconscious by my efforts to smack him against the ground when Grandma Rose wasn't looking. I didn't want him to see what I knew was coming.

Grandma Rose told me to fetch a hatchet from her lawnmower shed as well as the metal rack from her charcoal grill. I found them hanging from hooks on the shed wall and took them to her. The rack unhinged into two separate pieces, wire half-moons with a small gap in the center. I held one above the bag as Grandma began to work Old Snapper out, using the weight of her body to pin him to the table. At the first sign of his head, I was to lock my makeshift pillory around his neck. My stomach roiled with anticipation, leaden circles tumbling inside.

Too soon the turtle's head jerked free; I wasn't fast enough. Old Snapper whipped around, dragged his hooked beak across Grandma's palm in the split-second before I clamped the metal tight around him.

Blood inked the pale parchment of her skin. I had failed her. But Grandma did not cry out, she merely pressed harder, lying upon the creature the way a man might lie against a woman--resolute, insistent. With her wounded hand, Grandma Rose reached for the hatchet. One well-placed chop is all it took. The turtle's head fell to the ground, jaw gaping. His legs kicked, one last electric jolt.

After I pulled the metal away, Grandma flipped the dead turtle over. "Go to the shed again," she told me. "You'll find an old tent spike in a bucket on the floor."

I delivered the metal stake to her and watched her pound it through bone, the flat end of her hatchet producing a harsh staccato. She was sweating hard now, smelling of talcum and chalky mints, of mud and metallic blood. Her wig had lost its luster--a gray, limp dust mop sliding down her forehead. Only after securing the turtle to the roughhewn table did Grandma Rose lift her hand to inspect the damage to her palm. Drops the color of blackberry juice trailed down her wrist, falling one by one into the pool encircling the turtle.

Without a word, I hurried to my grandmother's bathroom. There I found disinfectant and gauze. I headed outside again. The day's bright light made me squint as I elbowed open the kitchen's screen door and made my way down the back porch stairs. Pain lunged anew deep inside my belly, but I swallowed it down. I crossed the lawn, took Grandma Rose's large hand inside my own, and began to clean her cut, to wrap her wound--my grandmother's quiet conveying trust and her unspoken need of me. Beside us, dragon blood drained into the ground. Soon Grandma and I would carry fresh meat inside the cool stillness of her kitchen. We would set a pot atop the stove. Strike a flame, boil the water, eat our soup and pretend to be satisfied.

Andrew – Seneca, Late August 1983

Chores done, dinner over, Andrew sneaks from the house to the solace of the woods and the path that leads to Cheat River. Andrew can almost forget the afternoon's heat and his loneliness as he climbs the tree-covered rise, not even Buck at his side this evening. Overhead, wilting leaves hint at changes to come, the end of summer vacation, the start of school, the day when the mountainside will blaze ochre and red. Already Andrew can picture his breath fogging the air on chilly mornings as he waits for the bus to carry him back to school, that otherworld of locker-lined halls and crowded classrooms where he is sure to see Jimmy Gilmore again.

Months have passed since the rainy spring afternoon when the two boys trespassed into Momma's bedroom. Since then, Jimmy has spoken to Andrew only once--the last day of school--and Andrew still feels the sting of his words: *'No, I don't want to hang with you at the river no more. Go fag out over somebody else.'*

With those words, Andrew's summer transformed from a welcome reprieve to a prison sentence, a span of time barely broken up by trips to store or the YMCA. Andrew has forgiven Artie for laughing at him last year and now stays late after Open Swim, using helping out as a pretense for spying on Jimmy as he shoots hoops on the upstairs basketball court. Jimmy plays on a summer league team, is always surrounded by other boys like Ricky Pierce. There is never a right moment for Andrew to approach, to say he's sorry, though sorry for what he's not quite sure. Will there come such a moment once school starts? Andrew turns the question over in his head, anxious for its final resolution. But that moment is not now. Right now there is only the quietness of his walk to Cheat River.

Evening is always the best time to go—better than mornings when the dew gets sneakers wet. Better than sweaty afternoons when his hours are stacked with chores. Better than night when he'd have to take a flashlight to find his way. Only this hour offers the contentment of knowing what the day has brought him, good or bad. The sting of Momma's words has faded; his sister's chicken-dumpling supper lies warm in his stomach. Now is the hour when the light lingers and the shadows stretch, his moment of amnesty, when he can lie on the riverbank and forget his troubles with a touch of his hands. They could be anyone's hands, he thinks. Artie's, thick-knuckled and wide, flecked with fine blond hair at the wrists. Or Jimmy's, bony and thin, forgiving him with their touch.

Andrew quickens his pace up the trail. He traces the ridge that runs toward town. In spots the tree line breaks away to reveal the valley below, the tops of Seneca's tallest buildings awash in the distance beneath the late-day light. Andrew doesn't stop to look. He hurries on to where the path forks, taking not the branch that leads to town but the one that leads to Cheat River. Getting to the swim hole by road would

take nearly an hour of winding through hollows and hills, of searching out the old logging road that once trucked timber away. Andrew carves his path the way the crow flies, paring shortcuts from his father's old route until at last he descends to the sound of rushing water.

There on the bank he sits beneath the wild magnolia where his father's bird dog lies buried. He thinks about how he never once saw his father take Sadie hunting. Going to war must have made him lose interest in such things. But Andrew doesn't want to think about that now. He concentrates instead on the light and shadow on the river, the color this evening of coffee with cream. Spring afternoons is what he wants to remember, hours spent skinnydipping with Jimmy by his side, back when the water warmed enough that the two of them could ride the tire swing together out above the river together, Jimmy's face so close Andrew could feel the boy's breath on his cheek. At the cry *Geronimo!* the two would jump. Now the tire swing hangs empty, barely swaying.

Andrew unbuttons his cutoffs, zips down his fly. He will not feel guilty for wanting his friend. This is just a phase, he tells himself. He closes his eyes and lets someone else's hands take hold of him--Jimmy's hands--now during the saving grace of the day.

But what would Momma do if she found him like this? Make good on her threat to cut him with her scissors? That was just her temper talking, wasn't it? Andrew never knows what she truly means. There is no understanding a mother whose love runs hot and cold, no easy *After School Special* to tell him how to make his family normal, to make *himself* normal inside.

Certainly trying to tell Mrs. Applebee at Bible school last month had proven to be a joke. For a whole week at the start of July, Andrew had been the only teenager in a ragged assemblage of kids otherwise aged six to twelve, most of them misfits whose parents cared less about salvation than they did about getting a breather from their little troublemakers. Yet Mrs. Applebee took her role seriously. She said so in the flyer she began tucking into church bulletins once summer vacation began. She had once taught mathematics at a military academy in Virginia, and, in the year since her husband's death, she had attended evangelical retreats with her sister, returning from the Deep South ready to start "a Bible boot camp for today's at-risk youth." Those were the words that caught Momma's eye and made her decide to send her cross-dressing, fucked-up heathen of a son to the one place where the fear of God might be drilled back into him. That was why Andrew had to go and Allison didn't. This was the only way she could think of to whip his wayward pecker back into shape.

But despite his fears, Bible boot camp didn't strike Andrew as so bad at first. Mrs. Applebee remained ignorant of the reason he was there, and, since he was the eldest, she looked upon him as an assistant. Andrew didn't mind; working with the younger kids was fun. They didn't strike him as especially ornery, just craving attention. In the multi-purpose room beneath the Methodist church's congregation area, he helped them memorize Bible verses and the Ten Commandments, helped them manufacture sock

puppets of the Twelve Apostles, helped them crayon pictures of Joseph in his many-colored coat. But the basement room was hot and the children often grew restless.

Mrs. Applebee was prepared for that. When a little blond boy misbehaved, she whacked his open palms several times with a ruler. “The best idea the Catholics ever had,” Andrew heard the old woman whisper under her breath as he escorted the boy to the bathroom to wipe away his tears. When Mrs. Applebee repeated the punishment to another student the next day, Andrew decided she had crossed a line. He decided to stir up dissent in the ranks. He waited until all the kids had gathered at a table to make angel faces out of paper plates to ask her point blank if she thought beating a kid with a ruler was what Jesus would do. Mrs. Applebee looked at him with her mouth agape. ‘If, if Jesus lived in this day and age,’ she stammered, “I think he most assuredly would.’

Andrew liked seeing an adult flustered because of him. A warmth spread though him that had nothing to do with the basement’s inadequate air-conditioning. Because Mrs. Applebee was especially partial to the Fifth Commandment, he pressed her about it; he asked what Jesus would say when it came to honoring thy mother or father when their actions were anything but honorable. He thought of his mother and her fucking scissors.

Mrs. Applebee told the younger kids to get back to work. She pulled Andrew aside and asked what the devil had gotten into him. Andrew searched her face for sympathy, but found none. Momma had lived in Seneca her whole life, knew everyone in town. They were sure to take her side over that of a moody boy. But still he felt the need to tell someone. He wanted Mrs. Applebee to know the real reason he had to stick up for the kids. His voice cracked as he struggled to find the words. “Sometimes parents do things they shouldn’t,” he said. If he said any more he feared he might cry.

The interrogating look on Mrs. Applebee’s face collapsed into a smirk. “Like what? Giving your bottom a whopping when you no doubt deserve it? I’ve seen how surly you can be. All I know is you’d better watch what you say.” She went on to ask whether a whipping was really worth having Andrew’s mother taken away and never seeing her or his sisters again. That’s what juvenile services did, Mrs. Applebee explained. Andrew wanted to tell her that spankings weren’t what he was talking about, that it was more than that. He wanted to say that it was the invisible threat of his mother always being mad at him, of blaming him for what her life had become--but he didn’t know how to say it, and Mrs. Applebee wouldn’t listen anyway; she simply cut him off with the crisp declaration that she had raised five boys of her own and hadn’t been afraid to take a belt to their backsides when circumstances warranted. Once, she said proudly, she had even backhanded her youngest when he cussed her to her face.

“Momma backhands me, too,” Andrew finally snapped, “and she doesn’t even take the cigarette out of her hand.”

Mrs. Applebee had shaken her head. “That’s what I mean, boy. You got a mouth on you.”

At the riverside, the thought of Widow Applebee's pruney-faced lack of empathy shrivels any sense of desire Andrew has. He grows limp, tucks himself away, sags his head against Sadie's tree.

Was it really only a season ago that he laid here with Jimmy? It feels like forever since they last spoke. '*Go fag out over someone else.*' Each time Andrew thinks of those words, a rock hits bottom inside him. Is that what he is, a faggot?

He wishes he could scribble away the past and start over, the way he can start a new drawing when what he's worked on turns out wrong. But the world isn't one of his drawings. He will have to find his own place in it. For too long he has hated himself, and he is tired of it. He is tired of crying in bed at night hoping no one will hear. He is tired of hatching delicate knife cuts on his arm and legs just to feel again, tired of telling Momma the marks come from stickers brushing against him in the woods. He should be able to be who he is and not have it hurt.

But how can that happen? "Born into original sin," Mrs. Applebee used to remind her charges, "and the whole world rolled downhill from there." Maybe she's right, thinks Andrew as he watches the river. Maybe he deserves what Momma does to him. After all, what are Momma's sins against his own? Is the torment she inflicts on him any worse than what he has done with Jimmy--trying to poison birds with Alka-Seltzer tablets, almost causing car wrecks with stupid shaving cream bombs, jumping from the woods to nearly give a heart attack to the retarded guy who delivers the paper? Andrew laughs bitterly at this last memory, how he and Jimmy braved chigger bites as they lay in wait at the edge of the woods for poor stupid Willy Zirbs.

Andrew had made the mistake of calling Willy a paperboy years ago. "Paper *man!*" Willy had trumpeted haughtily, and it was true he had the five-o'clock shadow and lumbering height to back up his claim. The rest of him was a study in stunted development: his silly short pants and cartoon T-shirts, his thick Coke-bottle glasses, the bug-eyed haplessness he wore on his jowly face. It was common knowledge that his dead mother had provided for his food and rent with a meager trust fund, but delivering *The Seneca Sentinel* saw to Willy's pocket money and sense of purpose. And yet how easily the paper man's sense of self could be stripped away as Andrew and Jimmy burst screaming from the brush. A look of stuttering fury exploded upon Willy's face. He blew at the boys with the whistle he used against dogs. "No fair," Willy cried. "No surprises!"

Laughing, Jimmy elbowed Andrew and pointed at Willy's shorts, wet now with pee Andrew felt bad then but reminded himself that guys like Ricky Pierce refused to let remorse weaken them. He kept quiet as Jimmy egged Willy on. "Hey Willy, you want to know the definition of a surprise?" Willy shook his head 'no', but Jimmy told him anyway. "A fart with a lump in it."

Willy didn't laugh at the tired kindergarten joke, but Jimmy sure got a kick out of it. There was no stopping him. "You know who's got the hots for you?" he asked. "Andrew's sister!"

Willy quit folding his next newspaper and shot Andrew a look.

“Hey, Willy,” Jimmy goaded. “I got another surprise for you. This one’s about Super-Fan.”

Willy Zirbs stopped dead in his tracks.

“Jimmy, wait,” said Andrew. This was going too far.

For years Willy had been coming to local football and basketball games wearing a blue bath towel, a red dime store mask and a black knit cap--the guise of Super-Fan. Countless times Andrew had seen Willy standing in the bleachers, matching the middle school cheerleaders cheer for cheer, though usually a word or two behind. Like the rest of the town, these girls knew the hardships Willy had been through and they halfheartedly tried to humor him, though Willy had been known to wreak pandemonium in the middle of their routines. Their red pom-poms stirred him like a cape before a bull; at the end of last football season, Andrew had watched wide-eyed as the girls’ halftime pyramid collapsed, causing Super-Fan to launch himself over rows of spectators, arms extended in flight as he swooped to the rescue. Horrified, the cheerleaders tried to dodge the lumbering man-child as he attempted to scoop them up in his arms. It took both the principal and Coach Wyatt to finally restrain him.

“I know who Super Fan really is,” Jimmy teased the day of the ambush.

“Not me!” Willy shouted. “He’s not me!”

Andrew grabbed Jimmy’s arm. “Don’t.”

Jimmy shrugged him off. “Of course he’s not you, Willy,” Jimmy said. “That’s because Super-Fan is a, is a--” he milked the revelation for every iota of suspense, “a big fat *retard!*”

Poor Willy Zirbs looked like he had just swallowed a chunk of Kryptonite. What fun there had been in teasing him altogether soured in Andrew’s stomach. If this is what guys like Ricky Pierce felt, then Andrew wanted no part of it. He turned to go home then and would have if Jimmy had not cajoled him into going to Cheat River.

Andrew throws a stone in the water and thinks how that incident couldn’t have been more than a week before things with Jimmy went to hell. Jimmy’s awful words repeat in his head like a refrain. ‘Go fag out over someone else.’ Maybe Andrew really is a fag. Maybe he needs to accept the fact that he and Jimmy will never again swim here or build another model together.

Andrew has been back to the tree fort Jimmy dubbed his Fortress of Solitude only once since school let out. That had been in July, on the day he rescued a few of his father’s things from his mother’s ceremonial goodbye bonfire. He had taken those items to the tree fort along with all his completed models from home; he didn’t want constant reminders of the people who’d abandoned him, but neither could he part with the mementos altogether. His metal footlocker was the answer. On the fort’s wooden rail edge he placed King Kong, Frankenstein’s Monster, the Creature from the Black Lagoon, lining them up like exhibits in a zoo. It reminded him of the alien creatures Superman kept in his own Fortress of Solitude. Andrew had read all about the Man of Steel’s interplanetary menagerie in *Superman* No. 187, a musty issue from the ‘60s he had found in the attic last year alongside a box of letters saved by his Great-Aunt Adalene.

The letters were from Andrew's father, but the man had only recently left, and the letters hurt too much to read. Andrew hid them from his mother and buried his nose instead in that 80-page issue where all of Superman's secrets were revealed.

Superman was like those weird animals himself, thought Andrew. The only one of his kind on earth. Yes, technically there were others, but they didn't count--not the wraithlike evil Kryptonians jailed in the extra-dimensional Phantom Zone, not the shrunken citizens sealed within the Bottle City of Kandor whom Superman had to rescue from the notorious Brainiac. They were as fragile as ants in an ant farm and required constant watch by the Fortress's robot caretaker. Not even Superman's cousin Supergirl counted; she hadn't rocketed to earth until Kal-El was an adult. She was more a kid sister than a soul-mate; she would never all the loneliness Clark Kent had endured growing up. Superman always had been and always would be essentially alone.

But did that always have to be the case? In the comic books Andrew loved so much there were alternate universes full of *what if?* possibilities. Every summer, for instance, the Justice League of America left their Earth and traveled to Earth-Two where a different super group existed, the Justice *Society* of America, whose membership included much older versions of Superman, Batman and the Flash, heroes who had been fighting crime since World War II. But alternate-universe stories weren't limited only to such crossovers; sometimes a hero ended up in his own future instead, where he'd have to help his own descendants save the world. Or sometimes he might return from outer space to find his present reality warped—all the heroes gone bad and the villains turned good, or --all the superheroes somehow having switched genders—*Superwoman* instead of Superman. No matter how intricate or convoluted the plots were in such stories, they always left Andrew with a sense of hope. Other yous might exist out there somewhere. And if you wanted to live in another world, all you had to do was find your way to it.

He thinks now of those comics and the models he and Jimmy made, the old notebooks filled with his drawings and his thoughts about the world, the stack of letters he still hasn't dared read. He thinks again of poor Willy Zirbs, and how if Jimmy can be so cavalier about the secrets of someone like him, how much regard can he hold for anybody else?

Yesterday he had seen Jimmy at the Y sitting in the bleachers next to Ricky Pierce as they waited for one basketball game to end so theirs could begin. Andrew had been taking sports equipment to the storage closet. This time, instead of avoiding his gaze, Jimmy kept an eye on Andrew. He had snickered and whispered to Ricky until Andrew felt his face grow flushed. He hadn't realized what the incident might mean until now. Filled with sudden dread, he rises to his feet.

Andrew races along the path that hugs the river, trying to beat the fading light. He needs to see his tree house again, his Fortress of Solitude, needs to make sure everything is still safe. The path is muddy in spots, hard to see clearly. Andrew stumbles. He picks himself up and starts again, closing the distance to where the tree fort overlooks Cheat River.

In a sway of maple leaves its old planks float, a frozen magic carpet. Andrew grabs hold of the slats nailed to the tree trunk. Something flutters above him--not leaves but the sound of paper rustling. Andrew climbs. He pulls himself through the hole cut in the tree fort floor.

Not even the pink light of evening can forgive the sight of what someone's done. The remains of the monster models lie smashed and scattered across the tree fort's planks. Andrew's footlocker has been overturned, ransacked of comics and keepsakes. A few stray marbles from his dad's collection remain caught in the rifts between the planks, but most are gone, along with their felt bag. Andrew's prize comics lay tattered and torn next to his journals, issues of *Batman and Robin* and *Aquaman* weather-beaten and wrinkled; issues of *Superman* ripped in half. The old army letters Andrew salvaged are blowing around, caught in the corners of the tree fort. A lump rises in Andrew's throat as he reaches for them.

Something catches his eye. He looks up to where a shaft of light falls across the trunk of the tree, illuminating the letters Jimmy once carved. One of the words has been hacked over; its white scrawl now reads *Fortress of Faggitude*.

Jimmy. Had to be. Well fuck him.

There is no solitude to be had here anymore, not with the trespass of what Jimmy has done. Jimmy and Ricky together, the two of them undoubtedly really getting their rocks off as they busted and stole Andrew's favorite things. Andrew gathers what's left, the least torn comics, the single model that might be salvageable, the marbles caught in the cracks of the planks. He packs them back in his metal footlocker, knowing that it's time to take it all somewhere else. But where?

The sound of Cheat River flowing in the distance tells him what he needs to do. Tomorrow he will take the rope from the tire swing he and Jimmy hung. He will loop it over a branch here instead, lower his old trunk and haul it away, off to the swim hole where Sadie lies buried. He will have to bury this footlocker too, bury it and forget that Jimmy Gilmore was ever his friend.

Part Two: Playing Grownups

Chapter 13: Wakeup Call

That first night in Philadelphia I had fallen asleep on the rooftop of Andrew's apartment building, and only awoke when the Saturday morning light eked past the rooftop next door to hit me in the face. I was disoriented at first, then glad I hadn't been assaulted in my sleep by some big-city cat-burgling pervert. Charlie the trucker had been bad enough. I stood and stretched and pushed that thought from my mind. To the south I could hear a few birds calling from the trees that towered over the Amble-Through, and to the west, I made out sounds of traffic building on Broad Street as the city came back to life. A bee had made its way to the lavender blooms of Andrew's chives, and I realized I didn't have my EpiPen in my pocket, so I made sure to keep my distance as I climbed back down the fire escape to Andrew's apartment.

He hadn't come back of course, but that still didn't prevent me from checking his bed, just in case. The bedsheets were unwrinkled, just as I had left them. The clock on his milk crate nightstand read just after seven, just about the time I usually got up back home. If I had been back in West Virginia, I'd have known what to do with myself, the same things I did every day. Get up, wash whatever dishes were in the sink, start Momma a pot of coffee. Saturday morning would mean Elizabeth would rise with hardly any prompting; at the age of ten-and-counting she still liked to check out the new cartoons on TV. I would fix her breakfast, maybe French toast or oatmeal, then poach Momma the one egg the doctor allowed her each week ever since she had started putting on weight and her cholesterol had spiked. Momma blamed it on her medications, but I had been successful for the most part in convincing her that a few extra pounds was worth the easing of her frequent mood swings, and in the last year or so we had managed to sustain peace in the house. At least most of the time. But I knew today there would be no peace back home, that Momma would still be frantic about my having left. I had not yet called her, and knew that I should. The note I had left with Martin, my manager at Hardlee's Fastfood, would certainly not be assuage her worry or appease her temper. But the phone wasn't working here.

After I took a shower, I decided to go get something to eat and think about everything I needed to do. Despite the early hour, I figured in a city this size I could certainly find someplace open for breakfast. I took a stack of Andrew's unopened mail with me, hoping I might find a clue as to where he'd gone or how soon I'd be evicted from his old apartment. Downstairs, a white-haired man was opening the deli, and he gave me a funny look as I squeezed by him and a large stack of newspapers that had been dropped off sometime earlier. I thought about buying one, but a glance at the headlines--one about problems with the Mars Observer, another about a Yale professor recovering from an exploding package mailed by the Unabomber--seemed either remote or depressing, so I chose to do without.

Walking down the shady streets of the Amble-through, I noticed a few other people already out walking dogs or watering window boxes. The brick houses all looked more or less the same, with the exception of their doors and old-fashioned shutters, which changed color from house to house. They were pretty, but none was as unique as the red door Andrew had decorated on Rodman Street. Eventually I stumbled upon the same path I had taken yesterday, but the Amble-Through's twist and turns soon stole my sense of direction. When it spit me out onto 12th Street I was a block further up than I thought I'd be. That was lucky, I guess, for there was a restaurant on the corner called the Cheap Art Café whose door was propped open for business.

Inside, the restaurant's walls were covered with goofy artwork for sale that appeared to be the output of local college students. Only two other customers were in the place. I sat down at a table next to a long bank of windows and ordered a spinach omelet and a cup of coffee, hoping the latter would taste as good as what I had tried yesterday. None of Andrew's mail looked like it had been booby-trapped by the Unabomber, so I started opening it as I waited for my food. Most of it was junk, like a flyer for a list of art openings come the first Friday in September, or a free software sample for something I had never heard of before, AOL for Macintosh. I certainly hadn't seen any signs of a computer in Andrew's apartment. (Perhaps he took after Momma and hated the things; a few years before, she had the unfortunate timing to finally finish her typing instructor certification just as the world was switching to computers. While the speed drills she knew were equally effective for IBM keyboards as for old Selectrics, the world of microchips and Random Access Memory was well beyond my mother's expertise. Her already out-of-date diploma quashed her dreams of becoming a full-time teacher, and she remained in her job as a secretary for the Board of Education.) The rest of Andrew's mail consisted mainly of unpaid bills. Obviously that was why his phone and electricity had been shut off. At least his next rent payment wasn't due until the start of September. The statement from the rental agency told me that his lease was not up until December 1st, and I figured that even if I didn't pay a dime the fact that his security deposit could be applied to the last month's rent meant I would probably at least have until October 1st before someone knocked on the door to give me the heave-ho.

My food came. The omelet was smothered in cheese and delicious, the coffee not nearly as good as what had come out of Aleta's French press. As I ate, I decided to make a mental list of things in my favor if I chose to stay in Philadelphia. First, I was lucky to have left home with my ATM card and checkbook in my purse, and there was no way Momma could cripple my finances since I had already had her name removed as a secondary signer on my account. Usually Momma was a penny pincher, but back in February I had caught her using my funds to pay off a massive credit card debt she had run up during a manic, after-Christmas shopping spree at the mall in Fairmont, bringing home boxes of discount ornaments we did not need and bagfuls of marked-down outfits that would fit her only if she actually managed to stick to one of

the fad diets she had given up on time and again. A consequence of her mood swings, Dr. Whetsel had told me when I consulted him; he upped her dosage and I returned her merchandise. Still, I had learned a lesson.

So I found that even without adding in the money Grandma Rose had willed to me, my balance was still pretty healthy from having worked, even at a crummy pay rate, at Hardlee's Fastfood for over five years—which just goes to show the benefits not having a social life can provide. I also had in my favor a place I could stay, seemingly for free, at least for awhile. Another plus was Andrew's friends, Aleta and Remy, who seemed nice and helpful, though somewhat bizarre compared to people back home. I had yet to exhaust their knowledge of Andrew's time here in the city. And in spite of the labyrinth of the Amble-Through, I seemed to be getting my bearings. But the most important thing on my side was when I finally realized I had a lot more gumption than I would have given myself credit for a few days ago.

That brought a smile to my lips. I knew my choices were to either give up and go home, or stick it out here playing Nancy Drew in hopes of discovering where Andrew went. What the hell, I finally decided. Why not stay in Philadelphia, at least for a while? Even if I didn't figure out where Andrew went the worst that could happen, I told myself, was that I'd have me a big city vacation. I couldn't recall the last time I'd had a vacation.

Once this was decided, I pulled a pen from my purse and wrote a To Do list.

Buy some clothes (T-shirts? Shorts? Jeans? Underwear)

See about getting phone/electric hooked back up?

Review next month's utilities, write checks?

Find ATM

Buy groceries!

Find a map of Philadelphia/get better oriented

Contact Martin about getting last paycheck

Look through Andrew's notebooks for ideas/clues?

Talk with Andrew's co-workers, boss (at museum?)

Make a list of Andrew's other friends here?

Track down this Steven?

Review Andrew's bank statement - gas purchases, hotel purchases, etc (may show where he went?)

What I didn't want write down on my To Do list was the one thing I could put off no longer: Call home. I had to, before Momma herself phoned the police or the FBI. I finished eating and threw away Andrew's junk mail. As I paid my bill, I looked around for a payphone, but there wasn't one in the place. I asked for some quarters anyway when the woman behind the counter gave me my change. Maybe there'd be one outside. Before I left, I was able to cross off one of the items on my list. By the register was a big bulletin board with flyers advertising guitar lessons or community fundraisers, such as a local animal

shelter's movie night featuring *Old Yeller*. Stapled beneath the orange sign was a box of free maps, their covers emblazoned with big pink triangles. I took one as I headed back out onto 12th Street into the hot sunshine. In the years since the Great Purge, I'd begun telling myself a story, and I thought of it then. Thought I was the teller, it wasn't my story; it was Daddy's, Momma's, Andrew's—all the family that came before I did.

* * *

I imagine my parents' courtship: a parked truck on an October night, a man and woman so young I might call them kids if I saw them now. My mother's pale skin is lit blue by the dashboard; my father is a shade darker, his shirt unbuttoned. She leans against him. Their lips—cured in cigarette smoke, marinated in whiskey--kiss then part, then kiss again.

She smooths her hiked skirt past her knees and lifts a bare foot to rest against the radio. She twiddles the volume up and down with her toe. The young man sighs as he sinks against the seatback. She is no good for him and he knows it. Still, she is company, pretty company. She lets him take down her hair, lets him stroke her thigh while she rests against his collarbone and hums a song overtop the commercial on the radio. She wants to be a college girl, she says, wants to go to school over in Elkins if she can save up enough money by next year. She waves her hands before his eyes--long slim fingers with pink painted nails--and tells him how she can type eighty words a minute, no mistakes. I'm something special, she reminds him, shooting her war hero a look until he nods in agreement. A college girl, he thinks--just like that other who ran off to California while he was in Vietnam. Is Katie cut from the same damn cloth? Hell, he doesn't even know why he likes her, or if she is the reason he's stayed in town this long, when everyone else he knows has hightailed it to Pittsburgh or down to DC--big cities where paychecks offer more than black lung. What's he doing, hauling produce, working odd construction jobs--killing time? Staving off loneliness? The uncle whose farm he has worked most all his life is dead now, and the aunt who raised him no longer recognizes his face since the stroke last spring. Kevin's gone; his uncle's farmhouse is all that is left to him in this world, but even that is rented to white trash tenants he can't get rid of till next summer. He should sell the house and the land for what money it will bring and get the hell out. But this Katie holds him here. Maybe if he lets her work on him awhile, the memory of that far off war won't move around inside him so much. But love? He's not even sure what love is. Love is words, a thing far less true than the one fact he knows, that Katie will never leave this town. She is all her mother has anymore. Wants to be a college girl. Yet these mountains, these people, suit her. This is what he thinks as he pulls himself to her. On the radio, Patsy Cline sings "Walking After Midnight" sweet and smooth, making it easy to nuzzle this young woman's neck, tongue this Katie's ear, until she lifts her head and accepts a kiss into the smoky ripeness of her mouth. A lift of Momma's skirt, a tear at her panties. In the truck bed, swollen pumpkins newly picked shift as the metal beneath them shakes.

Months pass. Full of morning sickness. Doctor visits. A tearful confession to Grandma Rose. Come December, a hasty wedding in a hand-me-down gown. Finally on a fateful Sunday in July, she goes into labor watching a report about the Apollo astronauts while playing Crazy Eights with her Aunt Inez. He is off taking weekend work, pouring concrete at a house in Harmon for a man whose wife sticks her head out the backdoor to tell this daddy-to-be he must get to the hospital at once. He apologizes to Lew for leaving him shorthanded, hard to get help when the whole world has been huddled around television sets the last four days awaiting news of the lunar landing. With a little liquid courage from beneath his truck seat, this daddy-to-be rockets to the hospital himself.

There he manages a brief clasp of his bride's hand, a quick kiss to her sweaty forehead before he is ushered out of her room by a well-meaning nurse. He waits in the hallway lounge alongside Rose and Inez, old hens who irritate him more with each passing hour. A black and white TV has been brought into the lounge, and the floor's staff gathers round, eager to watch the Lunar Module touch down on the Sea of Tranquility. Inez mutters she doesn't believe it. Neither do I, this daddy-to-be wants to tell her, his thoughts elsewhere. It's late in the afternoon when the Eagle finally lands. The nurses applaud; this daddy-to-be's stomach growls; he hasn't had a bite since breakfast. What is taking so long? He goes to the cafeteria, but cannot eat his sandwich. At ten, when the night shift arrives, he is reassured everything is all right; pay no mind to that screaming down the hall. *Childbearing is just harder on some women than others*, he is told by the new nurse. *The doctor's going to give her something to knock her out; he needs to perform a C-section, but don't worry*. In the lounge, Rose is squeezing Inez's hand like she might break her sister's fingers. He hasn't seen them take so much as a bathroom break in the last several hours, hardly talking now as they stare stone-faced at the TV. Inside his chest this daddy-to-be's heart pounds a mile a minute. The night nurse pours him a cup of coffee, ratchets up her hillbilly accent to win him over. *Stop worrying so much. Go watch those crazy astro-nuts on the boob-tube*.

She is right, he thinks, the whole world is nuts. That a child could be coming into this world, a child of his, when soldiers are blowing each other to bits in faraway jungles and a spacecraft is landing on the surface of the moon, is so damn nuts that he wants to laugh, wants to cry, wants to turn to anyone who will listen and confide in them all that he feels—if he only knew how to put it into words. It is past eleven o'clock now, and David McKenna still hasn't eaten, hasn't even brushed the dried cement off his boots. On the TV the picture from the camera on the lunar surface is hard to make out, but there Neil Armstrong is, dressed in his white spacesuit, jouncing down the Eagle's ladder. Through a spit of static Armstrong proclaims "one giant leap for mankind"—and it is at that moment that David McKenna lets go of his fear and lets something else rise up in its place. His eyes, and those of half a billion others, are at this moment watching something wondrous take place. Man has stepped foot on the moon. And down here his Katie is in labor. It is a night full of miracles, he thinks. And this he tells to Rose, to Inez, to the nurses and anyone else who will listen,

pausing only to swish the bad hospital coffee from one side of his mouth to the other. *A night of miracles*, he says again.

* * *

I crossed to the shady side of the 12th Street in search of another payphone. I passed the bookstore where Remy worked, which I noticed was listed on my map along with seemingly every gay bar in town. This would come in handy if I needed to trace Andrew's old haunts, I figured. The map only covered the downtown of the city, "Center City" they called it, and as I stood there looking at how big it all was I realized how fortunate I had been yesterday when asshole Charlie had chosen to drop me off right on the edge of Andrew's old stomping grounds. Maybe my luck was changing.

Across Pine Street I spotted a payphone outside a pizza shop, but when I tried to use it the damn thing ate my money. I got a dial tone, but didn't think I could call collect. After the disaster with Andrew at the cemetery last December, Momma had made the phone company cut off our long distance service when she discovered I had called my brother a few times to make sure he was all right. I figured her set-up also forbade reversing charges. I hung up, and shoved my handful of quarters back in the pocket of my sweats.

The sign on Giovanni's Room bookstore had said the place wouldn't be open until eleven-thirty, so I couldn't stop in to ask Remy where else I might try. But what if he didn't even work there on Saturdays? Perhaps he would be up by now anyway, or maybe Aleta, or one of the God-only-knew-how-many others who lived in Andrew's old house on Rodman Street. Maybe I could give them money and use their phone.

I walked down Pine Street to Broad, and turned south to stop at the store where I had bought my iced tea yesterday, figuring I could get some donuts to grease the wheel with Remy and Aleta when I made my request. As I neared the corner where the 8-Twelve Convenience Market stood, I was surprised to see a bunch of metal scaffolding had been erected in front of the ugly mural above the store's parking lot. A black man and a white woman stood at different heights on the scaffolding, using pressurized paint sprayers to whitewash away the rendering of the old 7-Eleven that had been there the day before. A number of other folks, mostly teenage boys, stood outside a van with a logo for the Anti-Graffiti Network on its side. Most of them had on red T-shirts emblazoned with the word MAP across their chests. Were they going to paint over the old work with some sort of map of the city, I wondered? Something better than the ugly image that had been there before? I thought again of the map on Andrew's wall in his old house around the corner, all the places he wanted to go, all the places he could possibly be.

I asked a young black kid who wore one of the T-shirts what was happening.

He cocked his head at me. "They painting over the old mural," he said.

His deadpan statement of the obvious left me feeling like an idiot. The boy couldn't have been more than fifteen, but he was already fully steeped in that brusque, Philadelphia attitude I had encountered yesterday.

“Yo, Rufus,” said a white kid next to him. He was short and squirrely for his age, with a Phillies cap on backwards and a gold chain around his neck. “She can see that, a’ight? What she want to know is what’s goin’ up.”

“Oh,” said Rufus, softening a little.

I pointed at his shirt. “Some kind of map?”

He laughed, flashing his teeth. “You’re tripping, girl. We ain’t painting no map. Mural Arts Program is what it is. We erasing that tired old shit-ass painting and putting up something fine in its place.”

An older white woman standing by the van glanced over at us. “Watch your language, Rufus.”

It was the white kid’s turn to laugh. “Busted. *Again!*” He busted a dance move inside a pair of shorts too big for him, and pointed at Rufus like some sort of rapper wannabe. “Ole Rufus here got caught taggin’ buildings on South Street and now he got to add some sizzle to the scene, yo.”

“Yeah?” Rufus said. “You lucky they don’t got you out picking trash up with the juvies, no better than you tag.”

The white boy ignored him, still looking at me. “When the man got me, I was the best tagger in South Philly, yo. But I’m an *artist* now, dig?” Each word he said was like an exercise in how much of his mouth he could twist into it.

“Whaddaya mean by bling?” I asked him. “What’s a tagger?”

He caught my accent. “Where you from, yo? Alabama?”

I chuckled. “West Virginia.”

This revelation made both boys laugh as well. I wasn’t sure why. But it helped them open up more, glad I think to have a stranger asking them questions, taking them seriously. They went on to tell me about how they were spending the summer assisting with the city’s mural project, having stayed on even when their community service time was up, both of them having been initially assigned the work for having been caught tagging their street handles on other people’s property with spray paint. When I asked why they were standing around, they looked at each other sheepishly before confessing they had had a little “incident” working on their last mural and now were forbidden to touch the sprayers. “But you just wait till they let me up there with a brush, girl,” Rufus said to me. “Then you be seeing something.” I liked that the two boys seemed to have a newfound sense of purpose and took pride in the fact they were now actually getting paid for their time and talent. Before I went into the store, they even showed me a black-and-white sketch of the new mural, a busy rendition of a pretty young girl draped in a long, flowing robe that fanned out from her body in all directions. Each fold of the robe was like a movie screen, presenting slices of different scenes, but the drawing was too small and too crammed with detail for me to fully appreciate it.

I got a bagful of fresh donuts from the Middle-Eastern man, who was complaining to anyone who would listen how he would never have given the mural workers permission if he had known how badly they would tie up his parking lot.

I rolled my eyes and left. Maybe this was simply the way Philadelphia was, full of brusque people who liked to talk tough or complain but who were actually nice once you pried past the armor they wore. Back outside, I gave both boys a donut, which seemed to surprise them. They bit into the pastries greedily. The white kid, who finally introduced himself as Rocco, asked for another, but I told him I had to save some for my friends. "Maybe next time," Rocco told me, before inviting me to come back over the next week to watch their progress as the mural went up.

"Yeah, you really be seein' something then," Rufus promised.

I told them maybe I'd do that, then headed past the other workers, past the scaffolding and van. Once beyond the senior center on whose side the mural was being painted, I turned onto Rodman Street and walked halfway down the block to the funny red door decorated with gold. I knocked. Duke barked on the other side again, but there were no signs of human life. I knocked again. This time a voice answered, telling me to hold on. A few seconds later the door was opened by a man with curly brown hair. He looked to be in his late twenties, older than me. "May I help you?"

The man was skinny, but handsome, slouching against the doorjamb like a male model in a fashion magazine. I swallowed down the awkwardness I felt and asked for Remy or Aleta.

He smiled. "Oh... you must be the chick they talked about. Andrew's sister." He had a slow way of talking, like a "dude" in a surfer movie. At least he was dressed--unlike Aleta yesterday--and had the kind of frame anything could look good on, even a sleeveless green army shirt and a pair of parachute pants cut into shorts. "Allison, right?"

I nodded.

"I'm Tommy," he told me with a wink of his deep brown eyes. "Come on in."

As I followed him into the dim living room, Duke the dog circled my legs, sniffing and wagging his tail.

"I was just drinking some java on the back porch," Tommy said. "Want some?"

"Sure."

"Cool." Tommy started for the kitchen but stopped; I was following so closely I nearly smacked into him. Tommy grinned, made an overly grand gesture of sweeping aside so I could pass. He walked back to the front of the house while I settled into a chair at the table and Duke turned his attention to a bowl of dog food. "Yo, Remy! Yo, Aleta!" Tommy shouted up the stairs. "Take a piss and get the lead outta your ass! You got company!"

My ears burned in embarrassment at the fuss he'd made. I wanted to bolt, but Tommy just grinned ear to ear as he headed back to the kitchen. "That'll teach those lazy sonsabitches," he said with a laugh, then started washing a coffee mug from the pile of dishes in the sink. I told Tommy I had brought donuts, which elicited a playful wiggle of his eyebrows and an even broader smile. A moment later he plunked the mug down in front of me and poured me the last of the "java" from the same press pot Aleta had used

yesterday. There was no offer of milk. Standing beside me, Tommy dug into the donut bag and grabbed two of them, one chocolate, one frosted.

He balanced them atop of his own coffee mug and gestured with his head toward the yard. “Let’s sit a spell on the veranda, as you Southerners like to say.” With that, he slid open the screen door and stepped out onto the back porch, turning a moment later to see if I’d follow. He winked at me again, and I started to wonder if he had some sort of eye tick. I finished pouring some sugar in my coffee and headed out to join him.

The porch was a simple uncovered deck just wide enough for a pair of old bistro chairs and a table made out of a metal beer sign fastened atop a birdbath pedestal. A few steps led down into a yard no wider than the house itself and only about a third as deep; it ended in back at a wooden fence beyond which a dead tree rose. The yard held no grass, only brick pavers that had been pulled up in spots to make way for few thirsty-looking hydrangeas.. Bushy weeds had overtaken a couple of large terracotta pots. There were some holes dug in the yard that made me wonder if Duke liked to bury bones. As I settled into the bistro chair, I took a better look at the property beyond the back wall, an eyesore if ever there was one.

Tommy caught me staring at the soot-stained building. He gobbled down his second donut and informed me the place was vacant, beyond repair. On the table between us lay a pack of rolling papers and a pouch of something called Pow-Wow Blend, an organic tobacco. As Tommy told me about the building, I watched him crumble tobacco leaves onto a tiny square of paper. “Couple winters ago a few homeless guys snuck in there one night and lit up a fire to stay warm. Woulda burned the whole place down if your brother hadn’t called the fire department.” Tommy smiled at the memory. “One damn guy climbed out the top floor window and got stuck in a tree branch outside Waif’s window.”

“Waif?” I asked, recalling the name from talking with Remy the day before.

Tommy glanced at me sideways. “AKA Tiffany. She used to live here too, off and on, along with this other guy, also named Tom, like me. Confusing, I know. The other Tom had Aleta’s top floor room back then, and Aleta was living in the basement, I think. And Waif--we called Tiffany that because she was so damn skinny and freaked out looking but always floating around like some sort of orphan--she got scared the night of the fire thinking the homeless Tarzan-guy was a rapist or something. Tried to knock him outta the tree with the end of a vacuum cleaner. Your brother woke up and stopped her.”

I glanced up to see how one of the dead tree’s branches veered within spitting distance of a top-floor window. When I looked back down, Tommy had unzipped a pocket in his parachute cut-offs and pulled out a pack of matches and an amber medicine vial.

“The whole household was buzzing by then,” Tommy said, uncapping the vial. “But not a one of us could find the key to the breezeway that runs between this house and the next, so the fire department had to smash it with an axe to run a hose through.” He sprinkled something that looked like dried oregano atop the tobacco he had spread upon the rolling paper.

“Next thing I know the fire department’s running through our front door with a ladder. Aleta’s up and barking orders at them like someone just named her the new fire chief. Remy and the other Tom are just getting in from barhopping. Out back, the firemen are attacking the blaze from both our side and South Street. And up in the air, the homeless man’s still hanging on for dear life.”

“You’re kidding.”

Tommy pulled his attention away from rolling up his little cigarette and looked at me with his intense brown eyes. “Nope. And it was your brother who had the good sense to start whipping up cocktails so everyone in the house could relax and let the firemen do their work. Purple Jesuses he called them.” His headful of brown curls shook as he laughed. “Every last bottle of booze in the house he poured into the blender with grape juice and ice. Then *wham*--out came alcohol Slurpees for all.” He finished rolling his cigarette and sealed it shut with his tongue. “Andrew told me you never forget your first Purple Jesus, and the way I was prayin’ to the porcelain idol the next morning, I can testify to the fact that’s true.”

“What kind of bullshit you spoutin’ now?” Aleta said, surprising us both. She stood in the screen door behind us, dressed in her too-short red kimono. One of the black lotus flowers embroidered on it was starting to unravel.

Beside me, Tommy lit his cigarette on his very first try. “Just telling our guest what a bad-ass you are.” Tommy grinned as he took a puff. The smoke that blossomed smelled something awful, like skunk odor clinging to car wheels. “The girl here brought donuts!” he said excitedly as he tried to hold the smoke inside his lungs.

“Morning, Allison,” Aleta said to me with a tired smile. She found the donut bag on the kitchen table and fished one out. “Looks like you’re meeting the whole crew.” She slid open the screen door to let Duke out.

“Sorry to have gotten you up,” I said as I pulled my hair over my ears. They had started to burn again. Duke scurried past my legs and bounded into the yard. “I was hoping maybe I could use your phone to call home. The one at Andrew’s place has been disconnected. I can pay you.”

“Duke, dammit!” Tommy cried. “Cut that out!”

Aleta and I both glanced at Tommy, who had leapt down the stairs after the dog, and was now shushing him away from peeing on the terracotta pots. “Not on my Super Silver Haze! Shit! I brought those seeds back all the way from Amsterdam!” He looked back up our way, still puffing on his tiny cigarette. “Aleta!” His brown eyes had lost their playful wink.

“Get over your bad self, hash-head!” she told him.

Tommy prodded Duke away, over to a bleak hydrangea.. I rose up and leaned against the deck rail, trying to get a better look at Tommy’s plants. Seven leaves all right. Five big, two small--just like the picture on the T-shirt Andrew had once tried to wear to high school before Momma made him throw it away. Tommy’s weeds were *Weed* with a capital W.

Aleta moved back a few steps and pulled the phone receiver from its cradle on the wall by the kitchen table. She came out beside me again, stretching the kinks from the phone's ridiculously long cord. She handed the receiver to me. "Look, you take that dog down there for a walk so I can get ready for work and we'll call it even, a'ight?"

"Deal," I told her.

Aleta smiled and went back inside the kitchen. I sat down again and looked at the phone in my hand. In the yard, Tommy's temper had softened, and now he and Duke were playing Tug-of-War with an old knotted T-shirt the dog had scrounged up. I swallowed hard and placed the call.

Elizabeth picked up on the second ring. "Allison! Is it really you?" she asked upon hearing my "hey" hello. Her voice dropped to a hush, letting me know Momma must be nearby. "Why'd you go? Are you there with Andrew? What's Philadelphia like? Does he know I miss 'im?"

"Slow down," I said. "No he's not here. I'm with some friends of his. He went... he went on a trip." I felt bad lying to her.

"Well, when he gets back, bring him home. Does he know how long it's been? Bring him home for my birthday next week. Okay? I don't care what Momma says. Does he know I miss him? Hey--"

Momma must have grabbed the phone out of Elizabeth's hand because the next thing I know, she's screaming at me.

"Allison! Where the hell are you? What do you mean, running off in the middle of the night and giving me a heart attack? How dare you treat me like that. Did Andrew put you up to this? I oughta kick that bastard in the balls!"

"Momma, Andrew had nothing to do with this."

But she was talking over me, about her worry when I didn't come home, about her embarrassment at having to drive to Hardlee's to get the note I'd left with Martin, about her sense of abandonment, betrayal and extreme humiliation standing there by the fast food counter reading my dashed goodbye with a roomful of eyes upon her.

Standing there with the phone in my hand, I was still at a loss to explain what I'd done. Even if I managed to get a word in edgewise, how could I explain to her that ever since that family funeral last Christmas, when Andrew had left home for the last time only to vow never to return, a sense of panic had been building inside me? For too long most everyone I cared about seemed to be speeding along the path to death or self-destruction, with drunken, depressed Andrew taking the lead. When his calls and postcards stopped coming, my panic intensified. He wasn't simply hiding secrets; he was cutting me off the way he had Momma. So even if she had decided to take a breath right then, how could I explained to her all I'd felt two night ago when Charlie walked into Hardlee's to drop the bomb that the gendarme had fallen, that Princess Snowbird had finally tired of her ancient calcifying wait and pitched herself into a million pieces

among the sandstone scree? There was no way Momma would've understood what that meant to me, that it was a sign telling me what I finally had to do.

On the phone Momma gave me orders through gritted teeth. "You are going to turn around and come *home*. I want you this very afternoon to take your brother's car, or find a bus station and buy a ticket, or do whatever it takes to put yourself in reverse and haul your ass the hell home! I did *not* give you permission to run off and--"

Remy came down the stairs at the front of the house, dressed in a purple kimono just as short and skimpy as Aleta's. A dark-skinned young man trailed behind him, and as I stood there absorbing the tongue lashing that blasted from the phone, I watched Remy kiss him long and deep before unlocking the door and sending him on his way.

Momma went on as Remy sashayed into the kitchen, his hairy legs an odd sight as they worked the too-short skirt of his robe. He gave me a theatrical look of surprise, then leaned in to give me an air kiss. His hair smelled of bar smoke, the way Daddy's used to the nights he came home from Wimpy's Pool Hall. Remy noticed Momma's yelling--how could he not the way her tirade blared through the phone, so loud now that I had to hold the receiver a good six inches from my ear. Remy's eyes pinwheeled in their sockets as he scooted past me to dig himself a coffee mug from the pile in the sink.

"---I don't care what he tells you," Momma continued, "your brother has decided to hoe his own row, so you just let him do whatever the hell he wants. You're coming home, young lady. Today."

I took off my glasses and rubbed my temples. "I don't think I can do that. I don't think I want to come home."

"What do you mean you can't do that? You don't *want* to? Listen, little lady. It's *him* or *me*. And I shouldn't have to remind you that I'm the one who--"

"Momma," I sighed. "I'm on somebody else's phone. I've got to go."

"Don't you *dare* hang up on me--"

But that's exactly what I did. Aleta and Tommy's bantering out back washed in to fill the silence in the wake of the call. Remy had remained near me, quiet the whole time, and now with a gentle hand on my shoulder he eased me down into a chair as my eyes welled up in front of him for the second time in two days. He sat down beside me and twisted his mouth into a farcical moue. "That could have only been the famous Momma Hyde your brother used to go on about."

"Yep." I sniffed back my tears and laughed, not having heard that nickname since Andrew had last left home.

"Ooh, donuts!" Remy said, noticing the bag. He dug one out and handed the rest to me. Outside, Aleta was raising her voice to Tommy, yelling at him to quit teasing the dog so she could bring him inside and get him ready for his walk. Remy and I watched her through the screen door as she marched back up onto the deck.

“If you really got so much energy this morning,” she called back over her shoulder to Tommy, “you might try tacklin’ the dishes in the sink!” She came in the door and slid the screen closed with a bang.

Remy gave her an incredulous look. “Tommy? Dishes? Aleta, honey--you know the only time that boy lends a hand is when it comes to mutual masturbation.”

Aleta’s grumpiness gave way to a chuckle. “Don’t I know it,” she finally conceded. She turned on the sink faucet and squirted some liquid detergent on the pile, then turned to look at me as the water ran. “He likes to cook but hates too clean. Too fuckin’ lazy.”

“Tommy’s cooking is the main reason we keep him around,” Remy told me, “‘cause he sure ain’t good about turning his rent money in.” He winked at me conspiratorially. “Tommy blames his inability to hold down a job on dyslexia. Everyone *else* blames it on the fact that he’s perpetually stoned.”

“You get your call done like you wanted?” Aleta asked me.

I sighed. “Yeah, I guess so.” I was glad she didn’t press.

We talked awhile more then, Aleta and Remy pointing out places of interest on the map I showed them while out back crazy Tommy’s mood turned so agreeable again that he started serenading Duke the dog with an old blues tune. After a while he came inside and announced he had to roll. “This dude I know promised to help me shoot my new audition tape for *The Real World*.” Remy and Aleta groaned. Once Tommy had left, the other two told me he had been mailing off tapes every other month since the show debuted a year ago. I laughed, trying not to think anymore about Momma. Instead, I told them about the boys working on the mural around the corner, and Remy and Aleta told me a few new things about Andrew. But it wasn’t long before we’d finished off all the donuts and another couple rounds of coffee. Our small talk ran cold. Aleta carried our mugs to the suds-filled sink and plunged them in, and for a moment I could see myself, back home in our family’s kitchen and standing behind my own sinkful of dishes, the way I had done so for too many days of too much of my life. I was glad when Aleta, her hands deep in the soapy water, glanced over her shoulder at me at me and broke the spell. She pointed to a peg on the wall with her chin. “Duke’s leash,” she reminded.

Chapter 14: Mixed Tape

Andrew – Seneca, Christmas 1987

The road is glassy, the woods an icy tunnel as Andrew guns his VW Bug toward Seneca. Snowflakes spiral past the beam of his headlights, sweeping down the mountainside and disappearing into the steep plunge to the right of the road. Andrew thinks it would serve Momma right if he slid off the hillside and wrecked around a tree, but with his luck he'd live, be confined to a body cast, have to listen until the end of time to the old woman ranting about his foolishness. The thought of Momma spoon-feeding him is more than he can bear. To hell with that, Andrew decides as he thunders onto the plowed road by the wooden school bus stand where he and his sister once spent their mornings waiting. The hit of gas causes the Bug to fishtail so much that Andrew has to pump his brakes to regain control. He has a reason to survive Momma, after all--a reason more substantial than simply escaping from home, of getting out from under her thumb. He has Jake Cahill in his life now.

Jake. Andrew's first up-close meeting with him had more than stolen his breath away; it had been a sucker punch to his senses, something he still wasn't quite sure he'd recovered from.

They had met back in summer. Andrew had been working for the county's summertime recreation program, supervising a playground at a piss-ant elementary school over in Harman. The job provided a way to save a little money before the start of his senior year. As for Jake, he had been given the responsibility of supervising all such programs throughout the county, despite the fact that he was no older than Andrew—Jake's reward, Andrew figured, for coaching endless county Little League games over the past several summers.

Already Andrew knew his name. Jake Cahill was famous in the sports pages of the *Seneca Sentinel* for breaking track records, for being named baseball All-Star his sophomore and junior years over in nearby Belington. Sportswriters speculated Jake's series of shutouts made him a shoe-in for first-string pitcher come spring of his senior year. Andrew had seen Jake play the spring before, a month before the school year ended when the Belington Bobcats played the Seneca Braves. Momma had dragged him along to work the concession stand in yet another of her efforts to shore up her running in whatever full-time teaching opportunities might open up soon. Despite working as a playground supervisor, Andrew barely had a passing interest in the game—until Jake cracked a homer in the seventh inning, bringing in three players to steal the lead. Selling pop in the stands, Andrew fumbled to make change as he snuck peaks at handsome Jake rounding the bases. As Jake hit home, his dirt-covered teammates rose from the dugout to clap his shoulders and smack his rear with their caps as they hoisted him on their shoulders. How good it must feel to belong like that, thought Andrew.

And then, come this past August at the playground in Harman, Jake had stood tall before Andrew in a pink Polo shirt and jeans so faded it looked like he'd slid home too many times to count. From beneath an unruly thatch of brown hair, Jake's skeptical eyes sized Andrew up, seemed to tease him out as the two shook hands hello. At first, barely any banter--just the nuts and bolts of time sheets to turn in, of keeping the supplies and fix-it lists up to date. But soon Jake's sense of humor came through like a copperhead's strike, dry comments about keeping the tomboy girls out of fistfights, of frisking the boys for pocketknives. After that initial visit, Jake was only supposed to stop by Fridays to pick up paperwork and drop off arts and crafts materials, but he found reasons to stop by other afternoons as well. At first Andrew thought he must be doing something wrong, that Jake was checking up on him, making sure he had enough games planned, disciplined the troublemakers properly, wasn't—*what*—stealing dodge balls? Then one afternoon Jake stopped by to show Andrew the Chevy muscle car he had traded his truck for, an old '67 Camaro he had gotten off his uncle's neighbor outside of Pittsburgh. With pride, Jake rattled on about the car's custom grill guard, its original Z-28 engine. Andrew ignored the patches of Bondo on each side, the dent in the roof, the upholstery that looked like a pack of wolves had chewed through it. He liked seeing the marvel of the car through Jake's eyes, the pleasure Jake took in the prospect of fixing it up. Andrew offered to help, and Jake said he might just take him up on that. Suddenly a job that had previously been a mere means to an end now afforded Andrew something more—the unforeseen but welcome prospect of spending time with Jake Cahill.

But what had it been about Jake that made friendship seem so likely? Was it the way Jake had cocked his head and looked at Andrew after each off-hand remark he made--likely that Andrew understood not only Jake's lame jokes but also whatever meaning lay behind them? Had friendship been likely because both boys were really the same in some deep-felt way? Back then, all that Andrew could tell for sure was that Jake was unhappy. His mother had recently remarried, and his new stepfather had relocated them all to Seneca over the summer to be closer to his job at Armentrout Lumber. Though the move had been a short one, the change meant Jake had to negotiate, come fall, a new school and new friends during what should have been a piece-of-cake senior year. Worse, next spring, he'd be forced to prove himself anew among a baseball team he had formerly fought against. As Jake confessed these worries to Andrew, he kept a steady smile on his lips, but Andrew could sense that Jake was bearing not only the weight of these burdens, but perhaps something deeper, something that threatened to dim the light in his brown eyes altogether. Jake wanted to tell him something but couldn't. And whatever it was, Andrew would have to work it out of him like a splinter.

Weeks went by. Whatever bond was building between the two remained unspoken but nonetheless communicated--a charge that filled the air. Perhaps Jake was testing Andrew, biding time. Andrew, on the other hand, was reminded of what he once felt for lifeguard Artie (probably back home in Delaware, having long-since forgotten him), or his former friend Jimmy Gilmore (living with his mother in North Carolina

last Andrew heard, having moved there after his old man was jailed for spousal abuse). And yet what Andrew now felt for Jake was different than all that, more than just a tug in his guts or groin.

As now, as Andrew drives to town, he pictures that first Monday after Thanksgiving when months of second-guessing finally crystallized into the hard truth of desire: the sight of sweaty Jake shooting baskets with the Harman kids, their shouts echoing in the cavernous expanse of the multipurpose room. Jake pulled up his shirttail to wipe his face, revealing the corded muscles of his belly. A fuse was lit inside Andrew. The beat of his heart became a string of cherry bombs, one explosion after another.

But that was a month ago. Driving now in the car, Andrew hits the split where the road from home joins town's Route 33. Atop a craggy triangle of rock in the split of the intersection stands the Iron Indian, a statue commemorating Seneca Chief White Eagle. The snow is falling faster, hard enough to warrant windshield wipers, but still Andrew can see the mark on one of the boulders beneath the Indian's feet--a pale scar his father once told him got made the icy New Year's Eve his parents wrecked coming back from visiting Uncle Si and Aunt Adalene.

Andrew slows. But instead of forking right toward the Mountaineer Mart and the shovel Momma wants him to buy, he heads left onto Davis Avenue and the direction of Jake's house. The streets that branch off in each direction are dotted with the glow of houses decorated for the holidays. Andrew punches on the radio, desperate for some music, but the stupid station from over in Elkins is still playing Christmas crap, "Grandma Got Run Over by a Reindeer." Good for her, Andrew thinks. He switches off the station and scrounges through the glove compartment for the tape he's made Jake for Christmas.

He jams it into the cassette deck for one last listen before he takes it to Jake, unable to wait until Christmas break's over and work starts up again. Even on his Bug's crappy player the first song sounds good with the treble high and the volume up, Robert Smith singing "Why Can't I Be You?", his voice wailing overtop a mix of jangling synthesizers and explosive horns. Momma always complains that what Andrew listens to isn't music at all but robot noise, and he hasn't the words to explain to her how the ironic lyrics of bands like The Cure provide an antidote to the poisons of the world. Each time she grinds him he pops a tape in his VW's cassette deck, cranks the volume and drives out the old logging road to Cheat River. He lets himself be reconstituted song by song, each new mixed tape he another installment in the soundtrack of his life.

Momma doesn't get it, but will Jake? Is a tape too much, too soon? Andrew fears his intentions are too easily decodable when what he *should* do right now is aim for a more subtle route into Jake's heart. But he can't help himself. The inside of Jake's Chevy is littered with cassettes by Def Leppard and Quiet Riot; the boy's in obvious need of reeducation, something only a healthy dose of songs culled from John Hughes soundtracks and import albums can do. He needs Eurythmics; he needs Talking Heads. He needs The Cure, same as Andrew. A few foot-stompers as well, tracks by Madonna and Cyndi Lauper, something to get the blood going and the feet moving, get Jake dancing like Kevin Bacon in *Footloose*, that scene in the back-lit

barn where beads of sweat sling from his skin. On the tape, Andrew's squeezed in songs from other movies, too: *Fast Times at Ridgemont High*, *The Breakfast Club*, *Pretty in Pink*. Cruising through town, he runs through the band names he's listed in gold magic marker on the cassette liner: Psychedelic Furs, New Order, Echo and the Bunnymen

Andrew hits a slick patch and skids through a red traffic light in front of the YMCA out into the empty intersection. "Fuck!" he cries, grateful no one else is around. He works his breaks, takes a deep breath, slows down to navigate the increasingly snowy streets on his way toward the development where Jake lives. On the car stereo, the tape's first rousing wave has geared down to Suzanne Vega's voice spiraling somewhere "Left of Center." Andrew sings along to steady himself. Though he's never been invited over, Andrew has driven by Jake's place countless times, taking reassurance in the sight of Jake's parked Camaro or sometimes growing crazy with insecurity when it's nowhere to be found. And of course tonight there's no way in hell Andrew will muster the courage to knock on Jake's front door and force a meeting with his mother and stepfather. Having to explain why he's stopped by unannounced, uninvited, would surely twist Andrew's tongue into knots--and Jake would *not* be happy. Better to play secret Santa, to simply put the cassette inside Jake's car if he's left it unlocked as usual, or wedge it in a plastic bag beneath his windshield wiper as a backup. No note; let the music speak for itself, hoping Jake will understand, will come to appreciate the songs so much he'll learn to mouth the lyrics the way Andrew does now as he turns onto Jake's street, matching Morrissey word for word: "*please, please, please... let me get what I want... this time.*"

Jake's brick ranch house looks picture perfect beneath its snowcapped roof and evergreen hedges strung with blinking Christmas lights. In the yard, a light-up snowman offers a cheesy Bob's Big Boy grin. Beneath the carport sits Jake's stepfather's Chevy Caprice. No sign of Jake's Camaro.

Where the hell is he? Andrew parks at the end of the block, pops the tape from the deck and steps from the car. From beneath his seat he pulls the fifth of Jim Beam he paid Wino Williams to buy him. Andrew drinks deep, the sting of the liquor bracing him as he starts through the snow. The homes in the development are spaced far apart with big front lawns and no sidewalks, and Andrew can feel the snow seeping into his sneakers. He pulls his coat and new sweater tighter around him, takes another pull of whiskey before hiding the bottle. Already the snow lies an inch thick upon the ground, more than enough to leave incriminating footprints behind as he sneaks up Jake's driveway and hurries around the carport to see if Jake's Camaro sits in the alley out back. No such luck. Andrew smacks the cassette tape against his thigh in frustration. He rounds the house full circle, past the back porch and then the kitchen, where a glimpse of Jake's mother washing dishes is enough to make his heart leap into his throat. Andrew hunches low, creeps past the black rectangles of other windows, other rooms, wondering which one is Jake's, what secrets it might contain. He presses his face against the glass of one, but the glow from the alley lamp behind him makes it impossible to see anything but his own reflection.

Around another corner toward the front he goes, the cassette still tight in his hand. At the living room window Andrew stops. He balances himself on a lip of snow made icy by a leaky overhead gutter and peers past a gap in the curtains. The room's wood paneling gleams buttery and alive from the glow of lamps and TV. Beneath an enormous oil painting of a stag crossing a river sits Jake's stepfather reading a newspaper. Still no sign of Jake.

What did he expect, the three of them eating Christmas cookies and wearing matching snowflake sweaters? It's no surprise Jake's out; Andrew knows how much he hates his stepfather. Andrew studies the man's paunch and thinning salt and pepper hair and is likewise hard pressed to see anything special about the man Jake's mother married. Still, something about the room makes Andrew pause, something beyond its warm contrast to the snowy cold around him. Maybe it's the lazy curl of Mr. Munroe's sock clad feet on the foot of his recliner, the neat stack of hunting magazines beside him, the framed wedding photo on the polished side table. Maybe it's the sleepy-eyed way he looks up as his new wife calls from the kitchen. Andrew watches her enter, pausing in the archway of the room, her hair the same brown as Jake's. Andrew finds himself surprised at the care with which she stoops to pick up a sprig of artificial mistletoe that has fallen from the arch. She digs its thumbtack out of the cream-colored shag before continuing to her husband's chair. When the man says something to her, she smiles, raises her eyebrows playfully, slides onto the arm of his chair and holds the sprig above his head until his gruff expression melts and he cranes his neck to kiss her. It becomes apparent to Andrew what's made him linger, what he's long missed seeing but seldom admits: the sight of love between a husband and wife. Suddenly he feels ashamed for watching them, for not altogether disliking Mr. Munroe the way Jake wants him to.

"Who's there?" someone calls from behind, and Andrew turns, startled to see a neighbor woman peering at him past the glare of her over-decorated porch. He slips off the icy ridge he's balanced on, tries to catch himself as he slides toward the house. His hand with the cassette tape smacks against the window glass. Jake's mother and stepfather flinch with surprise, their love giving way to worry. Andrew reels back, quick before they can get a good look at him. He stumbles on the ice, rights himself, takes off running as the old woman next door threatens to call the police.

Andrew hightails it back to the Bug. Something rises inside him, a feeling stronger than the fear of getting caught. He is suddenly mad at Jake, at everyone, but most of all at himself because he doesn't know what to do when his emotions overtake him.

He guns the Bug, lurches from the curb, narrowly missing a mailbox as he skids around a street corner. A couple blocks later, his heart has calmed enough that he can pop in the cassette again. Right now, the thought of going to the Mountaineer Mart to pick up Momma's shovel is the last thing on his mind. He wants to find Jake. Wants to know where he is, what he is doing. He passes an empty field edging town that bears a faded billboard advertising a business park that has never come. The street's a shortcut to the road where the Barretts live: Sergeant Barrett, his wife, their daughter Virginia--the one Jake claims has been

moonling over him since he first stepped foot in Seneca High. Andrew hopes Jake's desire to flee his house hasn't made him desperate enough to go on a date with her. A song by Culture Club starts up on the tape deck--Boy George wondering, "*Do you really want to hurt me?*"—and suddenly the whole idea of this mixed tape for Jake seems so desperate and faggy that Andrew wants to hurl the cassette out his window. He takes no comfort in the fact that Jake's car is nowhere to be found on the Barretts' street. Jake could be out with Virginia somewhere. Anywhere.

He could even be at Cheat River, the sanctuary Andrew shared with him not so long ago. The day the two of them sat side by side in Andrew's car, thumbing labels off bottles of Miller beer as Andrew tried to catch Jake's eyes in a sideways show of desire. In a perfect universe Jake would be at the river now, waiting. He would have read Andrew's mind. Andrew can picture it: Jake latching onto his thoughts from among all the hopes that must float unspoken above Seneca.

To Cheat River Andrew drives. His mind calls out to Jake, speaking to him as if through the magic connection of the tin can phone Andrew once shared with his sister, asking Jake to be there, waiting for him. Andrew thinks of all the angelic aliens he's drawn in notebooks over the years, the ones with the little ESP antennas on their heads. Over time, he has simplified their figures into iconic outlines—runes, he realizes, in a code designed to conceal his wants from the world. All this time he's been writing out the secret message of himself without knowing it. But Jake will understand it; he has to.

Past Seneca's streetlights Andrew drives, past the Iron Indian statue and its scarred stone, down the country road that leads to Cheat River. Andrew turns the tape up loud. Boy George gives way to a song off Eurythmics' *Savage*, Annie Lennox pleading over chainsaw guitars, "*I need a man...!*" Andrew sings along to the truth of that need. For too long fear and unhappiness have walked him from school to job to home again. But now life has become more than the tally of minutes into hours into days into weeks--the countdown of months before he can rocket out of here. In grade school a whole world had rolled into the map above the teacher's desk, full of places Andrew wanted to go to but was afraid to. Until now, when finally there is Jake to take with him.

Already Andrew can picture their escape: Come summer he'll lift the hood of his old Bug and pack its front-end trunk with what he'll need for a life away from here. Sneakers and tapes, jeans and T-shirts. In case he manages a job interview someplace decent, he'll throw in his Sunday suit and the black tie he bought at Chess King in the Fairmont mall--rail thin and decorated with piano keys. What pared down keepsakes will make the cut? A few vintage issues of *Superman* and *Aquaman*. His dog-eared copy of *The Catcher in the Rye*. And the letters, the one thing more important than the rest. Already he's moved them from his once-buried footlocker to a hiding place dug into the upholstery foam beneath his driver's seat, a place where Momma can't find them but the occasional touch of their twine-bound stack can reassure Andrew of the realness of his plan. Andrew lets his cold fingertips graze the bundle there now. He imagines sharing the letters with Jake on their long ride toward escape. Would Jake understand what they mean to

Andrew--proof he is just as capable of escape as his father? Past the Appalachians Andrew and Jake will drive, far beyond the conformity of small-town streets. small-town scrutiny and the conformity of little streets. They will leave behind rural houses on country roads--the kinds of places Andrew drives past now--where window curtains would shift aside should a pair of boys linger in a parked car too long.

The old logging road carves a tunnel through the woods, a tunnel assaulted by wind and snow. Andrew lurches fast down the rutted road. As he rounds a bend, something catches his eyes: two paralyzed deer, winter-thin and unblinking. Their bodies take on shape as Andrew slows to a stop. Their eyes are red, their bodies so tense they nearly tremble. The song on the car stereo fades. Andrew cuts his lights then turns them back on. The snowy world returns. Already the deer are leaving, more motion than form. They fade like apparitions, leaving Andrew aware of how alone he is.

The cassette makes a click as it switches from side A to B, but Andrew turns it off, not wanting to hear it anymore. Andrew pulls out his whiskey and takes a drink. His thoughts loop back to that day not so long ago when Jake came here with him, the Monday after Thanksgiving. When Jake stopped by Harman to visit, he had left his headlights on and his battery died. Andrew had no jumper cables; he could only offer a ride home.

A plan took shape. First, a quick stop at the Harman gas station to pick up beers from the Chinese woman who never carded anyone. Andrew told Jake he wanted to take him somewhere. Jake opened bottles as Andrew drove, handed one over, kept one for himself. The coolness of the beer couldn't quench the dryness in Andrew's throat, the sheer heat of having Jake beside him. Early evening had already washed the color from the sky by the time the two boys drove within in sight of Cheat River. Andrew parked the car in the same spot he parks it now, then pointed out the bend where he used to swim. Conversation slowly circled--first work, Jake's complaints about the asshole administrator he reported to; then Andrew's catalog of the latest shenanigans the crazy Harman kids had pulled, Jake steered the conversation toward the goings-on at high school: the headaches of advanced algebra, the anxiety of SATs, the persistence of Virginia Barrett's affections. It was a world Andrew felt he had already outgrown. He tried to impress Jake with descriptions of his Freshman Comp. class in Elkins, the college's weird mix of local yokels and East Coast transplants who hadn't made the Ivy League, tie-dyed poseurs who rocked to The Grateful Dead in the campus pub. Andrew told Jake how he wanted to get out of Seneca, leadfoot his Bug past the mountains until its transmission blew. In return, Jake told Andrew about his own dreams, about his father who worked at the Navy Yard in Philadelphia, how Jake hoped to live with him next year and go to college at Temple or Drexel, study engineering. Andrew wanted to knit their futures together, but he didn't know how to bring up the idea.

Andrew looked hard at Jake just then and mustered the courage to make the first move. Eighteen years of not getting what he wanted was long enough. Andrew's whole body trembled as he launched a hand toward Jake, grabbed him by the neck and crushed their mouths together. He forgot all about the

gearshift impaling his side as he drew in that first sweet taste of Jake, salty and rough as tongue met tongue. Jake's startlement lasted but the briefest of seconds, then he kissed back, matched Andrew's intensity with his own. Jake's breath pushed up, entered Andrew's lungs--sweet and indescribable. Beard scraped beard, an unexpected thrill.

Sneakers got soaked as Andrew dropped his beer to hold Jake tighter. A pulse of blood filled Andrew's ears. With quick fingers he opened Jake's shirt buttons, unsnapped the metal button on his Levis, Jake's pants shushing over the fine hair on his legs. Jake worked his lips along Andrew's throat, taking little bites that made Andrew so hard he thought his cock might break. Jake's shoulder shook as he fought to free his right hand, caught in the cuff of his flannel shirt. Reeling back, he hit the door handle. The door gave way, and Jake fell back on the ground outside, surprise and embarrassment giving way to an *aww-shit* smile that only served to melt Andrew further. Before Andrew knew what he was doing, he had crawled across the gearshift and out the door after Jake to roll with him upon the ground. He worked Jake's pants down as far as they would go, then pressed his forehead against the hard muscle of Jake's belly and let his mouth draw in another, deeper taste of Jake--a secret Andrew wanted to hold inside himself forever. Now, here in the car on this wintry night, the memory of that day has Andrew hard again. His hips arch on autopilot, his crotch grinds against the steering wheel. His gut is knotted tight, and there is only one thing a boy can do when his skin itches inside his jeans like this. Andrew frees himself, seeking release, seeking the solace of Jake who is not here but should be—if the world were as perfect and contrived as a Top 40 song.

He imagines what he hasn't yet had: Jake's mouth on him, reciprocation. He imagines Jake's flushed cheeks, full lips, smoky eyes staring up. A few strokes is all it takes before Andrew's sitting with a mess to clean up, jeans to wipe off on the old quilt from his backseat. He buttons the oversized black cardigan Allison gave him for Christmas, hoping it will cover his crotch. A feeling of desperation pours back inside him, the same as that other day when, afterwards, Jake's breath had finally calmed. Andrew had noticed the look of guilt lodged in Jake's eyes, had understood that Jake didn't want to talk about what had happened as he brushed the dirt from his clothes and climbed back inside the Bug. As Jake opened another beer and drank it down in silence, Andrew wondered if Jake was trying to wash away the taste of him.

Andrew leans his head against the steering wheel. He is a fool to think he and Jake can escape these mountains together. Andrew knows he feels too much, too soon; he is more likely to drive Jake away than draw him in. But that's the problem with love. How do you learn to properly give what you have never yet received?

Tears well up inside Andrew, but he swallows them down. Outside, the world is growing smooth with snow. If he stays here too long, he is sure to get stuck.

Out into the fierce cold beyond the car Andrew steps. Wind bites his skin, plastering on bits of snow that don't want to melt. Andrew walks forward, past the vanishing tracks of the deer, toward Cheat River. He walks right to the edge, lifts his arm and hurls Jake's cassette as far into the blackness as he can.

Chapter 15: Wishbone

I hadn't walked a dog since Buck died the Christmas I was sixteen, and. I should have taken his passing as a portent of more bad to come. But in the four years since Momma threatened Andrew with her scissors, things had gotten a little better. Momma knew she needed help. Our family doctor prescribed medicines to reign in her moods. But the pills left Momma numb and tired, and she was always asking to switch to something new. Andrew knew to stay out of Momma's way. Our household had reached a tenuous accord. But now it was readying to fracture again.

I was washing Christmas dishes, scrubbing dinner plates in water so hot my steam-covered glasses kept sliding down my nose. In my ears was the snap and tear of plastic wrap as Grandma Rose covered leftovers, as well as the sound of Momma's voice as she cooingly coaxed sickly Buck into eating scraps of turkey.

Buck should have been dead already; the veterinarian had offered to put him to sleep three days before when Momma and I had hoisted the poor dog onto the examination table, his body slumping against us like a sack of fertilizer. Even through winter gloves I could feel Buck's hard ribs pressing through his patchy fur. "Maybe the vet's right," I had said to Momma, but she wouldn't hear it. It was almost Christmas Eve and she was not going to murder the dog that had lived with us all these years. By God, she would wait until Andrew got home so he could pay his last respects. I wondered if it was the pills Dr. Whetsel prescribed for her that were making her behave that way.

As for Andrew, we hardly saw him anymore. A senior in high school now, he attended only half the day, taking advantage of a work-credit option for students with good grades who had already met graduation requirements. At lunchtime, I'd watch out the cafeteria window as he headed off to Harman where he now worked as a supervisor at a county after-school youth program. Since September, Andrew had also been taking Freshman Composition at the college over in Elkins, which offered cheap tuition to state residents. He wanted a few credits under his belt in case that made a difference in getting a scholarship at wherever he decided to eventually go. Back and forth he drove from one end of Seneca County to the other, crashing in the equipment utility room the nights when games ran late. He poked his head in our door only to change clothes or grab a bite of whatever I happened to be cooking. When it came time to decide what to do with Buck, Momma insisted we wait for Andrew to show--so what if that meant we wouldn't be able to get another vet appointment till almost New Year's? So what if when Andrew walked in the door Christmas Eve all he had done was shake Buck's limp paw and ask why he was he leashed to the kitchen table?

Momma abridged for him the vet's complicated diagnosis of cancer, cataracts and heart disease. "Old Buck's on his last leg," she told my brother, then went on to explain that she had tied Buck in the

kitchen because it was the only room in the house devoid of carpeting. She cataloged the poor mongrel's infirmities, how Buck barely moved, how he seldom ate or drank. How he squirted tiny pools of diarrhea every time he coughed--until Andrew flinched at her details. I could tell he was less concerned with the dog than with being around his family so much for the next few days with no break in sight.

And so it was Momma who had taken as her holy mission to force by God or rod the life back into Buck's bones. While Andrew taught the fine art of Etch-A-Sketching to Elizabeth in the living room and Grandma Rose and I cleaned up supper, Momma sat on the floor with her back against the stove cradling Buck's mournful head in her lap. As her nostrils forgave Buck's stink, her fingers pulled strips of turkey from greasy bones, carefully dropping piece after piece into Buck's hopeful but exhausted mouth, pampering him.

Out the corner of my eye, I watched the dog chew in that funny way he had, favoring the left side of his mouth over the right ever since the family picnic when Momma had thrown a rock at him for stealing chicken and broken off one of his lower teeth.

Consistency of affection had never been her hallmark. So I didn't find it strange that in Buck's twilight hours she sat with him cross-legged on the linoleum, scooting turkey bits back into his maw when they slipped out the trough made by his missing tooth. With each mouthful the dog managed to swallow, Momma made a saccharine fuss as if she could stave off the inevitable through sheer force of will. I shook my head, caught Grandma shaking hers too.

"I think it's disgusting to allow that animal in here in his condition," she said, fastening a Tupperware lid on some leftover cornbread stuffing before setting it in the fridge.

Momma shot her a sharp look. "The vet said he had to stay warm, Mother. I was not about to let poor Buck stay out in the garage when they're calling for snow tonight. If it weren't for me, this dog'd be long gone by now."

"But feeding him like that. In the kitchen. We're all going to get whatever he's got."

"He's not contagious, Mother."

"I don't know about that," muttered Grandma Rose, squeezing by me at the sink. She grabbed a soapy sponge then turned back to Momma. "Next thing we know, Katie, you'll be chewing it for him."

I nearly dropped a cake plate as I stifled a chuckle. Momma threw a Medusa glance my way, then reached for a tinfoil boat filled with more boney scraps of turkey.

"I am the only thing keeping Buck's old carcass together," she said. "Just like with everything. You and Allison don't have to help me, but I could really do without the smart remarks." Momma dropped another piece of meat for Buck to languidly chew. It was true; the dog did look better despite his shabby coat and sightless eyes. "I should be praised, not condemned," Momma snorted.

Encouraged by Buck's appetite, Momma began to coax him with larger scraps. "See what a mother's love can do?" She rubbed her greasy fingers over Buck's fur, patted his head.

“Oh, Katie, don’t sound so hurt,” Grandma Rose said as she scrubbed the dining table.

“Your problem is that you never liked dogs,” said Momma. “Not even old Inky, who you let run away from me.”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” said Grandma. “And his name was Blackie, not Inky.”

“It was not!” argued Momma. “He was called Inky and I know because I named him.” She stuffed another wad of turkey down Buck’s snout. The dog chewed frantically, trying hard to keep up. “I found him in the field by the swinging bridge and brought him home and--”

“--and you and your brother Neil got him so excited he peed on the rug,” finished Grandma Rose. “Yes, I recall the incident. I never did get that stain out.”

“You never loved him,” Momma said. “I practically had to beat you over the head to let me keep him.”

“That’s not true,” Grandma countered. She took a can of Maxwell House out of the cupboard and began to make coffee. “I remember setting my basket of laundry down after Blackie’s accident...”

“Inky!”

“Whatever. After that hyperactive little dog peed on the floor, I distinctly remember setting down my laundry and saying, ‘Well, I guess we’ll have to keep him. Looks like he’s done marked his territory.’ And I was as good as my word--”

“Until you left the back gate open and he ran off.” Momma was so angry now she wasn’t even bothering to tear off chunks of meat with her fingers; she simply held a boney piece of turkey carcass against Buck’s muzzle, hoping he’d what--chew his way through?

“He never run off,” Grandma said as she flipped on the percolator then returned to her chair.

“That dog was the one thing I could call my own and you never liked him,” maintained Momma. She grabbed another wad of turkey from the tinfoil boat and crammed it past Buck’s teeth. “Neil was the only other one who ever gave a hoot about him, and now they’re both gone.” And that’s when I heard the first gurgle escape Buck’s throat. Past the haze of dishwasher steam it rose.

“Shit!” Momma yelled as Buck began to frantically hack, trying to free himself of the piece of carcass he was choking on. “Get him some water!”

I scrambled to fill a glass from the faucet. “He okay?”

Buck pushed against her Momma’s chest with his paws. “He can’t breath!” Momma screamed.

“Try the Heidnick maneuver,” offered Grandma, not moving from her chair.

“He’s a goddamn dog!” Momma said as she wedged Buck in a headlock and tried to yank the carcass free. Her fingers fought past his teeth, trying to grip a trail of turkey that disappeared down his throat. I held the glass of water dumbly in the air.

Just then, Elizabeth and Andrew skidded into the kitchen, alerted by the noise. Elizabeth's eyes grew wide, and Andrew's jaw dropped to the floor. "Get that child out of here!" screamed Momma. In one quick swoop, Andrew heaved the five-year-old into the air and raced her back to the living room.

"Help me lift Buck!" Momma ordered.

I sat the glass on the table, crouched down, and hoisted the dog against Momma's chest. With a knotted double fist, Momma pounded the dog's heaving stomach. Buck shook violently in her arms, knocking her back against the stove. His splayed legs drummed the floor like a victim of a grand mal while bits of chewed turkey slid past his broken tooth, pooling in Momma's lap and piddling on the floor. Finally Buck's eyes rolled back, fixing on a spot above our heads, past the kitchen cabinets and the stark glow of the fluorescent light fixture and straight into his spot in doggy heaven.

Buck stopped. My heart froze. Momma leaned over the dog's motionless body and tried one last time to pull the piece of the turkey carcass from his mouth. "He dead yet?" asked Grandma, rising to get a cup of coffee. "Check his pulse," she suggested.

Momma gave her the old hairy eyeball. "He's a dog. How the hell do I check his pulse?"

She worked her fingers deeper into Buck's throat, unable to give up hope. But both Grandma and I knew in our hearts that nothing could lie on the floor like that, eyes unfocused and glazed over, and still be alive.

Momma gave a final tug, and Buck's head lolled towards her, then snapped back as the choking bone pulled free. In silence I watched her extract from Buck's mouth a long, gristly piece of meat. Buck lay motionless on the floor. Pink liquid oozed from his nose and mouth; an odor of old leaves and pent-up sickness poured out of him.

"He's dead all right," said Grandma Rose, covering her nose and mouth with a paper napkin. "The smell. It's enough to make you toss your oats." She blew on her cup of coffee and sat down at the table, scooting her chair back towards the counter as if she was afraid she might stain her shoes. "I guess it's the hand of Fate," she said, all matter-of-fact.

Beside me, Momma was crying. A mixture of sorrow and contempt buoyed inside me, a hard-to-understand feeling soon overwhelmed by the rising rankness of Buck's digestive tract. Slowly I took off my apron, wadded it into a ball and began wiping off Momma's clothes.

"Stop it," she said. "Just stop it. Both of you."

She leaned back against the stove and sobbed.

Should I have comforted her? Took her in my arms, offered a hug? Instead I said, "Get up, Momma. I'll take care of it."

"Why did this have to happen?" she asked.

"Get up," I repeated.

I rolled Buck off her and continued sopping. Momma leaned forward, untying her apron and gathering the corners in a sodden pouch that she carried to the sink. Tears streamed down her face and dripped off her chin. “What the hell am I supposed to do with him now?” she asked of no one in particular.

“You got any garbage bags?” queried Grandma Rose. Even I wanted to slug her at the callousness of the remark. Momma pretended not to hear. When she caught the disapproval in my eyes, Grandma looked away and took a long sip of her coffee.

“I was just trying to help,” Momma told us both. “Not a one of you would lift a finger to save that poor dog’s life. I try and look what it gets me. God dammit!” She grabbed a plate from the dish drain and slammed it to the floor. Earthen shards flew across the linoleum, glinting off my hands and lodging in Buck’s fur.

“Katherine Marie, you stop it now!” hollered Grandma Rose. “You ain’t making things any easier.” Grandma took her pack of Salems from the Lazy Susan on the table and tapped out a cigarette. “Crying can’t help now. It was God’s will. Him and that turkey carcass. We’ll clean up this mess and that’ll be the end of it. Just be glad that ole dog’s out of his misery. Sometimes I wish to high heaven somebody’d put me out of mine.”

“Shut up!” sobbed Momma. “Just shut up.”

Grandma stood and crossed to the counter. She took a mug from the dish drain, poured another cup of coffee and placed it in Momma’s hands.

I carried my wet apron to the sink, then returned on hands and knees with an old sponge to scrub the floor, rinsing in the mop bucket Momma sat down beside me. I tried to keep the contents of my stomach from rising; I told myself this was simply Thousand Island dressing I was wiping up, nothing more.

Andrew reappeared in the doorway--alone this time--his arrival punctuated with a loud “Jesus Christ” and a wrinkled nose. “What happened?”

“Buck’s dead,” I explained, staring up at him as he leaned against the doorjamb. “He choked.”

Andrew folded his arms, didn’t offer to help. “It smells like you turned him inside out.” He twisted a loose thread on the black cardigan I gave him and sighed. “This is definitely *not* a Kodak moment.”

I glanced back at Momma. For a long time she’d been staring down at Buck, as if replaying his last moments in her head, and I was glad to see she had ignored Andrew’s smart remark.

But Grandma wouldn’t have it. “Andrew, why don’t you make yourself useful and find something to put him in?”

“Oh, man...”

Momma reeled back inside herself, straightened up, fixed her eyes on my brother. “Go get that box my new vacuum cleaner came in,” she told him. When Andrew made the mistake of hesitating, Momma

shot him a look and told him to hop to it. Once he'd shuffled off to get his coat, Momma shook her head and said, "He sure doesn't seem very broken up."

"I think he saw it coming," I told her.

"I don't need your lip, too," Momma warned, and I figured if Grandma hadn't been there her outburst would have been even worse. Maybe she would have thrown that plate at me instead of the floor. She had a cabinet full of pills Dr. Whetsel had given her. Sometimes they worked; sometimes they didn't. And I wasn't sure whether it was a blessing or a curse that her behavior hardly shocked us anymore.

I nudged Buck to one side and began mopping under him as Momma crossed to the pantry, opened the basement door, and took an old flowered bedsheet from a basket of dirty laundry sitting on the steps. I watched her drape the cloth over Buck so that he simply became a mound of daisy-covered hills, a make-believe landscape Elizabeth might use as a backdrop for her dolls.

"Buck deserves a decent burial," Momma observed. She slumped into a chair.

I washed my hands at the sink, turning up the water as hot as it would go.

Andrew returned with the Electrolux box and dropped it on the floor. Momma began directing him through the delicate disposal of Buck's corpse, while Grandma blew trails of smoke into the kitchen's overheated air. I watched Andrew avert his face as he rolled Buck into a tight bundle inside the bedsheet, peering at his handiwork through scrunched up eyes. He asked me to help, and soon the two of us were gripping the sheet from opposite ends, heaving Buck's body into the cardboard sarcophagus. "Now what?" Andrew groaned.

"Take him out back," Momma instructed.

But when we lifted the box, the bottom fell apart and poor Buck crashed against the kitchen floor.

"Shit." Andrew lifted the carton to relock its bottom panels.

"Watch your mouth, Mister College." Momma plucked a cigarette from Grandma's pack and placed the palomino filter between her lips.

"That's my last pack," Grandma announced territorially.

"I'll get you more. I'll have Andrew run to the store and buy us a whole carton once he's done burying the dog."

Andrew looked her way. "The ground's frozen solid as a rock and you want me to dig a funeral plot?" He rolled his eyes. "Who am I? Kunta Kinte?"

Momma glared at him. "Don't fucking start."

"Yessum," Andrew finally said. "You's the boss lady." He glanced my way. "See why I hate being here?" He threw down the uncooperative box in disgust. "It's like *The Waltons* gone bad. Real bad."

Momma rolled her own eyes right back at him. "It's not my fault your father ran off and left you the closest thing we got to a man in the family." She took a quick puff and narrowed her gaze. "You'll do

what I tell you if you know what's good for you. And if you want to fix that carton you get the electrical tape, Genius."

Andrew stomped to the kitchen counter and pulled out a drawer with a dramatic flourish, rifling through the contents, knocking aside extension cords and old silverware. He snatched the electrical tape and returned, furiously winding long, sticky ribbons all around the bottom of the carton.

"Can I come in the kitchen yet?" piped Elizabeth's voice from beyond the archway.

"No!" cried Momma and Andrew in unison. They looked at each. Grandma Rose started in with her latest two cents' worth. "I don't know why you need to make this into a big production. Just put him in a garbage bag and set him out with the trash. And I'm not talking about some cheap garbage bag that's going to fall apart the first time you pick it up. I'm talking Hefty or Glad."

Momma turned to Grandma Rose and gave her the solemn look once used on troublesome students back when she substituted at the Vo-Tech. "Besides being undoubtedly illegal, I can think of nothing more personally hideous than being thrown out like garbage by the family I had lived with and loved my whole life."

But Andrew had the box secure by then, and so, with a cartoonish *allez-oop*, we once more hoisted our mummy-wrapped dog.

"Wait a minute," Momma said, stamping out her cigarette and rising to her feet. She went to the living room, where I could hear her enlisting Elizabeth's help in searching for something. Meanwhile Buck hovered above the Electrolux box, growing heavier in my arms. Suddenly I heard a plinking in the bottom of the box, and when I peeked down I noticed something piddling through the sheet. "Oh God," I muttered.

Andrew looked down and let a stream of expletives fly off his tongue. "Fucking shit! Where the hell is Momma? I'm not gonna hold on while this sheet turns into some goddamn Shroud of Urine--"

"Sometimes your system just lets go when you die," observed Grandma Rose. She took a sip of coffee and covered her nose with a napkin. "I told you, you need plastic."

Momma returned, brandishing Buck's last Christmas present in her arms: a purple satin sleeping pillow she had sewn. For years Momma had been too preoccupied to give much thought to Buck's welfare, but once his health started going downhill she made up for lost time. From an old bridesmaid's dress she constructed a homemade sleeping pillow she hoped would ease Buck's suffering. I wondered if she had started double-dosing on the pills Dr. Whetsel had given her, so shocked I was to find her keeping him not in the garage but the kitchen. I wondered for whose benefit this really was. Was Momma trying to prove something to Buck, to us, or to herself?

Now, in the kitchen, as Momma held that plump pillow above Buck's body, its satiny shine suddenly cheap and circusy beneath the fluorescent light. I held my tongue.

Tearfully Momma laid the pillow in Buck's box, then signaled for us to lower the dog in. With a sacrilegious thud, my brother let his end drop. I was a bit more careful. What if Momma's love was genuine? I looked at her as she blew her nose on a napkin and lowered my end as gently as I could.

"Can I come in yet?" cried Elizabeth from the archway.

At the table, Momma stole Grandma's last cigarette and crumpled the empty packet in her fist. "I suppose," she conceded wearily.

Elizabeth marched and sniffed a deep lungful of disaster. "Pee-yew!" she grimaced. "This place stinks." Her saucer eyes swept over us, and her bottom lip jutted forth as she asked where was Buck.

Momma balanced her cigarette in an ashtray, then took Elizabeth's hands in her own as she struggled for words slow in coming. Elizabeth tried to pull free. "Where's Buck?" Andrew pointed to the Electrolux coffin.

"Uh-oh," murmured Elizabeth.

Momma cleared her throat, assumed her Life-Is-Serious-Business voice. "Honey, Buck's passed on," she explained, as if such archaic phrasing could blunt what happened.

"Passed on what?" Elizabeth wanted to know.

"He's moved on to a better place, honey. You should be happy for him."

Andrew and Grandma both shook their heads.

"Buck is deceased," Momma said cautiously.

"He got a disease?" Elizabeth asked, peering into the box.

Unable to take it anymore, Grandma Rose finally spoke up. "What your mother is trying to tell you is that your old dog is dead. He choked to death on a turkey bone she was shoving down his gullet."

Momma dropped Elizabeth's hand and whirled in her seat. Tears once more erupted from her eyes as she stared at Grandma Rose. Here we go again, I thought. "Blame me," Momma said. "Go ahead. It's all my fault." She buried her face in her hands and shook with excessive grief.

"No one's trying to blame you," said Grandma Rose. "I just stated the facts."

"Buck's dead?" Elizabeth asked Andrew, who nodded. Elizabeth took a moment to assimilate the news, then pivoted to face Momma. This time it was her turn to comfort, to take Momma's red-knuckled hands in her own. "Don't cry," she said. "It's all right, Momma. Dogs don't live long times like people do. We can get a new 'un. I got money saved."

"I don't know," Momma said.

"Let's have a funeral!" Elizabeth suggested.

Momma finished her cigarette. "Your brother has to dig a hole first." She glanced at the Electrolux box. An oily brown stain spread beneath a taped bottom corner. "But first he better set Buck out on the porch."

"It's already dark out," Andrew moaned. "They're calling for snow."

“You’ll do it,” Momma said.

“Humor her,” sighed Grandma Rose.

Elizabeth jumped up on a chair to grab the plastic wreath decorating the kitchen calendar. “Let’s have a funeral!” she repeated, shaking her makeshift flower arrangement in the air.

Momma rose to her feet. “We should say *something*.” Elizabeth placed the wreath atop the cardboard box. “Everybody stand up!” She motioned to Grandma, who groaned as she hoisted herself up. “Everyone join hands!” Grandma refused to set down her coffee cup. “Simon sez ‘Join hands!’” Reluctantly Grandma gave in, moved close, until we were all standing in a circle around Buck’s cardboard coffin.

I felt foolish, but swallowed that feeling down as Elizabeth recited the only prayer she knew by heart in the weightiest voice she could muster.

“By his hands--” she began. Momma’s palm felt hot and sweaty in my own; my brother’s cold and firm. “--must all be fed--” Andrew gritted his teeth. Momma wetted her lip like she needed another cigarette. “Give us Lord our daily bread.”

Finally Elizabeth broke the circle. She marched to the kitchen counter, opened a low shelf door and took out a box of Milkbones. With great solemnity she extracted a solitary biscuit and carried it to the Electrolux box, slipping it in.

When she was done, I helped Andrew drag Buck to the porch, then returned to my dishes. From the window above the sink I watched him scurry to the garage, coat wrapped around him, head bent against the snow that had begun to fall. He disappeared inside the side door then emerged a moment later, carrying a shovel in his hands like a rifle--one of the few tools to survive the Great Purge. As Andrew retraced his steps to the house, I noticed how much he had come to look like our father--skinny, full of a pluck. He moved the way Daddy had, cautious, full of held-back grace.

“Don’t even take your coat off, young man,” Momma said when Andrew walked in the door. “Just go out back and start digging a hole.”

Andrew smacked his gloves against the table edge. “There’s three inches of snow already! The ground’s frozen solid!”

“You do it. All you got to do is start a little bonfire to thaw the ground. I know you can handle it.”

“Momma!”

“And I want that hole deep enough that nothing comes along and digs Buck up. Don’t worry, Allison’ll help you.”

I arched an eyebrow.

“You two just get busy,” Momma said. “I’m not going to rest until that poor dog is six feet under.”

Andrew grabbed the matches from the back of the stove, then turned on the heel of his sneakers and marched out, the screen door slamming behind him. I got my coat and followed. The storm had

stopped, but the clouds overhead still looked as if they meant business. I followed Andrew to the foot of the porch stairs, where he was looking through the shelves set into the recess there. The shovel lay on the ground next to him.

“Need help?”

“Leave me alone,” he said, back turned.

I waited a moment, watching as he pushed aside old newspapers and cans. “I want to help.”

“Then start by finding the goddamn gas can!” Andrew kicked the shelf with his boot.

“There,” I said.

“What?”

“There. On the ground by that tire.” I pointed to the gas can he used for refueling the lawn mower.

Andrew threw me a scowl, then bent down to grab the handle. The metal can wouldn’t budge; it was wedged in a skirt of ice that spread out from the drain spout at the side of the house.

“Fucking shit!” Andrew yelled, then kicked the can, but still it wouldn’t budge. “See that?” he said. “It’s frozen to the ground. I told her!”

“Why do you need gasoline?” I asked.

“For the fucking bonfire. Everything’s wet. It’s going to need a boost.” He picked up the shovel and chopped at the ice.

“Be careful,” I warned him. “Don’t puncture the can.”

“When I need your opinion, I’ll yank on your tongue.”

He kept hacking away, silent for a few moments. Then he looked my way. “I’m sorry. It’s not you I’m mad at.”

“It’s okay,” I murmured.

Andrew pressed the shovel against the base of the gas can. The shovel had a handle on it, and Andrew leaned against it as he slowly worked the metal blade into the ground. “It’s Momma,” he told me. “She rides my ass every chance she gets.” He threw his weight against the shovel handle, but the gas can barely budged.

“Sometimes you act like you hate her guts, the things you say--”

“Oh, Allison,” Andrew said, sounding suddenly tired. “Despite everything she puts me through, I still somehow don’t altogether hate her guts.” He forced the shovel blade farther into the ground.

“Maybe if you worked harder at being nice...”

“I spent years trying to be nice. I don’t have any more trying left in me.” His face tightened as he pushed down on the shovel again.

His words sounded familiar. I thought once more of Daddy. “Try some more then. She’s the only parent we’ve got.”

“Parents,” said Andrew. “Can’t live with ‘em, can’t shoot ‘em.”

With a great screech of metal, the ice broke and the dented can popped free.

“Sometimes I wish I could do what Dad did,” Andrew said. “Launch out a here like a comet. No more summers working dead-end jobs, no more Christmases at home. A clean getaway.”

The back porch door slammed again, and Momma’s voice sliced through the air above our heads. “What are you kids up to?”

We backed up a few feet till we could see her above the rise of the porch. “Just having a little sex,” Andrew said cheerfully.

I hit him, then added, “Just getting something to start a fire, Momma.” Under my breath I told him not to egg her on.

Momma’s arms were filled with empty cardboard boxes, and behind her Elizabeth was dragging out a garbage bag full of wrapping paper. “Use some of this,” Momma said, heaving the trash over the rail. “And there should be some old bushel baskets under the porch somewhere. You can burn those up, too. But get busy before it starts snowing again. Time’s a wasting. And get Buck off of this porch. The box he’s in is still leaking. If it freezes, we’ll all break our necks.”

“Now there’s a thought.” Andrew turned to go, shovel in one hand, gas can in the other.

Momma leaned over the rail. “Andrew Evan McKenna,” she called, “it would help if you acted your age.”

Years ago, Momma’s tone calling Andrew’s full name would have stopped my brother in his tracks. But this time Andrew didn’t even turn around. “You mean act like the ‘man of the family’? Oh, Momma, lay off. You’ve got your minions doing your bidding, so lay off.”

“And it would help if you developed a more civil tone. I’m your mother. I deserve respect. I nursed you at my own breast--”

“Please, Momma,” Andrew called out. “Don’t force me to picture that.”

“All I’m asking for is some cooperation--”

I grabbed a stack of bushel baskets and started after Andrew, who was crossing the yard towards the woods’ edge.

“Andrew!” Momma shouted..

Finally he stopped. He cocked his head like he was listening, but still didn’t turn around.

Momma shook her head. “How did we ever get like this? It’s not what I wanted.”

Andrew simply set down his gas can and began digging through the crust of snow down to the frozen ground.

For a long moment Momma stared after him, rubbing her cold arms. Then she remembered Elizabeth at her side and bent down to lift the girl into her arms, something I hadn’t seen her do in a long time. “Come on, honey,” she coddled. “You need to go back inside or you’ll catch your death.” The warm glow of the kitchen swallowed them up.

Andrew and I got busy then. I carried the trash bags and cardboard boxes into the yard while Andrew stomped on the bushel crates, smashing them into kindling. He arranged the lightwood among the boxes and wrapping paper, then threw on a few dead branches from the woods' edge to keep our bonfire from blowing away in the wind. We dragged over a junky bureau from the garage, ready to toss that on as well once we got the blaze going. Momma and Elizabeth came back out in their coats to supervise from the porch, and it wasn't two seconds before she began bitching again about moving Buck. Andrew stopped what he was doing, flashed me a tired look, and together we carted the foul wet box from the porch to the grass, setting it down beside the bureau. With a sigh, Andrew poured a generous amount of gasoline all over the bonfire, then set the can down on the Electrolux box.

"Watch your gloves," I told him. "That can's kind of drippy."

Andrew rolled his eyes, pulled off his gloves, then produced the box of blue-tip matches from his coat pocket. He struck a match against the top of the shovel blade and dropped it onto the bonfire. With the wind picking up, it took a few tries. But then, just as a few more snowflakes drifted past my eyes, the cardboard erupted in a sudden sheet of flame across the spilled gasoline. Plastic bags bubbled and melted. Wrapping paper unfolded in the heat, crumpled snowmen and Santas falling among the wooden crates where they blackened and burned. A piece of fiery tissue paper lifted in the wind, a luminous fairy whirling past my brother and me. Spellbound, we watched the glowing paper arc gracefully through the air, coming to light atop Buck's cardboard coffin, which burst dramatically into flame.

Andrew and I looked at each other. The gas can must have sprung a leak when Andrew struck it with the shovel blade.

Andrew lunged forward, tried to brush away the flames with his arm, but jerked back when a yellow flame danced up his nylon coat sleeve. He struggled to undo his zipper. I dove forward, wrestled the coat off him, and beat it against the ground.

"The gas can!" Andrew cried, pulling at my arm, tugging me towards the house. Ahead of us, Momma stared dumbfounded at the inferno we'd caused. Elizabeth clapped her hands and cheered.

We were halfway to the house when I turned to see the fire reach the gas can. Instantly, it rocketed skyward, drawing a plume of orange flame in its wake, stray sparks spiraling through the air--a family of comets. The moment slowed as the metal can arced across the yard, past the garage, toward the icy road heading to town. Sound pushed toward us as if through water, the dull thud of charred metal impacting earth, the gas can skidding into a ditch. The bureau toppled, joining the fiery spectacle of the bonfire, so bright now that it made the dark beyond my brother and me shrink into the woods. Snow and ash swirled around us. I took off a glove and wiped a bit of soot from Andrew's face. He pulled me to him. I could feel his heart beating hard inside his chest.

Momma's voice cleaved the air. "*What the hell do you think you are doing?!*" She crossed the lawn and stood before us, surveying one spiritually inadequate child and then the other. "I give you a dog to bury and you turn this place into Armageddon!" She waved at the fire. "God dammit!"

"These things happen," said Andrew, with such forced nonchalance I feared Momma might slug him.

Instead she glowered at him, trying to turn him to stone "You did this on purpose!" she hissed. "You'd do anything to hurt me."

"It was an accident!" Andrew said, for real this time.

I tried not to listen as they dug into each other again, going another couple rounds as the fire threw their shadows across the snow and onto the garage's cinder block walls. I thought of a passage from the science textbook we used at school, how after nuclear explosions ghostly outlines are the only thing of people left behind, etched like negatives into yielding stone. Let the future decipher *this*, I thought-- shadows full of accusing fingers and shrugging shoulders, arms raised in anger and exhausted love.

But I said nothing. I turned to see Elizabeth heading inside, back to Christmas toys or perhaps Grandma's questions, and I hoped they both had the good sense not to call the fire department. This fire could burn itself out.

Momma kicked Andrew's burnt Christmas coat and told him how much it cost. I stayed out of it, letting their anger die down. Momma barked an order for us to clean this mess up then retreated across the lawn and disappeared into the house.

Silently my brother put back on his dirty coat and retrieved the shovel. He stared once more at the fire. "She still wants what's left of old Buck buried."

Light played across his fine features, glinting like embers in the depths of his eyes. I had dropped my glove somewhere, so I lifted my cold fingers to my lips for warmth. "Well," I told him, "at least now it doesn't have to be a very big hole."

Andrew leaned on the shovel and laughed, and I felt like I had won back a small piece of him.

"We can put him in a coffee can," he suggested.

"Yeah, Chock Full O' Nuts." We laughed together this time.

I shoved my cold hand into the pocket of my dungarees and felt the thin, hard curve of bone. I pulled out the object, surprised to find it still there after my haste in the kitchen, still holding up after all it had been through. I rubbed its scrubbed, gray surface with my thumb, then held the bone up to Andrew.

"A wishbone?" he asked as he took it from me.

"It was in the carcass Buck choked on," I told him, explaining how I cleaned it for Elizabeth because she had asked for it over supper. "I should probably just throw it away," I finally said. "It's got to be bad luck to wish on a killer wishbone."

Andrew chuckled or sighed, it was hard to tell which.

“Don’t worry,” he said. “Our luck’s got nowhere to go but up.”

He extended the wishbone to me, gripping one half and offering me the other. Above us, the moon shone down through the scattered clouds like a thin slipper stepping through the sky. And at that moment, all there seemed to be to do in the world was to lean apart and tug.

Chapter 16: Momma Hyde

Andrew – Seneca, Spring 1988

Easter Sunday of his senior year, Momma forces Andrew and his sisters to go to church with her. There Reverend Helmsley unleashes his theatrical utmost, infusing his rendition of Christ's final days with all the fervor of a TV evangelist. He beseeches the congregation with outstretched hands and a flushed face as tears stream from behind his wire-rim spectacles. The man's account seems to last nearly as long as the Passion's actual unfolding, thinks Andrew, the emotions behind it even more scripted than the year before. The church is hot, and sweat slides down the nape of Andrew's neck, but he ignores it as he fans himself with a collection envelope. Today he is trying to make Momma happy.

Finally of the look of anguish on Reverend Helmsley's face gives way to a game-show-host grin. He invites the congregation to come on down and join him in Holy Communion. Andrew would like to leave, but instead, at Momma's prompting, he pushes past his sisters to accompany her in the procession to the altar where the blood and flesh of Christ await. Symbolically, Andrew thinks as they inch forward in line. Jake' Munroe has told him how Catholics believe in actual transubstantiation, and Andrew is impressed his friend's suspension of disbelief. Methodists, however, consider the rite merely metaphorical; the blood and host at Andrew's church consist of Welch' Grape Juice and saltine crackers. He finds this act of make-believe cannibalism just as convoluted and confusing as he found it back in Bible boot camp, when Mrs. Applebee forced him to do a report on the subject as punishment for backtalking. At snack time she had made him stand before the younger kids and explain how in 1869 Thomas Welch, the son of a Methodist minister, had been so upset by a friend's drinking binge that he decided to apply the Pasteurization process to grapes—creating not only a new unfermented communion beverage but also a multi-million dollar business. While Mrs. Applebee nodded approvingly, the children ignored him as they gobbled down their peanut butter crackers. So Andrew had told the children that the Keebler elves from TV were Methodists, too--which meant that every time a child bit into a saltine cracker it was like nibbling on good Lord's toes—that's what made Keebler crackers so "uncommonly good." Andrew burst out laughing as a couple kids spit half-chewed crackers onto the floor. Mrs. Applebee never again assigned him a report.

"What's so funny?" Momma whispers before kneeling at the wooden Communion rail.

Andrew only gives a shrug as he takes his place beside her. The brim of Momma's straw hat keeps scratching his cheek, but he ignores it as he looks up into the wrinkled face of the preacher, who lays a bit of cracker upon Andrew's tongue. Andrew chases it with a Nyquil-sized shot of grape juice that he takes from a tray held by a pimply altar boy.

Momma threads her arm through Andrew's on the way back to their seats. She has an especially pleased look on her face as she squeezes into the pew past his sisters, and Andrew wonders if she has doubled dosed on her happy pills . Allison shifts her legs to let Andrew pass, then whispers to Elizabeth not to write in the hymnal. Momma takes another copy and places it in Andrew's hands. The congregation rises to sing *Hallelujah*. Andrew mouths the words, thinking not of Jesus but of Jake Munroe again.

All winter Andrew has stood alongside him in the chilly garage Jake rents to work on the Camaro. Andrew keeps warm thanks to a tiny space heater and the sight of Jake's body leaning under the hood. Though Andrew has no idea what the two of them are actually doing, he nevertheless takes pleasure in following his friend's lead, handing him socket wrenches or turning on the ignition to test Jake's latest tinkering. Sometimes Andrew feels so happy he laughs out loud. Like yesterday, when Jake referred to what's under the Camaro's hood as a small block V-8, it had conjured in Andrew's head an image not of an engine but of a can of vegetable juice--the kind Allison's started drinking lately instead of her usual pop. Jake had looked up at him and rolled his eyes, which had only made Andrew laugh all the harder.

Though the Camaro's upholstery is still shot and its body needs a paint job, the car is running pretty smoothly now thanks to their efforts. Last week Jake overhauled the suspension with top-of-the-line shock absorbers they had to drive to Clarksburg to get. On the way back, a spring rain had come so hard and fast across the mountains that they had had to pull to the side of the road to wait out the storm. Jake told Andrew he had finally gotten an acceptance letter to Temple University in Philadelphia and was now talking with his father who lived up there about whether to stay with him or try to get into a dorm. Andrew reminded Jake that he hoped to get out of Seneca as well; what he didn't say was that ever since he had learned of Jake's plans he had been using his grandmother's address to order college catalogs for Philadelphia schools himself; he had even sent an application and portfolio sketches to Temple's Tyler School of Art. He didn't want to say anything to Jake until he knew for sure, but maybe if they both got accepted they could get an apartment together. That scenario seemed almost too perfect for Andrew to bear; it played over and over again in a loop inside his head like a new version of the tape he had made last winter for Jake but had never grown too scared to share. Hope is like that, Andrew thinks now as the church congregation finishes their song: One moment brimming with possibility, the next nearly paralyzed by despair.

* * *

In the sun-washed parking lot after church, Momma seems too pleased with herself, having all her children around her and behaving themselves on so pretty a spring day. Apart from her mother having to start chemotherapy for a tumor on her pancreas, lately things have been going her way; last week the Board of Education hired her full-time--finally, a steady pay check, a better health plan. And today, so moved by the Holy Spirit she is, that she actually proposes they all go for a ride in the country to enjoy--something she hasn't done with the kids since before Elizabeth was born.

Andrew tugs off his tie but keeps quiet.

“I have to be at work by two,” Allison warns as she flips the seat lever on the passenger side of Momma’s Aspen so she and Elizabeth can climb in back. Not yet six, Elizabeth is the only one whose face perks up at the idea.

“There’s plenty of time,” Momma says, pulling the seat upright again. She steps back, sweeps her arms through the air. “Look at this gorgeous Easter Sunday! How often are we all together like this?” Her gaze skirts across the car roof to light on Andrew as he opens the driver’s door. “You keep threatening to run off to college,” she tells him. “How many opportunities do I have left?” She hands her hat back to Allison and sinks into car as Andrew does the same. “Tell you all what,” she says. “We’ll drive to Mill Creek and stop at the Double-A for ice cream. Surely all your busy schedules can accommodate that.”

“Ice cream!” Elizabeth exclaims. She whacks the back of the front seat with the Barbie Momma wouldn’t let her take into church.

Andrew sighs and starts the ignition. In the parking lot, slow-moving church ladies dillydally in thick clumps of conversation, while beside them impatient husbands fish for car keys and avoid eye contact. Andrew navigates slowly through them, stifling an impulse to lead-foot the Aspen and knock everyone to Kingdom Come. He wants to tell Momma that he has plans; he wants to tell her he has priorities that supersede her wishes, but that would mean mentioning Jake, and Andrew will be damned if he’ll share anything about that boy with his family.

Momma rolls down her window and waves goodbye to the reverend as Andrew wheels out into the street. “Let’s use today to appreciate what the good Lord gave us,” Momma says. She glances at the girls in back. “Reach me my purse under the seat. I need a cigarette.”

Momma smiles pats Andrew’s trouser-covered knee while she waits. “You kids give me an hour and you can have the rest of the day to yourselves.” She takes her purse from Elizabeth and digs through it to find her lighter and a cigarette. The car passes empty shops with yellowed newspaper covering their windows, more and more of downtown’s businesses having migrated to the plaza at the far end of town. Elizabeth leans forward and stops chewing on the feet of her Barbie long enough to complain that her dress is too short and the car seat burns her legs. “Sit back down,” Momma snaps. “Take that doll out of your mouth or no ice cream.”

Elizabeth does as she is told. None of them want to make Momma mad; if there’s anything Andrew is sure of, it’s certainly that. But for God’s sake, don’t hold not getting ice cream over the poor kid’s head, Andrew thinks. She’s already woken up to no Easter eggs, no chocolate bunnies or marshmallow chicks—Momma being too busy taking care of Grandma Rose lately, and neither Allison nor himself have sufficiently helped “pull the slack”—a fact Momma’s mentioned more than once. Yet despite their mother’s standard griping, Momma Hyde has for the most part disappeared these days, thanks, no doubt, to all the pills Dr. Whetsel’s got her mother on. Still it’s best not to push their luck.

Past the statue of the Iron Indian, town's symmetrical blocks give way to the curl of a country road. The cool rush of air from the car window feels good on Andrew's face. From both sides of the road trees spring up, already leafed out enough to filter the sun. Every bend in the road seems to hold a small ranch house or trailer home, yards cut out from the rising woods behind. A couple have small trees out front strung with plastic Easter eggs. Once in a while, Cheat River peaks through, teasing Andrew with its presence. Andrew glances in the rearview mirror to catch sight of Allison, eyes closed and head back, her long hair dancing in the wind. Andrew can't remember the last time he's really talked to her. Beside him, Momma leans her head out the window, breathes deep between drags on her cigarette. The rinse she's started using to hide her gray is a shade too orange, and the way she has hair cut short now and lacquered in hairspray makes it quiver in the breeze.

"See?" she says, breaking the stillness. "It doesn't hurt us to go to church once in a while. The good Lord appreciates it and so do I."

"You can't beat that," Andrew says, and instantly regrets it.

Momma ignores the remark, turns to Elizabeth and asks, "Have you decided what kind of ice cream you're going to get?"

"*Mayyy-beee*," sings Elizabeth. "I want two kinds."

"Well, whittle it down to one, you little con artist," Momma laughs as she faces front again.

They round a hill and the Double-A Gas & Grocery juts into view, the store's squat, whitewashed cinderblocks glaring in the abrupt sun. Andrew pulls into the roadside lot, steering past gas pumps to a spot over by the orange-roofed store that sells junk food, fishing bait, batteries and beer. He hasn't even turned off the engine before Momma and Elizabeth are spilling out of the car. Andrew stays behind, unlatching the driver's seat to free Allison. She doesn't look at him as she grips the car frame and hauls herself out. She's tired, thinks Andrew, or mad. Maybe both. Allison stands, pulls down the waist of her too-tight flowered sundress. Andrew hates how much weight his sister's put on these last couple years.

"You okay?" he asks.

Allison lifts a fallen dress strap to her shoulder. "Just peachy."

Allison steps past him. Maybe she wants to slip free of these mountains as much as he does, Andrew thinks. A bumblebee lazes above a row of potted Easter lilies set out for sale on a wooden bench beside the door. "You still carry your bee medicine?" Andrew calls out. If Allison notices the bee, she makes no sign of it.

"In my purse," she says without turning. "Always."

A chime above the screen door rings as Andrew follows Allison inside. Low shelves are stacked full of potato chips, beef jerky and orange peanut butter crackers. Beyond them lies the register and the refrigerated ice cream case. Elizabeth presses her face against its glass, while above, Momma twists from

side to side, looking for assistance. A toilet flushes somewhere in back, and a moment later a round blond figure steps from a door behind the far end of the counter.

“Helena!” Momma cries.

“Katie McKenna,” smiles Helena, putting her wrinkled issue of *Woman’s Day* back in the display rack by the register before leaning as far over the counter as her belly, at least eight months pregnant, will allow. She gives Momma a hug.

Helena is the niece of Grandma Rose, first cousin to Momma, second cousin to Andrew--or something like that, Andrew knows. She’s the youngest of Great-Aunt Inez’s five kids by several years, a “happy accident” Inez always says. A mistake, Andrew always thinks. Two years ahead of him all through high school, Helena’s never ever treated Andrew with anything other than disdain, too busy running around with a fast crowd in her blue mascara and tight Calvin Kleins. Once, one of Helena’s old boyfriends called Andrew a fag, and all his cousin did was laugh. So Andrew was secretly pleased at the start of Helena’s senior year when she got knocked up. Another baby by a different father followed a year later, and by the look of things now, she must still be trying to milk the federal WIC program for every last penny she can.

“I didn’t know you worked here,” Momma says.

“I’m just filling in for a friend. With another mouth on the way, I can use the extra cash.”

“When’s this new one due?” Momma asks. “Last time I ran into your mother at the grocery store she never told me about this.”

“Mom’s got so many grandchildren by all her kids that I doubt she can keep up with the names of mine.”

You sure it isn’t because you breed faster than a bunny rabbit? Andrew wants to ask. Instead he gives Helena a curt nod hello, then steps over to join Elizabeth, who is fogging the glass of the ice cream display with her breath.

“I got another month to go,” Helena says. “Pete’s hoping for a boy this time, but I don’t know if I’m carrying low enough for one.” She sighs, rubs her hand across her stomach. She cranes across the counter toward Elizabeth. “Hey there, pretty miss.” She reaches to pat Andrew’s sister’s head.

“You remember your cousin Helena, don’t you?” Momma asks Elizabeth, who looks up with only the briefest of smiles before returning to the ice cream.

Helena’s eyes skirt over to Andrew, and she arches a brow at him in her usual haughty way. “I heard you’re not even graduated yet and already taking college classes over in Elkins. Guess you’re getting to be a big shot, ain’t ya?”

Andrew clears his throat. “Just taking them part-time, is all. They cut us a deal on tuition if our grades are good. I’m saving up, gonna transfer somewhere better come fall.”

“So he thinks,” laughs Momma, lacing her arm through Andrew’s. “Big college man! He’d spend every cent I have if I let him. I think he needs to stick around here, keep on being the man of the family.”

She leans her weight heavily against Andrew, looks up, smiling too hard. “Even though he’s still just my little boy.”

Andrew feels his face flush. “Better make your mind up,” he tells her. “I can’t be both.”

Momma laughs, as if he’s only joking. Andrew pulls away, slinking past Elizabeth to lean against the far end of the ice cream display. His fingernails dig into his palms.

“How’s Aunt Rose?” Helena asks Momma.

“As well as can be expected,” Momma sighs. “She’s not seeing too good since her cataract surgery, and this new cancer diagnosis has thrown her for a wallop. But the doctor’s got her on a round of chemo, and after that he’s doing more tests. We think she’ll beat it. But It’s rough, I tell you. Still mother is a trooper and doesn’t complain one iota. Isn’t that so, Andrew?”

“Sure,” he tells her.

Helena eases her body over to behind the ice cream display. “What can I get everybody?” she wants to know. Andrew catches Helena giving his Elizabeth a look for the greasy handprints left on the glass.

“Yes, I promised these kids ice cream,” Momma says. “I better make good before they declare mutiny.”

“Ice cream!” Helena says as she reaches for a wafer cone. You sure do spoil them.”

“It’s either that or shoot ‘em,” jokes Momma. She looks down at Elizabeth. “What’ll it be?”

“Rocky Road,” Elizabeth says.

Andrew chooses the same.

Helena slides open the freezer display. “Ya’ll must’ve been to church the way you’re dressed.”

The tops of her enormous breasts push pale semi-circles against the display case glass as she angles her arm to scoop. So much for Elizabeth’s handprints, thinks Andrew.

Momma snaps open her purse, orders a French Vanilla. As Helena hands Elizabeth her cone, Momma swings around to ask Allison, still standing by the entrance, what she’ll have.

Allison holds back, arms crossed, a tight look on her face. “A V-8,” she finally says, shifting slightly in her snug, flowery dress. “I’ll just have a V-8.”

“Whatever flips your pickle!” Momma trills before turning back to Helena and rolling her eyes-- it’s the same embarrassing hillbilly expression she used when Andrew used to pick out school clothes at end-of-summer yard sales. It embarrassed him then, and it embarrasses him now.

“We don’t carry V-8,” Helena says as she mashes a scoop of ice cream so hard the cone fractures. She hands it to Andrew with her trademark smirk, then starts to run through a list of all the soda pops and iced tea drinks the Double-A carries. Allison walks to the refrigerator case and gets a Diet Coke while Helena scoops up Momma’s French Vanilla.

Momma takes her cone and licks it wildly to keep it from dripping as she fishes in her purse for money to pay Helena. She hands the girl a five, and Helena rings up the sale. Allison lumbers back toward the door, and Andrew follows.

“You tell Aunt Rose she’s in my prayers,” Helena tells his mother as they finish settling up.

“You know I will,” replies Momma. “Maybe we’ll head there now.”

Andrew stops at the door to stare back at his mother, dropping coins into a beaded change purse. Chocolate ice cream pools on his tongue and he has to remind himself to swallow. Grandma’s house. Momma never mentioned anything about that. He pushes out the door. The ice cream was simply a bribe, a way to muck up his plans with Jake.

At the car, Allison is going through the trunk.

“What now?” Andrew asks.

“Just checking to see if my spare uniform’s here.” Allison peaks in a large paper bag, and then, satisfied, drops in her purse before closing it up again.

“Why?”

“You heard Momma yakking about going to Grandma Rose’s. Who knows how long we’ll be there? All of which means, it’s a good thing I didn’t throw my other uniform in the wash, or I’d be shit out of luck for my shift at Hardlee’s.”

Maybe there’s still hope for getting to Jake. “I could drop them off, drive you home--”

“No, Andrew. Don’t start with her. It’s easier this way.” Allison shuts the trunk and takes her pop can from the roof of the car. She drains it down as Momma and Elizabeth make their way outside.

Andrew watches his mother pause at the sight of the Easter lilies, turning their foil clad pots to inspect the blooms. Maybe the bee will sting her. He watches in silence as Momma hands Elizabeth some money to take inside while she makes a final selection, settling on a tall one she wedges beneath her arm. A moment later, Elizabeth dashes back out, and Momma catches the screen door with her elbow, yells a second goodbye, all the while managing to keep up with her ice cream cone. Watching his mother take her time makes Andrew so mad he’d like to throw his own ice cream cone on the ground, but that would only lead to trouble. He grits his teeth as he climbs in the car.

Momma lets the girls in, then settles into her seat beside Andrew. “I’m glad to see you’re all finally maturing.” She sets the lily on the floor between her feet. “It doesn’t hurt us to get up and go to church once in a while. It makes me feel like we’re a family.”

In silence, Andrew starts the car and heads out onto the road. “I smell honeysuckle!” Momma suddenly exclaims, leaning her head out the window.

Andrew licks perfunctorily at his cone to keep it from dripping on his shirt. But he takes no joy in it as he steers with one hand and fantasizes about car wrecks. “So I guess we get to go home now,” he finally says, unable to help himself. In the back seat, Allison issues an audible sigh.

“Oh no,” says Momma. “It won’t hurt you to drop by your grandmother’s. I just bought you ice cream, so the least you can do is pay her a visit.”

“That wasn’t part of the deal,” he reminds her.

“Oh, Andrew. Don’t start.”

“Why can’t you let me get away for awhile? This is my one day off. Maybe I have things to do. Maybe I want to go to the river.”

Elizabeth pops her head over the front seat between Andrew and Momma. “Oh, take me!!” she coos. She draws her small fingers, slightly sticky with ice cream, along the nape of Andrew’s neck. “I can swim good now. At swim class they made me a Dolphin. Cindy Meyers is still a Minnow. Tell him, Allison!”

“I have to be at work in half an hour,” drones Allison.

Andrew glances at her in the rearview mirror.

Elizabeth groans at her big sister’s lack of cooperation. Her tone turns mean. “You can’t have no ice cream,” she taunts.

Momma tells Elizabeth to settle down, but the girl isn’t quick enough so Momma slaps her on the wrist. Hard. The top of Elizabeth’s ice cream slides off and rolls down the front seat’s upholstery between Andrew and his mother. Momma sucks in air through clenched teeth. “Now you’ve done it, little Miss Smartass. God dammit, you’ve ruined the seat!” Momma smacks her again, this time on the shoulder with the back of her hand. Elizabeth wails louder. “Settle down. Now! Or maybe you *want* your brother to drive off the road and kill us all.”

“*Momma--*” starts Allison, leaning forward to join the fray.

“Stay out of this!” Momma warns.

“It wasn’t my fault,” Elizabeth pleads.

“*Shut up!*” cries Momma, raising her hand once more, ready to strike again if need be.

In the rearview mirror Andrew sees it all: Allison reaching for the tissue box in the back window, scooping up the ice cream in a wad of Kleenex now, while beside her Elizabeth settles back in her seat balling her hands against her eyes.

“It’s just an ice cream cone,” Andrew tells Momma, unable to help himself, “not the--”

“Don’t you start.”

Andrew glances in his mirror again. “You can have the rest of mine.”

Momma blocks his arm. “You’ll do no such thing!”

“*Mommaaa...*” Elizabeth begs.

Allison cuts her off. “Here,” she says, forcing the wad of ice cream into Momma’s raised hand.

“Good God, Allison! What the hell do I want that for?” Momma turns and flings the lump out the window, then looks at her hand, covered now in Rocky Road. Chocolate drips onto the lap of her dress.

The car grows silent again as Momma sags against her seat and starts to cry. For a long moment she babies it up like that, whimpering, trying to console herself with a few nibbles of her own ice cream cone, until finally she sickens of it and chucks it out the window as well. “To hell with it,” she says tiredly. She looks at Andrew, then glares at the girls in the back seat again. “I will never buy ice cream for this family again”

Chapter 17: Walking Duke

The dog that pulled me down the sidewalk my first Saturday morning in Philadelphia was funnier looking and less forlorn than old Buck had ever been. Duke was smaller and more manic, sniffing wildly from telephone pole to tree as I turned the corner from Rodman to South Street. Had it hurt Andrew to leave him behind? Growing up, our affection for our dog had been mitigated by the unfortunate fact that--up until the last days of his life—he hadn't been a housedog but a yard dog. He hadn't licked awake our faces in the morning or been there to curl up with us on the couch on winter afternoons. There was only so much of Momma's complaining about his dirtiness and filth that we could listen to before our hearts became inured to the sight of him chained in the yard. But Duke here was another matter; he had obviously always lived among people, and behind his tufted bangs there was a look in his eyes that said he considered himself one of them. He pulled at his leash with a sense of incorrigible autonomy. Though I feared my arm might soon separate from its socket, I liked him immensely.

Before leaving Andrew's friends, I had mentioned to them the enormous mural being painted around the corner from their house, but the news raised nary an eyebrow. In fact, Aleta informed me that my brother had helped restore another mural vandalized with graffiti the summer before, one painted by a bunch of local kids under the guidance of a New York City pop artist named Keith Haring. Surely, Remy insisted, I must have seen his simple, outline-style crawling babies and dancing people on record covers or in Absolut Vodka ads in Andy Warhol's *Interview* magazine. I confessed I hadn't, and felt shamefully unsophisticated when he rolled his eyes at my ignorance. Andrew had felt a kinship with Haring's work, Remy explained, because it was so similar to the iconography he himself had been refining since middle school--the stylized angelic aliens that were everywhere on Andrew's notebooks and journals and which embellished the bright red Rodman house door. Remy promised to show me the mural down in South Philly sometime. He also told he how the two of them once made a pilgrimage to Haring's Pop Shop in SoHo, where Andrew managed to meet the artist himself, even got a quick sketch and an autograph. "But that was before Haring kicked the bucket a couple years ago--AIDS," Remy sighed. The sound of that word made my skin crawl with fear for Andrew, and I prayed he'd always had the good sense to be safe.

"In the meantime," Aleta had told me, "you can see some other artistic wonders of your brother's much closer." Andrew had painted a couple solo murals for the city, one at a dive bar across from the coffee shop where she worked, and another at the far end of South Street above a restaurant. "Where one of the Pep Boys from those stupid auto shop commercials was born," she said. "But don't ask me to tell you if it was Manny, Moe or Jack."

"You idiot," Remy had interjected, spinning his eyes again--which I was beginning to recognize as his default expression. "It depicts *Larry Fine*. One of the Three Stooges."

At least I knew who *they* were. Back in childhood, the same TV station that had broadcast Andrew's late-night monster movies showed black-and-white comedies in the afternoons. Andrew had also painted the sign for a South Street comic book shop, Aleta said, when he worked there a few years ago. I got the sense that they were telling me all this in part to take my mind off my phone conversation with Momma. Before I left, Remy showed me where the Larry Fine mural was on my map. Not too far, so that's where I decided to walk Duke the dog.

Walking is not exactly correct. Once I got him out the door, Duke loped forward like a semi-retarded deer. Time and again he yanked against the leash, nearly strangling himself. He veered right or left, darting from phone pole to street sign, tinkling here, dribbling there, then shooting forward again like a pinball. Duke would pull me forward, and I'd pull him back, our game of Tug-of-War subsiding only when he began coughing like an asthmatic.

The block of South Street behind their Rodman Street house had the community garden at one end and a row of derelict houses at the other, so at first I had a hard time believing the truth behind the old song lyric Remy had sung to me: "*Where do all the hippest meet? South Street, South Street.*" The fact that the first store I encountered was a creepy but fascinating hole in the wall called Harry's Occult Shop did nothing to reassure me, though I couldn't help pausing to stare at the plate glass window's display of dusty prayer candles, canisters of dried powders, and what appeared to be a few shrunken heads. Who bought such things, I wondered as I passed a shuttered-up bar called the Bacchanal. But block by block, the sunny street became more hospitable, its decay and dilapidation giving way first to a series of mundane but livable modern brick apartments, chain pharmacies, grocery stores.

Outside a Rite-Aid, we were approached by a woman walking a smaller dog, a long-haired Dachshund. Duke launched himself madly forward, straining the limits of his leash as he reeled up on his hind legs to say hello. The woman scolded me and suggested I buy a choker collar that would teach Duke some discipline. I resisted the urge to respond with a "Fuck you very much."

In a garden lot alongside a small church, a dreadlocked black man had just finished covering a folding table with a Jamaican flag and was now arranging boxfuls of small wooden carvings for sale. Not much farther sat a brick building that appeared to have once been a horse stable but was now a recreation center. Its east wall lay exposed to a small alley, and as I passed I noticed a bushy-bearded white man affixing a few loose pottery fragments to an enormous mosaic affixed to the wall's stucco surface. Pieces of glass and tile curlicued upwards into crude oversized outlines of human faces, their eyes wide and their brows askew. "ART IS THE CENTER OF THE REAL WORLD" the mural proclaimed, and the old man smiled and winked at me as I passed.

As I headed further down, I noticed a marked increase in the number of stores that catered to tastes that were young and trendy. Pawnshops and thrift stores gave way to neon-lit tattoo parlors and adult sex

shops. I looked in the window of the latter. What the hell was a French tickle? I blushed and moved on, glad no one was there to see.

Though it was nearing ten o'clock, South Street was only starting to wake up. As the number of pizza shops, burger joints and watering holes increased, I began to see workers inside setting up chairs and readying tables. I moved on past businesses that sold old toys and Japanese-imported action figures, used record albums, videogames. Finally I spotted the sign Remy had told me about, the one Andrew had painted for Creature Comics. It sported a red script logo and the unmistakable reptilian mug of the Creature from the Black Lagoon. The monster wore a red Superman cape and a Double-C emblem on his chest, and he so embodied Andrew's trademark style of campy caricatured horror that I couldn't help but smile.

On up, an enormous used bookstore dominated the corner at Fifth Street, where a few early birds were rifling through milk crates filled with paperbacks that had been set out by the door. On my side of the street stood a new Gap, a store we didn't have back home, though it had been advertised on TV so often that I practically experienced a Pavlovian response at the sight of its logo. I tied Duke to a parking meter and ran inside to buy a few T-shirts and a fresh pair of sweats so I'd have more than Andrew's old clothes to try to squeeze into. Jeans were on sale, so I promised myself I'd come back later to try some on. I didn't want to keep Duke waiting too long.

The moment he saw me emerge, Duke's tail started wagging a million miles a minute. He had wound his leash around the meter so tightly it was as if he was trying to imitate the picture on the cover of the bondage book we had seen in the shop window a few blocks back. I untied him and headed on, past a pair of workers outside a florist shop who were stocking tall buckets with enormous yellow sunflowers. Across the street stood a punk rock clothing store called Zipperhead whose brick exterior was decorated with enormous sculpted ants like something out of one of Andrew's monster movies. I watched a girl with a pink Mohawk prop open the store's door; an ammo belt secured her black stretch jeans to her bony hips.

As Duke and I neared the intersection at Fourth Street, my nostrils caught the meat and grease smell of the day's first cheesesteaks being tossed on the grill at Jim's Steaks. Though the rest of South Street was far from busy, here a small line had already begun to form inside at the counter. On the next block, an old movie house called the Theatre of the Living Arts advertised shows by rock groups I had never heard of, as well as Saturday midnight showings of *The Rocky Horror Picture Show*. The street grew shady here, trees along both sides. Duke looked thirsty, so I crossed the street to Rita's Water Ice to get him a drink, and to get me my first taste of a mango and lemon ice.

When I stood up from holding the plastic water cup for Duke, I noticed the mural across the street, back at the intersection above a bar and grille. The old Stooge's black-and-white portrait loomed from a wall on the restaurant's second floor, standing out prominently from the enormous yellow and black bull's-eye painted behind it. I stood to better take in the bug-eyed expression on Larry Fine's face, his frizzy Bozo the Clown hairdo, all rendered in a photorealistic style I'd never known my brother to be capable of.

There was so much about him I didn't know.

Duke and I headed on, down toward the Delaware River. As we walked, I tried to picture Andrew standing on scaffolding, painting the wall. Had it been cold out or warm? Had he worked alone? Maybe his journals and sketchbooks would fill in the blanks. I resolved to stay up that night and pore through them, looking not only for clues as to where Andrew might have gone but also what his life had been like the last few years away from me.

South Street opened up at Second into a vast plaza that struck me as quaint and colonial, more like the Philadelphia of my American history schoolbooks. I thought this despite the fact that some of the taller buildings consisted of recently constructed apartments or parking garages atop decidedly non-colonial era convenience stores. Still their red bricks made them blend in with the painted shutters and early American signage of the older structures--little pubs and restaurants--that had survived to this day. In the center of the cobbled square stretched a covered, colonnaded marketplace. Duke and I made our way to it. Inside the open-air pavilion, artists and craft makers had set up two long rows of tables to display their wares and now sat resting in director's chairs as they made small talk with tourists. My map told me that this area of the city bordered Society Hill, a fancy neighborhood that stretched up to Philadelphia's old historical area. I finished off my water ice as I dallied among the tables full of beaded jewelry and stained-glass suncatchers. I bought a bracelet I thought I would send to Elizabeth for her birthday next week and a few scented candles for Andrew's apartment until I could get the electricity turned back on. Another stall sold boutique-style items for family pets. Because Duke's leash was frayed I treated him to an overpriced new one stitched with "arf arf arf" down the length of it. And because both my shoulders were now sore from his misbehavior, I broke down and bought one of the choker collars the busybody woman had suggested as well. At the north end of the brick pavilion a historical marker explained how people in Ben Franklin's day once bought fresh produce and live turtles here, as well as such hillbilly-sounding delicacies as bear-bacon and possum meat. I laughed as I worked to get Duke into his new accessories.

Though Duke didn't like his new collar, he slowly got used to it as we walked for a quite a while longer that day I got to know the city my brother had come to love then leave. Heading north to Chestnut Street, we walked past Independence Hall where I rubbed the shoe-clad foot of the George Washington statue out front, a ritual Andrew once confessed he did every time he happened by. We passed the glass pavilion that housed the Liberty Bell, and a few kids in the line snaking out the door made a fuss petting Duke's head. We cut over I-95 to the Delaware River, where I got a good look at both the state of New Jersey and the handsome blue expanse of the Ben Franklin Bridge that linked Philadelphia to it. It wasn't until mid-afternoon that Duke and I made our way back along the antique shops of Pine Street to the gay bookstore where Remy worked. He gave me his house keys to take Duke home, and when I returned Remy was ready to take his lunch break. The long walk had build up my appetite, so I went with him next door to a café called More Than Just Ice Cream

A huge sign hung above the restaurant's door, depicting an Art Nouveau-style rendition of a pretty, curly-haired woman daintily lifting a strawberry ice cream cone to her lips. Inside, the restaurant featured a cozy parlor filled with round tables and wire-back chairs. A flustered waitress hurried among the tables, taking orders or carrying out platefuls of food, the most astonishing of which consisted of football-sized helpings of apple pie floating à la mode in clouds of ice cream. Remy ordered a sandwich from the waitress, a friend of his. I ordered a salad with grilled chicken and mandarin oranges.

Remy pressed for details about Momma's reaction to my decision not to return home. It wasn't enough to simply restate what I told her; now I also had to explain the *why* behind it. By then I'd given up any last hope that keeping Andrew's home fire burning might make him return to me—but did I really think I could actually track him down simply by going through all the junk he'd left behind? Despite my misgivings, the truth was, once Duke and I had set out on our long walk, I had felt my old burdens lifting from my shoulders step by step. I might have still been yoked to Andrew in the same screwy way I had always been, I told Remy, but at least the choice to come here had been all mine. I might be in limbo, but I was also beginning to feel free.

"Here's to your independence," Remy said, and we toasted with our glasses of water. "As your fairy godmother, I hereby wish you life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

I laughed as we clinked glasses. "Do I get a free copy of the Declaration of Independence with that?"

"Just the key to the city, hon." Remy dialed his voice back down to its usual register. "And take it from this crazy Cajun—despite all its problems, Philadelphia ain't such a bad place to find yourself. The local yokels are like southern pecans, tough nuts to crack but pretty nice once you get past the shell. You may not find what you're looking for, hon, but you just might find what you need."

"What I need is a job. My money won't last forever." "Well, I can't give you that, but I can give you this."

He reached into the pocket of his cut-offs and produced a note that he handed to me. I read it as we continued waiting for our food to come.

Yo, Remy—and everyone—

I'm bound for greener pastures. I can't tell you the whys or the wheres, but by the time you get this I will be gone. I'm sure some reasons will be obvious, such as those concerning He Whose Name I Will Not Speak. But it's more than that. Just take care of good old Duchamps if you guys can. I can't bear the thought of handing him over to the Morris Animal Refuge, but I can't take him with me either. I'm not certain where I'm going or where I'll end up, but I knew if I didn't get out of that apartment I would go crazy. Momma Hyde crazy.

Use my keys to get whatever you want out of my apartment. . You can sell the Unspeakable One's TV to help pay for Duke's upkeep if you like. And make sure you get all the bingo junk I made. The rest of the shit you can burn for all I care.

You and Aleta and Tommy have been good friends. Give everyone my love, and I hope to see you again someday. Just not now--nothing personal. I just need to get lost for awhile.

Peace out.

--Andrew

When I was done reading the note, I started to hand it back to Remy, but he told me to keep it. "What's this 'bingo junk' he's referring to?" I asked. "And I don't remember seeing any TV in his place."

"Sorry," Remy 'fessed. "Already took the TV for my room when I picked up Duke's bowl." A worried look crossed his face. "You don't want it *back*, do you?"

"The fall TV line-up is the last thing on my mind right now."

"Thank *God*," said Remy. "I've already invested in a VHS player and joined a porn-of-the-month club. All the Jeff Stryker I can handle, which is a lot, lemme tell you." He leaned back in his chair and sighed. "As for that other stuff, it's props for Gay Bingo, an AIDS fundraiser that I'm hosting tonight as Miss Iona." Remy's face lit up again. "Oh, you simply *have* to come to. We're doing a superhero theme night that your brother suggested, and it just wouldn't feel right without an actual McKenna in the house."

Just then, Remy's friend Tracie appeared with our food, slapping our plates down on the table a little too hard. Remy's eyebrows nearly shot off his forehead and only settled down when Tracie offered a tired apology. "They're killing me here today," she explained, pushing a wisp of dirty blond hair out of her eyes. "A waiter quit and we don't have backup coming till four. Got a cook out, too."

"That mean you're hiring?" Remy asked.

"We're about to start lassoing in help off the street," said Tracie.

Remy grinned a shark-toothed smile and looked my way. "Tracie, let me introduce you to Miss Allison McKenna of the famed West Virginia McKennas."

By the time our bill came--thanks to my new fairy godmother--I not only had plans for Saturday night, but a trial run for a new job come Sunday morning.

Chapter 18: More Than Just Ice Cream

Andrew – Seneca, Spring 1988

Momma's still fuming about the ice cream when the family pulls up at Grandma Rose's house. She yanks Elizabeth out of the car and orders the others to follow. Andrew raises his seat to let Allison out, then trails after her up the steps of Grandma Rose's porch and into the shuttered-up parlor, where heavy drapes block all natural light, let alone any breeze. Across the room, a three-way lamp is turned on low next to the recliner where Grandma Rose sits listening to Seneca's troubles on the police scanner she bought herself last Christmas.

"Good God," cries Momma. "It's like a crypt in here. Let some light inside and maybe you'll feel better." She pulls the drapes back and yanks up the blinds.

"Now, Katie, you'll fade the davenport," Grandma Rose starts, stopping as she fends off kisses hello from her granddaughters. Allison wishes her a "Happy Easter" before continuing on to the bathroom with her bag of work clothes.

Momma hands Grandma Rose the Easter lily.

Andrew untucks his shirttail and falls into the rocker by the old gas heater, which over the years has turned the room's ceiling a sooty shade of gray. Momma pulls Elizabeth off Grandma Rose's lap, then turns the reading lamp on high, causing Grandma Rose to reach for the pair of oversized sunglasses the doctor has told her to wear outside ever since her cataract surgery.

Momma catches Andrew shaking his head. "Don't get too comfortable, young man," she tells him. "As soon as Allison changes you can drive her to work."

"What am I, a chauffer?"

"Then get your butt back here, pronto. I don't need you disappearing on me." Momma begins picking through a pile of mail that has accumulated on a side table. "Look at all this junk. You got any coffee? This is going to take a while."

"I have coffee, but only half a can of evaporated milk. No regular."

"Andrew, when you take Allison, pick up a gallon of milk at the Mountaineer Mart."

"Only half a gallon," Grandma Rose tells him. "I'll be dead before I can drink a whole one."

* * *

Soon Andrew follows Allison outside again to the car, Momma's keys gouging the palm of his hand. Allison sits beside him in the front seat this time, dressed in her orange and brown work clothes, a silly

imitation of a train conductor's uniform complete with a polyester cap she holds in her lap. Andrew guns the motor. The Aspen jerks away from the curb.

"Get me there in one piece," Allison says.

Andrew's told his sister more than once that it's ridiculous she hasn't yet bothered to get her license. But today he doesn't mention it, not wanting to make her any more irritated than she already is. "What's wrong?" he asks as they pass the Budweiser distributorship. "Is it just Momma and her stupid ice cream?"

"Oh, it's more than just ice cream," Allison says, staring out the window. "I'm surprised you don't have it all figured out."

"What?" Andrew asks.

Allison looks at him. "That we all know what you're plotting. How you want to get the hell out of Dodge. Well it's not gonna work."

Andrew says nothing.

"You're not as smart as you think," Allison continues. "Momma found your acceptance letter the other day, the one you had mailed to Grandma's. She steamed it open and read it."

"She what?!"

"And she's gonna make you send it back to them, make you decline their offer of financial aid. She's just waiting for a good time to have it out with you."

Andrew's knuckles grow white as he grips the steering wheel. "If that's what she thinks, she's got another think coming."

Allison's voice grows louder. "What burns me up is that you never bothered to discuss with *me* what you've been hatching. You've just been planning to take off and leave without a word! I know you hate Momma, but I didn't know you hated me. What kind of brother are you?"

"It's not that simple," Andrew tells her.

"Then how about explaining it to me?"

"I *do* care about you. Elizabeth too."

She tugs at the pants leg of her uniform to keep it from riding up. "That's a laugh."

Andrew sighs. "You don't understand. It's complicated."

"How?"

But Andrew doesn't know how to put it in words. In silence brother and sister drive past the Methodist church once more, where good old Willy Zirbs, the retarded paper man is sweeping up the sidewalk. "Look," Andrew finally says. "It's all I can do to keep myself together, to wait till the end of summer and get the hell out of here. Is that so wrong? Millions of high school seniors do it every year."

"I don't think I can stand it here without you."

“Oh, don’t worry, I’ll be back. I’m sure Momma will sucker me in with her guilt hooks every chance she gets.” He looks hard at Allison. “You know, I had all my graduation credits out of the way last fall. If I’d wanted to, I could have dropped out and taken the GED. But I didn’t. I stuck around. Not for Momma, but for Grandma, Elizabeth, *you*.” He doesn’t add *for Jake*.

“Don’t do me any favors.”

“Allison--”

“I mean it. What are Elizabeth and I supposed to do when you’re no longer around?”

“Elizabeth will have you to protect her from old Momma Hyde.” Andrew’s answer is too facile, and immediately he regrets it.

“You’re a jerk,” Allison says.

Hardlee’s Fastfood comes into view, sitting in a paved lot where a grand Victorian once stood back when Andrew and Allison were small. The lot sits by the intersection of Robert E. Lee Avenue and Route 33, a strategic spot to catch big-city vacationers on their way to Blackwater Falls and ski resorts like Canaan Valley and Snowshoe. The restaurant’s squat structure sports an imitation gable to make the place look like a railway station. That’s the fast food joint’s theme, railroads, and a plywood cutout of the business’s mascot, a smiley-faced red engine called Chew-Chew, stands by the door to assure customers of the good time they’re in for.

Andrew wheels up alongside Chew-Chew to let his sister out. She leans back into the open window and looks at him. “Maybe I ought to Houdini out of here, same as you.”

Andrew doesn’t know what else to say to her. He asks if she wants him to pick her up, but no, she says, she’ll hitch a ride or walk. He knows if she accepts the favor, she’ll feel like she’s letting him off too easy. So Andrew simply watches her go.

* * *

When Andrew returns to his Grandma Rose’s house, he has every intention of confronting Momma about the letter. But she and his grandmother are going round and round in a fight about what to do with the old woman’s possessions when she dies. Andrew pauses in the doorway, not sure if he should slink off or stay there and watch. Ever since her cancer diagnosis, Grandma Rose has been understandably obsessed with her own mortality. She keeps urging Momma to take some of her furniture she no longer has use for, to help her sort her paperwork into shoeboxes, to get her affairs in order. But other than making sure doctor bills get paid, Momma wants things left exactly where they are. “You shouldn’t strain yourself,” she says, as if afraid her mother will too soon wear away what life she has left. Momma only stops arguing when it’s time to run to the kitchen to check on the coffee she’s made. Elizabeth uses the opportunity to escape to the front porch. Andrew gives in, heading over to the couch to claim the seat by his grandmother.

Too tired to climb to the second floor these days, Grandma Rose now passes her nights in the living room, sleeping in her green vinyl recliner. A metal hospital bed has been set up in the corner, but she

refuses use it. Sometimes, Andrew secretly slips by to visit her when he knows Momma won't be there. He brings his grandmother donuts from the Mountaineer Mart, ruffles the hospital bed's covers so the nurse who visits twice a week will think it's being used. Because her eyes are bad, he sits on the plastic-covered couch next to Grandma Rose's chair and reads her stories from *The National Enquirer* she still subscribes to—her one vice, she says, other than smoking.

He's never told Momma how those nights when he's come by to check the mail he's cooked his grandmother dinner and stayed up with her till she falls asleep. She likes to stay up past the eleven o'clock news, afraid she'll miss something, likes to fall asleep listening to her scanner spit clouds of static and CB broadcasts from around town, pieces of conversation torn from truck drivers passing through, meeting up with buddies at Hardlee's or the twenty-four hour diner out on the four-lane. Once in a while cops might talk about vandalism at the high school, a bunch of redneck kids high on dope. Andrew has watched his grandmother's head droop as she listens to it all, her chin settling in the hollow of her collar bone, her teeth soaking in a jar within reach. These days, she leaves the house only to visit the doctor, prefers listening to the world instead of living in it.

"Andrew," she says softly now, as he settles back against the crinkly davenport. She takes his hand, her fingers rough and warm. "I can't believe you'll be graduating so soon." She offers him a weak smile, coughs, leans over and spits in a tin can. "Don't worry none on my account 'bout goin' off to college," she says.

"Allison told me Momma found a letter from Temple," he says. "That she's gonna screw things up so I can't go."

"Oh, we'll see about that," Grandma Rose says. She removes her shades and fixes him with her rheumy eyes. "I know what she's up to," she smiles, squeezing his fingers. "But your mother's got you and me to contend with. We'll see how far she gets."

Andrew smiles.

"How far she gets with what?" Momma abruptly asks.

Andrew's reassurance at his grandmother's words is riddled through at the sight of his mother, standing in the arch of the door with two steaming coffee cups in her hands.

"Your jig is up, Katherine Marie," announces Grandma Rose.

"I know you stole my letter from Temple."

Momma rolls her eyes as she moves nears to hand her mother her coffee. "'Stole' is a rather dramatic choice of words," she says. "I'm your mother. I have a legal obligation to oversee your welfare--"

"I'm eighteen now," Andrew tells her. "You had no right--"

"A mother has every right--"

--to read my mail, to keep me hanging on the line worrying about whether or not--"

--to do what she feels is in the best interest of family, and by God, I think--"

“Enough!” shouts Grandma Rose.

Andrew and Momma look at her.

“Katherine Marie, you will give this boy his rightful letter and let him make up his own damn mind about what he wants to do.”

“Mother--”

“You have this need to control everything. You think the world will stop if you don’t spin it. Well it’s about time you learned the rest of us don’t think that way.”

“Mother!”

“She’s right,” Andrew says, looking up at Momma.

Momma’s jaw sets hard, and it’s as if Andrew can see a switch flip in her head. She breathes in sharp through her nostrils, stiffens her back. She slams her coffee cup down on Grandma Rose’s side table so hard it spills.

“Now look here, young man.” She grits her teeth. “I’m just thinking about everybody’s welfare. Sometimes plans have to be put on hold. God knows I--”

“It’s not fair that you would steal my letter and jeopardize my--”

“I am not a thief!”

Here come the waterworks, thinks Andrew.

“You have obligations. To me, to your sisters, to your poor ill grandmother--”

“Don’t you blame this on me,” Grandma Rose says. “I still got some kick left. Let Andrew worry about making good grades. Let me worry about my health.”

“Mother, you are not helping.” Momma turns back to Andrew. “I don’t see why you need to go to *Filthadelphia* at all. They have trash strikes and gun violence and they just reelected that colored mayor who dropped that *bomb* on all those people. You’d have to be crazy to go there. There are schools here just as good with no violent people running the show.”

“I never took you for a racist,” Andrew snaps.

“I am *not* a racist, you smartass! But you are certainly one selfish son of a bitch!”

Andrew stands up, looks Momma right in the eye. “Well, if I’m the son, you’re the bitch.”

Momma slaps him across the face.

Andrew’s face stings. His eyes start to water. “Fuck you!” he tells her.

Momma, still crying herself, starts to go on about what a bastard her son his, how awful they all are to gang up against her.

But Andrew is already tearing past her, out to the front porch, digging for the car keys in his pocket. He wants to get the hell away from her, from everyone. Not even Jake can console him now. He needs to be alone. Needs to get a six-pack and head to the Cheat, lay his clothes upon the bushes and cool

off in the current. Let Momma and Elizabeth thumb a ride or take Grandma's car home. To hell with them, to hell with everybody.

But at the bottom of the porch stairs Andrew's wingtips scrape to a sudden halt as Elizabeth blocks the sidewalk with a little red wagon. Andrew recognizes it. His. The last time he saw the thing it was full of old *National Enquirers*, tucked out back in the shed where his grandmother keeps the mower. "What the heck are you doing?" he asks.

It takes Elizabeth a moment to pull herself away from hooking her Barbie doll's arms over the wagon-side just so. Her face breaks into a big smile as she looks up at him. Andrew wonders if he's ever smiled that big in his whole life. If Elizabeth hears Momma's voice still carrying on inside the house, she shows no sign of it.

"I'm taking Barbie on a hay ride," she says, tugging on the wagon handle. The handle rattles in its socket, too loose, sure to break soon.

"Wonderful," Andrew tells her. He starts to step around her, but she grabs his shirttail.

The too-hot sun swallows them up, standing on Grandma's walk in their stiff church clothes. The strong light makes a blond halo of Elizabeth's hair. She beams at Andrew, with a smile too strong for simply having found a new toy, the smile of a crazy person. Perhaps they are all crazy, his family. Each and every one.

"Take me for a ride!" Elizabeth suddenly croons. "Take me for a ride!"

At first Andrew thinks she means the car, and a picture of the two of them barreling down the interstate flashes briefly through his mind. But Elizabeth drops the wagon handle and pulls at his shirt. Andrew sighs. Cheat River flows away from him, as always. "What do I have to do?"

Elizabeth throws her Barbie on the grass and climbs into the wagon. She swings the handle toward his open hand. "Pull me to the end of the block," she says.

Andrew grabs hold but does not move.

Elizabeth's fades. "What's wrong?"

He can still hear Momma crying. "Nothing," he tells her.

"Don't worry," says Elizabeth. "We'll take turns. I'm bet I'm as strong as you from swimming. You pull for me now, and later I'll pull for you."

Fair enough, thinks Andrew. But not that easy.

Chapter 19: Drive

That summer before Andrew left home for college, he tried to teach me to drive, his old VW Bug jerking in the empty plaza parking lot. Gears ground as my feet did a graceless two-step between clutch, gas and brake. “Calm down,” he told me. “*Breathe.*” I tried to visualize the points of the stick as an H like he had told me to, tried to shift out of neutral and into drive--ease up on the clutch, step down on the gas--but the coordination it required remained beyond me. The car bucked and shuddered to a stop. The late-summer morning gleamed brightly through the dusty windshield, the stores not yet open for their Sunday shift from noon to six. I studied their plate glass windows full of farm equipment and lawn furniture, clothing and crafts, and tried to bolster my courage. Sweat sluiced down my back, making me stick the vinyl seat. I took a second shot, trying not to think about how I had twice failed the West Virginia state driving exam so far that summer. But the gears ground so bad I scared us both. From out of the corner of my eye, I saw Andrew wince. I swallowed hard, half expecting smoke to rise from wherever the engine was tucked away in my brother’s little jellybean car. I called it the Purple Turtle, because that’s exactly what my brother’s second-hand VW looked like. But Andrew wasn’t into any silliness that hot morning.

“Easy,” he coaxed, his patience wearing thin. All summer he had pestered me about how hopeless I was, nearly a junior in high school and still without a license. In the car now he asked, as he had done before, how I could’ve passed Driver’s Ed last year without ever actually learning to drive. Usually I shrugged and blew him off. But that morning I told him how we had been four to a car because the board of education had no money, how I had gotten A’s on all the written tests but when it came time to drive I had stayed in the back seat watching while the boys took all the turns.

Andrew shook his head and sighed, knowing he had his work cut out for himself. Summer had been hard on him so far, all his back and forth fighting with Momma about going to college in Philadelphia come fall. Temple University had accepted him, even given him a partial scholarship due to good grades. But thanks to Momma confiscating his mail, he’d missed the deadline for sending a drawing portfolio into their college of art—a separate hoop to jump through. So I knew from their arguing how he was at the prospect of attending main campus for a year, taking general requirements in the core curriculum, waiting until the next deadline to apply to the university’s Tyler School of Art and officially declaring his major. It all sounded so complicated. I’d seen the thick catalog he got in the mail, hidden beneath his bed so Momma wouldn’t spot it and throw it away. I snuck a peak at its map, showing Tyler and the main campus miles away from each other, and wondered if Andrew knew all he was in for. Still, he’d do anything to get out from under Momma’s thumb. His resolve was firm. And for the last few weeks he had been hammering me about my license, telling me he wanted to make sure I could fend for myself once he was gone. But already I was starting to feel abandoned. I wondered if he wasn’t simply tired of having to drive me everywhere, to

the plaza when I needed to shop, to Hardlee's Fastfood when I worked my shift or picked up extra ones from the other high school girls when they had dates with boyfriends. In the car, I looked at Andrew in the seat beside me--sunburned nose freckled and peeling, blond hair spiked in a summery cut--and noticed a hint of worry in his eyes. But was he worried about me or that I might screw up his getaway?

I tried again. The car lurched forward, shimmying over the faded yellow lines of the parking lot's pocked asphalt. Then, with a rasp, the engine expired.

"Enough," Andrew declared. He got out, walked around the car and opened my door.

Ashamed of myself, I unbuckled my seatbelt and climbed out. My lesson over.

* * *

By the time we got back, Momma was home from church, her Aspen in the driveway with Elizabeth playing alongside. In the kitchen, Momma threw a fit about a dish of food I'd forgotten to put in the fridge. I told her I was sorry; I had been excited to go practice driving.

"Well, I sure hope that fruit salad didn't go rancid," she said, "sitting there on the counter with flies buzzing around. Food doesn't grow on trees, you know."

If I started correcting her right then, I knew I'd never stop.

"You have to cooperate better," she continued. "I can't afford to be making another trip to the store tomorrow. I have to help your grandmother get her medical forms in order this week. You all need to learn to fend for yourselves."

Nothing new about that, I wanted to tell her. But I held my tongue. Momma was worried; last week Grandma Rose had finally taken to sleeping in the hospital bed Momma had gotten for her, and she had barely been out of it since. I knew Momma was frantic trying to juggle doctor bills between Medicare and the additional insurance plan Grandma Rose had bought off TV, which was now dragging its heels about covering anything.

Momma lit a cigarette, asked me when I planned to try again for my license.

"Soon," I told her. "Maybe next Tuesday when they give the tests again."

"Well, I hope you pass," Momma said. "But I don't want you driving before then, not unless there is a licensed driver in the car with you. I don't need my premiums skyrocketing." Insurance worries were eating away at Momma's brain.

I watched her blow out a long stream of smoke. "But you're a smart girl," she said. "You can accomplish anything you set your mind to. If prodded enough."

"Thanks for the vote of confidence." I knew Momma wasn't thrilled about the prospect of sharing her Aspen. But she shouldn't have worried. I had no idea who the hell I would visit if I did get my license, if I did ask to borrow her car.

* * *

Luckily, Andrew didn't give up on me. The next evening, he argued with Momma when she got home from Grandma's, wearing her down until finally she relinquished her Aspen, an automatic. While I cleaned up supper, Andrew gassed up Momma's car, then returned home to pick me up. We headed back to town, back to the plaza, the shops closed now, just a few cars slowly sharking past the movie theater and its neighboring arcade.

We staked out the low end of the lot, still wet from an afternoon shower. Andrew got out and I got out, and we both circled the car until we reached opposite sides. We climbed in and I turned on the ignition.

"Don't worry," Andrew said: "It's easier without the stick. Trust me."

I took a deep breath, shifted into drive and pressed the gas. The car lurched forward. Slowly I steered us up and down the parking lot aisles, imagining them as streets, listening to Andrew's words of encouragement. After a while, he called out scenarios to test my reflexes: *Red light at this corner. Yellow diamond sign. Blind man crossing the road.* He told me I was doing fine; if I kept this up I'd be ready to take my test at the state police barracks in no time. For an hour or more we wheeled around the parking lot. The sky turned purple then plum, the sun finally growing level with my eyes so that I had to pull down my visor. As I circled through our makeshift streets, Andrew turned the lesson into a game, growing increasingly outrageous with the scenarios he called out: *Police barricades! Overturned tractor-trailer! A formaldehyde baby in the middle of the road!* I laughed so hard I careened right through the last one.

Andrew glanced out the back window. "My God, what a sight," he said with mock gravity. "You creamed the poor formaldehyde baby."

"It's *thalidomide*," I told him.

"Whatever," Andrew said. "Now it's nothing but blood and pulp and a few twitching limbs."

"You're disgusting."

Andrew laughed and told me to stop the car. He got out and take two orange cones from the trunk, placing them about twelve feet apart just off to the side of the car. In my side-view mirror, Andrew looked farther away than he really was. I studied the rangy sight of him. He wore his typical outfit for that summer, a black T-shirt and cut-off jeans rolled above the knee, work boots and a chunky silver crucifix he insisted on wearing despite the fact that he hadn't attended church since Easter. He must have had half a dozen of those T-shirts. I had asked him once about his new look, and he had told me it was what the art students wore in the various catalogs he had sent for. He called it hip, cool--something Madonna might wear on MTV.

Andrew walk up to my window. "Do you think you can get between those?"

I nodded. He walked back around and slid in beside me. "Where'd you get the cones?" I asked.

"Stole 'em," Andrew confessed. "From the construction they're doing in front of the Y."

I drew in a breath, sharp enough the air whistled through my nose.

"Don't worry," Andrew said. "I'll put 'em back."

“Very thoughtful.” I knew he considered me a goody-goody, but I couldn’t help it. I started the car, circled around to the cones, eased my foot down on the brake once I had them in sight. “God, I hate parallel parking.”

“Just drive up till your rear bumper’s even with the front cone, then back up. Start to cut the wheel when you’re halfway back and you’ll slip in fine.”

“Easy for you to say. You’ve got your tiny Purple Turtle.” I bit my lip.

“Should I get out and show you how?”

“No--”

“Maybe I should put eggs on both cones, like when Marcia and Greg competed in that driving contest on *The Brady Bunch*.”

I laughed, and the knot of tension in my stomach dissolved. Andrew’s voice stiffened into a state trooper’s gruff tone. “Time to get serious, young lady. This is a driving test, not goof-off time.”

I laughed again as I navigated the car between the cones, as smooth as a duck parting water.

Alone in the car together, we didn’t talk about Andrew’s plans to leave for college in Philadelphia in a few short weeks. We didn’t mention what it would be like for Momma and Elizabeth and me without him. We didn’t speak about how forsaken I felt at the prospect of losing him. And we certainly didn’t discuss Grandma Rose being ill, though more than once over that summer Andrew had tried to reassure me that our grandmother was too stubborn to die from something as mundane as cancer--just another of his stories, I knew, unlikely to prove true despite how many times he repeated it. No, because we didn’t want our rare laughter to end, we spoke of none of these things, for a moment almost fooling ourselves that they were not there.

But soon the sun slunk down behind the mountains altogether, and the parking lot lamps flickered on. The fiberglass letters that spelled out PLAZA TWIN CINEMA blazed to life in a burst of red-orange/ More cars began to straggle in for the nine o’clock show. Andrew said it was time to go.

* * *

That Thursday, after I got off my afternoon shift at Hardlee’s, I had to walk uptown to pick up Elizabeth at the Y. “You’re late,” she told me when I found her by the side door being used as a temporary entrance. Construction workers had left big wounds in the sidewalk from where they were laying down pipes for the center’s new addition. Building materials and concrete rubble were everywhere.

“Everybody’s gone,” Elizabeth complained, clenching her wet beach towel around her neck like a cape. Fierceness burned inside her moss green eyes. Almost six years old, she was no one’s baby anymore, not Momma’s, not mine. Though I’d fed her, changed her, nursed her through chickenpox, I suspected it was Andrew who was her favorite now. Love worked like that.

“Momma finally got Grandma in to see the doctor,” I told her. “I had to walk.”

“I’m tired,” Elizabeth said. “I been swimming all day and I’m ‘xausted.” She gazed longingly at the candy machine inside the Y’s propped open door. “Buy me somethin’ to eat.”

I dug into the pants pocket of my uniform, searching for quarters. All I found was my EpiPen. “Crap!”

“What’s wrong?” Elizabeth asked, her green eyes growing big.

“I left my purse at the house, with all my money. My keys, too. We’re locked out.”

“I’m starving!” Elizabeth cried. “I’m gonna pass out!” She swooned against the arched entrance of the Y. “I wish Andrew was here,” she said, as if I could wiggle my nose and bewitch him here.

“He’s still in Harmon,” I explained. “Teaching arts and crafts at that summer playground.” Glorified babysitter, Andrew called it. “You can wish all you want, but he won’t be home till five or six.”

Elizabeth started to bawl then, oily tears slipping from her pinched eyes. A woman driving by in a truck shot me a look. I grabbed Elizabeth’s hand and dragged her down the street.

A few blocks down Robert. E. Lee Avenue, we passed the fast food joint where I worked, and Elizabeth’s bottom lip quivered as she strained against my hand, wanting to go in. “Make them give us something to eat!”

I looked up at the orange and brown fiberglass sign that hung above the parking lot. There was no way I was stepping foot through Hardlee’s door one minute before my next shift. I pulled Elizabeth past. Only when we reached Parker’s Hill down by the train tracks did she settle down enough that I could let go.

“Why don’t you call Momma?” she begged.

“It’s no use. She can’t leave Grandma by herself.”

“Where are we going?”

“This hill’s a shortcut I know. Our house is just a ways over the ridge.”

“That’s a mountain.”

“It’s not as big as it looks. In fact, Grandma used to bring me down this way to a pond back when you were just a baby.” I pointed with my chin to a copse of trees in the distance, fenced off now behind hurricane wire and a weathered sign proclaiming a new industrial park that had never come to pass. “In fact, Andrew used to play by the river the next holler over this hill. He even took me there once in a while.” This news perked her up, made her follow me into the tall grass that rose upwards.

“My legs’re getting’ scratchy,” Elizabeth complained, grasping a handful of weeds for support as she climbed behind me.

“Wrap your towel around your waist.” Once she did, I took her hand. No resistance this time.

Elizabeth grew silent as we climbed--a small miracle. We were winded and our hair was stuck to the backs of our necks by the time we hit the ridge and the breezy respite it offered. I steered us down toward the river, searching for the spot where Andrew and I used to play. I hadn’t been there in ages and I hoped it hadn’t changed.

“Can Andrew make a sign for my club?” Elizabeth asked as she pulled into stride beside me.

“What club is that?”

“Mine and Elsie Denmark’s. It’s a Dolphin Club. You have to swim to be in it

Already Elizabeth, with her blond hair and silly clubs, was more popular than Andrew and I ever were. I couldn’t help but wonder if I were her age whether or not she’d ask me to join.

“I’m pretty sure Andrew will help you. He’s good at drawing. Dolphins, monsters. You name it.”

Elizabeth danced ahead, suddenly happy. I pointed her onto a trail that declined as a light wind leapt up to lick our faces. I smelled honeysuckle.

“Water!” cried Elizabeth. Its sound came rushing to our ears.

“That’s the river.”

“This would be a good place for a clubhouse,” Elizabeth said, bolting toward the line of trees that edged the river.

“It has been,” I said, but she didn’t hear me.

I looked up at the trees, their vaulted branches, as safe and strong as arms. I tried to take comfort in them as I followed Elizabeth to the river’s edge and the mix of maples, tall pines and scraggly magnolias that sheltered it. I was expecting the sight of Cheat River to be a comfort. But I shouldn’t really have been surprised by what I saw instead. The afternoon sunlight that lapped the slow-moving water also gleamed off the distorted reflection of objects from the far bank: an abandoned car amidst a tangle of weeds, plastic bottles and beer cans, garbage bags. The sight made my ears turn hot with anger. I wondered how long till this side of the water got spoiled, too.

On the far side, the bank was high and steep, but on ours the ground sloped. I scrambled down and found Elizabeth a blackberry bush growing in a sunny spot by the river’s edge. She went hog wild, dropping her towel, staining her fingers as she popped the sour-sweet fruit in her mouth. Tired, I settled down on a dry spot beside a clump of mountain laurel that hugged our side of the bank I counted the years since Andrew and I last escaped there. More than anything, I wanted the woods grow alive again with his old spirit. I tried to imagine him ghosting through the trees, even pointed out a flutter of movement to Elizabeth and confessed who it was spying on us, laughing inside the sound of birds. “Andrew’s soul as a boy,” I explained, “not much older than you.”

Instead of looking at me like I was crazy, she played along. She wrinkled her brow, strained her eyes. “I think I see him, too!”

I left her like that--eating blackberries, steeped in wonderment--while I laid back and closed my eyes. I must have dozed awhile, thinking of Andrew, how he had it all figured out with his scholarship and art school ambitions, while I was as lost as sunlight to shadow. By the time I opened my eyes again, the light had shifted. Beside me, Elizabeth slept curled like a pup on her beach towel. I shook her awake, told her it was time for us to go.

* * *

Friday night I was stuck babysitting again, my whole life revolving around what I could do for other people, as usual. At four o'clock, Momma had left to take Grandma's car to get inspected before the station closed, telling me just because Grandma was sick didn't mean everything she owned should fall to ruin. Andrew was supposed to pick up a video, come home, have dinner with Elizabeth and me while Momma cooked for Grandma Rose. But Elizabeth and I ate our chicken and biscuits alone, just the two of us. I had no idea where Andrew was, since he had never come home after work.

After dinner, my sister and I watched TV awhile. Momma called to tell us she'd be late. I told Elizabeth she could stay up, made her popcorn, and then lost to her at Chutes and Ladders and Sorry since she always complained she had no one to play board games with. We watched summer reruns of nighttime soaps--Dallas, Falcon's Crest--until the news came on and I switched over to the old movie channel to watch *Suddenly Last Summer* while Elizabeth tried to draw a dolphin on her Etch-a-Sketch beside me. In the movie, Katharine Hepburn wanted to give Elizabeth Taylor a lobotomy. I told my sister the young, dark-haired actress on the screen shared her name. "Big whoop," Elizabeth said. It was late and she was tired.

On the screen, Elizabeth Taylor fended off her impending lobotomy with the help of Montgomery Clift. I recognized the actor from his place amidst James Dean and Marilyn Monroe in the postcard collection of old movie stars Andrew kept taped above his desk in his attic bedroom.

Though Elizabeth Taylor sure complained a lot, I couldn't help but wonder how it might feel to have all the pain and pressure snipped from your brain. Would you feel its absence like long hair suddenly cut short, a ghost weight floating about your head? Would you find peace? Elizabeth Taylor wailed and wailed, sounding like Momma when she was depressed, when a valve would turn somewhere inside her and all her happiness would drain away. Maybe Katherine Hepburn had a point. Sometimes Momma could have used a lobotomy, too.

Bored with her Etch-a-Sketch, Elizabeth stretched her legs out on the couch and rested her head against my arm, eyes fluttering, drowsy. "How come you don't watch MTV?" she yawned, smoothing her Snoopy nightshirt.

"There's more to life than MTV."

"Maybe they'll have Madonna. Andrew and I saw her new video. He gave it a thumbs up."

"Be quiet. I'm trying to watch this. Why don't you fall asleep?"

"I could use a story," she sighed--the same tone Momma used when she needed a cigarette. Elizabeth was milking the night for all it was worth.

"Wait till a commercial."

"Now," she demanded, turning down the TV with the remote, then pulling *The Three Little Pigs* out of the book bag she used when I took her to the library. In this version, all the animals sported punk

haircuts, wore Reeboks and wild shorts. They carried skateboards and listened to Walkmans. Elizabeth told me she liked this one because she could relate. As I read to her, I thought about how I used to cuddle up next to Andrew, losing myself in watercolor illustrations as he read aloud the adventures of Peter Pan or Hansel and Gretel. . Elizabeth's eyes grew drowsier with each turn of the page. Soon she was fast asleep, her curly head sprawled across my lap. I tried to get back into my movie, but I was lost by then--Elizabeth Taylor wailing about turtles trying to crawl back into the ocean, how they kept getting overturned by swooping seabirds that ate them alive. Something or someone had been lost to her, I supposed. But all I could tell was that she was nothing like Momma. Elizabeth Taylor looked beautiful when she wailed.

* * *

Later, when the phone rang, I had to carefully extricate myself out from underneath Elizabeth's body. I didn't make it to the receiver in the kitchen until the fifth ring. It was Andrew. He sounded worried.

"Momma home yet?" he asked, breath shuddering like he'd been running.

"No. She called a while ago. Grandma talked her into staying late, going through her insurance payments. It might be awhile."

"Did she take the Aspen?"

"No. She's got Grandma's car still."

"Then here's what I want you to do. Get Momma's keys, get in her car, and come pick me up."

"I can't do tha--Did you have a wreck?" The thought of him broken and bleeding flashed through my head.

"No, I just need you to come pick me up and drive me back to the plaza. My car's parked there."

"I can't do that! I don't have a license."

"You know how to drive. You don't need a license. Nobody's going to stop you. Just remember what I taught you and you'll do fine. Consider it a test."

"Momma would kill me."

"Get over it," Andrew said. "I need you."

I wasn't sure if he'd ever told me that before. "Where are you, anyway?"

"A Gulf station. The one on Harpertown Road. Hurry up."

"How'd you get all the way out there? Why'd you leave your car at the shopping plaza?"

"Don't ask so many questions. Just get out here and pick me up."

"You been drinking?" I asked.

"Why--do I sound like I've been drinking?"

"I don't know what you sound like." I glanced back into the living room at the sight of my sleeping sister. "What'll I do with Elizabeth?"

"Bring her with you."

"She's asleep."

“So bring her asleep, unasleep, whatever you like. Just hurry.”

For a long moment I listened to the sound of Andrew’s breath against the receiver. “You shouldn’t be drinking,” I finally said. Nevertheless, I agreed to come. What else could I do?

I hung up and dug through Momma’s desk until I found her extra keys. Then I scooped up Elizabeth into my arms. She remained asleep even when I elbowed open the front door, carried her across the wet lawn to the car’s passenger side, clicked her beneath the seatbelt.

The TV set’s blue illumination flickered through the front porch window as I ran back to the house to shut the door. When I turned again, dark seemed to have crept across the yard to swallow Momma’s Aspen. My throat felt dry. A sheen of sweat had broken out upon my skin. In the distance, a silhouette of jagged peaks--the tops of pine trees, the crest of hills--seemed cut from black paper and pressed against the sky. I suddenly felt afraid for Elizabeth in the car and ran to her. ,

I slipped into the driver’s seat as quietly as I could and took a deep breath. Andrew had jeopardized us all--how dare he call us away from the house dressed in nothing but our nightclothes and slippers? I laid my hand on Elizabeth’s hot shoulder and searched the road for signs of Momma’s headlights. My ears strained for the sound of Mr. Beaman’s dogs barking. Nothing.

Gently I eased her tired Aspen into life. The car coughed and thrummed under us. The dashboard lit up pale and blue, washing Elizabeth’s face in a spectral hue.

I gripped the steering wheel. The gas said a quarter tank, the time 12:16. I put the car in drive and began to inch down the driveway. Headlights! I forgot headlights. I bit my lip and fumbled with the button until the light leapt forth from the front of the car like two swords against the night. I switched from low beam to high, high beam to low beam, until finally I settled on high--best for out here in the country. It had rained earlier, and the concrete driveway shone bluish gray as I backed down it. I could feel the worsening in texture as we pulled onto the dirt road and pushed forward into the night.

As I skirted the edge of town, I was extra careful, though the hour was late and the place nearly deserted. A car passing the other way flicked its lights at me, and my heart leapt. But it wasn’t Momma, thank God. I had just forgotten to flip my high beams down. I glanced at Elizabeth, still sleeping as pretty as you please. I wished we were home in bed, not out here where some cop might pull me over. I watched the speed limit. I braked on the sharp turns of the road. Careful, careful.

Harpertown wasn’t far from where we lived, a tiny, unincorporated bump in the road upriver that everybody joked and called the suburbs of Seneca. At a fork in the road sat the Gulf station, one road leading deeper up the valley, the other curving back towards town, winding past squat, tumbledown homes and old logging roads where Mommas said students made out in cars.

I pulled into the darkened station, wheeling the car so that my high beams fanned across the gas pumps, the trash barrels, the gray stucco structure. Light glared back at me from the glass windows of the

office. No Andrew. Could this be the wrong place? There was no logical reason why he should have been out here, unless it was to drink or smoke pot, to carry on with God knows what kind of people.

And then I saw him, a cautious figure slipping out from the far side of the building, moving quickly to the car. Hands up, he shielded his eyes as the headlights cut across him, one after the other. Night moths glittered white against his black T-shirt as he neared.

At the passenger side of the car, he rested his hands on the door, glanced at me--too quickly for me to catch hold of his eyes. He looked down at sleeping Elizabeth. Something light and fuzzy covered his shirt--bits of grass, the fluff from dandelions--like he had rolled downhill to get here.

“What’s going on?” I asked, voice hushed so I wouldn’t wake Elizabeth.

“I wasn’t sure if it was you or not,” he said.

“Who else would it be?”

“I don’t know.” He looked back behind him, out into the night. “Somebody. Anybody.”

“What’s going on?” I repeated, gesturing at his clothes.

“Just get out so I can drive us back to my car.”

“No.”

“Allison, now isn’t the time for any women’s lib.”

“No. If I was good enough to get us here, then I’m good enough to take you wherever the hell you need to go.”

Andrew sighed, opened the door. He unfastened Elizabeth’s seat belt. There were scratches all over his arms, and beneath the cuff of his shorts, an oily smear down his right leg. Blood.

“Andrew--!”

“Don’t give me a hard time,” he said, taking Elizabeth into his arms, her head sagging back and her curls spilling down. In her long nightshirt, she looked like a fairy-tale damsel in distress, or a fainted girl from a monster movie. Andrew seemed tired as he sagged against the seat, arranged Elizabeth tenderly on his lap, her head coming to rest against his heart.

Elizabeth’s eyes fluttered, she sighed Andrew’s name and pressed drowsily against him, but did not altogether wake.

Andrew shut his door and whispered: “Drive.”

“You’ve been drinking,” I told him, my knuckles white from squeezing the wheel.

“I have not,” he said.

“You’ve been drinking. Why did you have to go and get yourself all torn up like that? .”

“Take me to the plaza so I can get my car.”

“Your car,” I mocked. “What kind of friends take you out here and leave you in the woods? Maybe if you had come home like you were supposed to you wouldn’t have to worry about getting stranded like this.”

“You’re going to wake up Elizabeth.”

I glared at the road, tried to breathe in evidence against him, the smell the Boone’s Farm, Mad Dog, whatever the hell it was. But the windows were down, the night air rolling in. “I know you’ve been drinking,” I still told him.

“Okay, fine. I’ve been drinking. Happy?”

I was driving faster now. Wheeling into town, I didn’t forget to turn my high beams down this time. I stopped smooth and precise at all lights and signs. But Andrew offered no praise as I steered us toward the plaza.

“Momma’s going to be standing at the door wondering what the hell happened to us and it’s all your fault,” I told him. I didn’t care if Elizabeth woke up. It would serve Andrew right. How dare he sit there and hold her, so smug and quiet. It wasn’t fair that he had made me drive all the way to Harpertown but refused to tell me what he’d been up to.

The plaza was empty, windows shuttered, the electric signs shut off hours ago. All the cars were gone. Ugly circles of light fell from lamps surrounding the lot. In one, Andrew’s Purple Turtle sat as if marooned. I pulled up beside his Bug and shifted into neutral. Andrew slipped out from under Elizabeth and did his best to secure her for the ride home.

“I shouldn’t even let you drive home if you’ve been drinking.”

“I haven’t been drinking!” With disgust he turned from me, searched his pocket for his keys and unlocked the VW’s door.

“Maybe you should go first so I can follow--”

But Andrew ignored me. He slammed his door and started his car. I watched him whirl past, heading for the parking lot exit. I followed. Through our empty little downtown we traveled once more, past the courthouse and the YMCA, past the Beachum family’s funeral home and the fast food joint where I worked. Without incident we passed dim-lit bars and all the shuttered shops, finally turning at the fork guarded by the statue of the Iron Indian, where city streets gave way to country roads. Old Mr. Beaman’s dogs howled as we pulled onto the narrow dirt lane that wound home. I held my breath, hoping Momma wasn’t back yet, hoping I wouldn’t have to explain myself. But when we got there, the driveway was still empty. The knot in my stomach untied itself. TV light shimmered through the front window as if we had never left. I parked Momma’s Aspen exactly as before.

Inside, Andrew wanted nothing to do with me. I carried Elizabeth to bed and pulled a sheet up to her neck. She kicked it off but still didn’t wake. I follow Andrew to the bathroom, tried to talk to him through the shut door, but he only said he wanted to be left alone. He turned on the tub water, trying to drown me out. I pounded on the door. “What happened? Tell me. You act like it’s my fault you got stranded.”

“You sound like Momma,” he said.

I wanted to hit him. Make him feel as bad as I did. But I just kept pounding the door and talking. “That’s blood on your leg, isn’t it? You’re bleeding!”

He opened the door a crack. “No shit, Sherlock.” He started to shut it again, but I blocked the door with my body.

“You’ve been fighting!”

He shook his head, exasperated. “I’ve not been fighting. I’ve not been drinking. I just went for a walk in the woods, okay?”

But through the narrow opening I could see Andrew’s shirtless skin, marks of red on his chest that were slowly turning purple. He pushed me back, closed the door in my face, clicked the lock. “Why won’t you tell me what’s going on?” I was almost crying. I felt my ears, my whole face, turning red. I didn’t want to cry. I only wanted Andrew to treat me like I mattered, like he and I were still a part of each other’s life. I gritted my teeth and lowered my voice. “I’ve have half a mind to tell Momma all about this escapade.”

“No,” said Andrew from the other side of the door. He switched on the showerhead. “You won’t,” he said calmly from far, far away.

* * *

Monday afternoon, Sheila Barnes called me up to tell me her family was having a rehearsal dinner for her sister’s wedding--would I cover her evening shift at Hardlee’s? When people needed off they always called me, certain I didn’t have a life of my own. I told Sheila all right. She offered to take over my shift on Tuesday, but I told her no thanks. I wouldn’t be doing anything Tuesday, either.

So late Monday night I was alone at the counter pouring a vanilla milkshake for a plump young woman with seashell earrings while the other girls working gossiped in back. Late-thirties with bleach-blond hair, the customer had the kind of cleavage that made guys whistle, but from the way she kept tugging at her bra strap I wondered if such baggage was worth the hassle. I rang her up while the girls in back took their time filling her order. When I handed the lady a receipt and the change from her ten, she wadded up her chewing gum in the paper and tried to hand it back to me. I pointed to the trashcan behind her. Then I snapped a lid on her shake and dropped a handful of ketchup packets into her bag, glad when her Hardlee Beef Sandwich finally came shooting down the slide. I bagged it up nice, offered the requisite thank you, but the woman was already padding out the door. At Hardlee’s, if a customer didn’t backtalk you, you were about as close to job satisfaction as you were ever likely get.

Still, I hated the damn place. Making food there required no recipes, just routine mechanical acts that numbed my mind till it was time to go. And Mondays were slow. Since nobody was around to place an order, I picked up a damp sponge and started wiping the counter. Martin, the assistant manager, was in back, checking in a shipment of supplies. Claire Civello, God’s gift to Hardlee’s, stood by the fryer resting her weight on a mop she was supposed to be cleaning the floor with. Beside her, Julie Floyd gossiped non-stop.

“Did you hear about it?” Julie asked Claire, sneaking a French fry from a cardboard box beneath the warming lamp. “Lisa Barrett just about died this weekend. We are talking major embarrassment! She’s been seeing this new guy--Jake something--who moved here from Belington--”

“Is that who I saw her with at Pizza Hut?” interrupted Claire. “He’s cute.”

“Well, you won’t think he’s so cute after what I’m about to tell you,” said Julie. “Lisa was really into that guy and--”

“I don’t think she’d be ‘into’ anybody after the way that football player screwed her over at the junior prom.”

“Well, trust me,” Julie urged. She made a face, eyes bugging out and mouth hanging open as if her friend was going to keep interrupting forever. “Can I finish now?”

Claire nodded, moving to lean against the far end of the counter.

“So Lisa was crazy about this guy Jake,” she continued. “Nice. Polite. Took her out all the time. But it turned out he was just tryin’ to cover up something. ‘Cause Lisa’s dad was out in the police cruiser after the movies let out Friday. Saw that boy’s car out on a back road, the one behind the plaza, goes to Harpertown, I think. You ever seen that boy’s car?”

Claire shook her head, bit her lip, afraid to interrupt again.

“He drives an old ‘60s Chevy, big chrome grill, repainted nice. A fuckin’ Camaro. Well, Sergeant Barrett knew that car, knew that Lisa and Jake had been to the show--and we all know how uptight that man is about his kids sticking to curfew. Like since he’s Sergeant Barrett his daughter’s got to set an example. Can’t have her parking, can’t have her making out with a boy. So he gets out of the cruiser and goes right up and shines his light in the window, all ready to give ‘em hell. And sure enough it’s Jake. Only Lisa ain’t with him. There’s some guy in there and they’re both half naked, tryin’ to pull their pants up. The one guy runs off, but Jake is caught right there, red-handed as can be. Turns out Lisa’s been dating a faggot!”

“Whoa....”

“Doesn’t that just slay you?” Julie asked, laughing. “Does me!”

“Get out! Who’d you hear that from?”

“From Joyce. My number one source of information.”

“Whoa.”

“Will you quit saying ‘woah’? You’re like a broken record. I think it serves Lisa Barrett right. I’ve hated that bitch ever since she disinvited me to her slumber party in fourth grade....”

I could feel my ears turning red, my cheeks burning as if branded. I squeezed the sponge harder against the counter, watching the soapy water bubble out, trying to lose myself in mindless scrubbing.

“That’s so repulsive,” Claire said, her lip curling. Julie just laughed harder. Claire glanced over at me, as if her disgust was something to be shared, but I didn’t say anything. They both knew I didn’t

socialize much, was no fun to tease. More than once I'd heard them talking in the back about me, calling me stuck up, a fat-ass bitch--but nothing ever to my face. I was glad I didn't have to work with them often. I thought of Andrew and my ears felt so red hot that I pulled my hair forward to hide them.

"You know what that reminds me of?" asked Claire.

Julie raises an eyebrow, her inquiring mind wanting to know.

"Something awful my cousin told me. She's a nurse in Philadelphia. You know what the latest thing among fags up there is?"

"What?" asks Julie.

"They take those cardboard tubes from inside rolls of toilet paper, put 'em up their butts and then let gerbils run inside their ass. It gives them a real thrill or something. And then the gerbils die and they try to pull them out by the tail. Only some TV reporter had the tail break off of his and had to have it surgically removed!"

Julie howled with laughter. She dropped her mop, which smacked loudly against the tile floor. "Hey, Martin!" she called back to the rear where the walk-in freezer lay. Our lanky assistant manager popped his head out, eyebrows raised on his acne-scarred face. "You shit any rodents lately?" Julie asked. She and Claire doubled over; Martin, bewildered, shot them the finger before going back to checking in supplies.

"His ass is so big he'd need at least a guinea pig!" declared Claire.

"A groundhog!" said Julie.

I hated them both. That they were lying, that they didn't know what they're talking about. I walked over and poured myself a Coke, wishing spineless Martin would actually do something when he caught them goofing off like this. I sponged off the Coke dispenser, trying to clean their conversation out of my head. I scrubbed so hard the plastic handle broke off the Sprite. Calmly I made my way through Julie and Claire's minefield, walking out back to tell Martin what happened with the pop machine. He said not to worry; he knew how to fix it. I told him I wasn't feeling well, that I couldn't work the rest of Sheila's shift. I knew he considered me a hard worker, thought I never lied. He scratched his belly, told me it was okay, there was hardly anyone was around anyway. Just be sure to close out my drawer.

And I did that, all the while my ears throbbing as if scorched. They felt ready to blister as I rested the phone receiver to my ear and faked a call home for a ride. "I'm supposed to wait outside," I told Martin as I pulled off my Hardlee's cap. "The night air will do me good."

Claire and Julie glared at me as if to say *what attitude*, but I didn't care because the glass door was already swinging shut, leaving them behind. The parking lot was empty and it was quiet outside. I watched the moths orbit the lights until after the supply truck pulled off. Then I slipped into the shadows, heading down Robert E. Lee Avenue toward Parker's Hill, the shortcut to home, the trail past the river where my brother and I used to escape and play.

Andrew could have told me. I knew how to keep a secret.

The street-lamps' pale wash disappeared as town fell behind. Only moonlight and memory guided me. I began to climb the hill, alone with the sound of crickets, the whippoorwill call of summer, the dark and deafening silence.

Chapter 20: Hyde and Seek

Andrew – Seneca, August 1988

The cartoon coyote should be dead, crushed beneath a two-ton boulder. Yet when the stone rolls aside, he's pancake flat but alive, flattened fingers and toes inflating again as he creeps to the side of the TV screen. Andrew watches Elizabeth laugh at the old Looney Tune then climb down from her chair at the kitchen table to roll the TV stand closer, as much as the cord stretching from the living room will allow. She turns up the volume to drown the sound of Momma's feet stomping upstairs across the floor of her room. Andrew rests the telephone against his ear, straining to hear the ringing at the far end of the line. "Turn that down," he tells Elizabeth in vain.

Finally somebody picks up. A woman's voice. Jake's mother.

Andrew bites his lip, suddenly at a loss for what to say.

"Can I help you?" asks Mrs. Munroe, annoyance peppering her tone.

"Jake there?" Andrew finally asks, voice breaking. Upstairs, Momma's pounding increases.

Andrew presses a hand against his free ear, struggling to hold on to Mrs. Munroe's voice.

"--someone smashed the mirrors off his Chevy, so he drove it over to the shop in Elkins to see if he could get it parts. Lately that car's been more trouble than it's--"

"Can you tell him Andrew called?"

"Why, sure." Instinctively her voice rises to be heard above the din of the TV and Momma's stomping. "I gave him your message the other night, but lately talking to that boy would try the patience of a saint, in one ear and out--"

"It's important I get a hold of him," Andrew tells her. The ceiling shudders as something heavy falls against the floor of Momma's bedroom. Andrew and Elizabeth both look up as the kitchen light rattles in its socket. Andrew wonders if maybe after breakfast he ought to stand on the table and tighten its shade.

"I'll tell him you phoned again," Mrs. Munroe practically shouts.

Andrew tries to thank her, but she's already hung up.

She's covering for Jake; it's as simple as that. For the past week he hasn't returned Andrew's calls. When Andrew's driven by Jake's house, he's seen Jake's muscle car parked in the carport, paint scratched, driver's door dented in half a dozen places (did asshole Barrett really do all that?). Andrew wants to march on Jake's porch, pound the door, demand to see him. But he hasn't the courage. Jake won't even call him back.

Well fuck him. Andrew picks up a coffee mug and slams it against the counter, breaking it to pieces. Elizabeth looks over at him, her eyes wide. She hurries to turn down the TV volume.

Andrew moves to clean up the mess, feeling ashamed for scaring her. Mostly, though, he feels dead inside, like some monster on the late night horror shows he used to watch, his movements slow and zombie-stiff as he gathers up shards of broken ceramic.

He decides to make it up to her. “How about some oatmeal?” he asks. His little sister redeems him with a nod and a smile. Andrew opens cabinets, takes out a bowl and a box of oats, lets Elizabeth pour for herself. The Quaker man beams from behind her fingers. Andrew runs water from the tap, fills her bowl, places it in the microwave—all the while a web of sound spreading above their heads as Momma tears up her bedroom, searching for whatever the hell she’s lost this time.

As the oatmeal starts to cook, Elizabeth crosses to the far side of the kitchen, stiffens her back against the porch door. Andrew asks her why.

“Don’t wanna get too close to the microwave,” she explains.

A heavy object thuds against the floor of Momma’s room. “What’s there to be afraid of?” Andrew asks, sagging against the counter by the sink.

“Block the rays for me!” Elizabeth cries. She pulls the back door in front of her.

“Come on. I’m not in the mood for this.”

“Grandma Rose says microwaves are bad. She says she never had trouble with her eyes till she got hers, and now she’s got cattle-racks and cancer.”

“Cataracts,” Andrew corrects her. “And there’s no connection.”

Except for an old woman’s fear. These last couple of weeks, Andrew has driven his grandmother to the hospital when Momma hasn’t been able to. Her first round of chemo hasn’t been effective; the doctors need to try again. No surprise that his grandmother’s mind works overtime to conjure the cause.

Allison shuffles into the kitchen dressed in her Hardlee’s uniform. She opens the refrigerator and stoops to rifle through the crisper.

“Elizabeth thinks the microwave’s going to nuke her,” Andrew tells her, hoping she’ll laugh, lift the heaviness from the room. Andrew misses her laugh, knows he’s had a hand in making it go away, but can’t quite find the way to put things right again.

Allison simply rises, a carrot in hand. She pushes her glasses back up the bridge of her nose.

A piece of furniture drags across the bedroom upstairs. “Momma Hyde’s on the loose again,” Andrew remarks. He forces a smile, tries to pry her open.

“She’s lost her car keys,” Allison says. “Both sets. If she can’t find them she’s going to take your Purple Turtle.” “Like hell.”

Allison sighs. “Don’t start. I have to be at work in ten minutes. Someone’s got to take me.”

Sunlight from the kitchen window streaks Allison’s auburn hair sunflower gold. Andrew’s thankful when the microwave dings and he can turn to take out the oatmeal, setting it on the table for Elizabeth, who slops on some milk.

“Don’t let the radiation burn the roof of your mouth,” Andrew warn as Elizabeth attacks the bowl with her spoon. She eyes him suspiciously before turning the TV back up.

Andrew wants to say something to Allison too, but the right words won’t come. He wishes there was a way to tell her about Jake, about himself, about the complications of caring for someone who doesn’t want you to care. But the sullen look on his sister’s face might as well be carved in stone. All Andrew can do is pick up a napkin and try to clean a blob of oatmeal off Elizabeth’s face. Even she pulls away from him.

The sound of an explosion shakes the kitchen, and Andrew glances up at the ceiling before realizing it’s just a backfired booby trap on TV. On the screen, a smoldering Wyle E. Coyote staggers off the edge of an impossibly high precipice. He steps through the air, momentarily suspended thanks to the Looney Tune’s screwy physics. Only when he looks down does the gravity of his predicament sink into his bloodshot eyes and he starts to fall.

“Beep-beep,” Elizabeth chirps. Her ponytail bobs like the Roadrunner’s plume.

Suddenly, Momma’s footsteps boom down the front staircase. Her stream of half-muted curses carves a path through the living room toward the front door. Elizabeth grabs her bowl and runs outside through the screen door of the kitchen, scared that Momma’s on the warpath. Allison rolls her eyes and looks at her brother. “I guess she found her car keys.”

Andrew turns down the television while Allison digs in the fridge for a carrot. Outside, Momma lets go on the car horn with a series of short, frantic blasts. But it’s Andrew’s VW, not Momma’s Aspen. Shit. She’s swiped his keys. Andrew starts for the door to tell Momma he needs his car today--his only day off, his day to get things done, to find Jake, wherever the hell he is. But Allison blocks his path with a raised hand.

“Don’t you start a fight with her,” she says. “She’s got to take me to work. She’s got to check on Grandma--no *if’s*, *and’s* or *but’s*.”

Something wells up inside Andrew, but it won’t shape into words. He stands there with his mouth hanging open. His guts are tied in the same knot that’s been there since last week when he ran off and left Jake in the woods.

“At least tell Momma not to take all day,” is all he manages to say as his sister heads toward the door. “Tell her I have plans.”

Allison glances back, eyes narrow behind her glasses. “Now you know what it’s like.”

Andrew wants to run after her, grab her arm, shake her till she lets go of the grudge she’s holding. But the sudden ringing of the telephone stops him cold; it’s as if his blood has forgotten to flow. The screen door slams as he mutes the TV. Elizabeth shoots him a mean look and harrumphs onto the back porch with her bowl. A shock of quiet fills the room. Andrew lays the cool receiver against his ear and mouths a faint hello.

It's Jake, whispering Andrew's name into the receiver.

Andrew's blood recirculates with a vengeance. His heart hammers as he thinks of what to say. "I, I've been trying to get in touch with you," he stammers. "I was worried."

"Right.... Like you were worried last Friday night, leaving me out there to get nearly shot by fuckhead Barrett."

Andrew tongue goes dry in his mouth. Yes, it is Jake on the line, but not the Jake he knows. Not the baseball All-Star with a secret inside, a secret he's shared with Andrew from winter to spring to summer. This is not the Jake who has lingered with Andrew to help load away gym equipment after his playground kids have gone home, the Jake who has laughed and kissed Andrew beneath the rafters of the multi-purpose room when there is no one around to watch.

Still maybe he's there, if he'll only resurface.

"You should've called back," Andrew says. Stupid, desperate. "You should have let me know what happened."

"I'll tell you what happened," Jake says, his voice low but angry. "Fuckhead Barrett shines his light at me so I can't see him, only hear his voice. He's pounding the car with his flashlight, and there I am trying to pull up my goddamn pants. You hit the ground running. But me? Me, he's yanking out, kicking in the ass, yelling to find out who the hell it was with me."

"You tell him?"

"He punched me in the--"

"Did you tell him?"

"Fuck no, Andrew. Has some redneck thrown a beer bottle through your window? Has anyone smashed up your car? You stupid jerk. I didn't give you away."

Andrew sits down at the table and cups his forehead in his hand. How did his life work into this perpetual equation—love versus self-preservation? If he hangs up now, perhaps he can will his stomach back to normal. Perhaps he can make his legs stop shaking, will his whole body to grow as numb as a corpse, a movie monster impervious to pain. Except what he feels for Jake won't let him. Love pins him to this spot, makes him endure.

"I can't believe you fucking left me out there," Jake whispers.

The phone turns to lead in Andrew's hand. Jake's words die off in protracted silence. For a long while neither boy speaks, and Andrew wonders if Jake's hung up. He holds his breath, fights back tears. On the muted TV, the Roadrunner silently zooms across a taffy-colored desert, smack toward a mountainside where the Coyote's painted a tunnel. Andrew watches the Roadrunner do the impossible, escaping through the magic black hole. The Coyote hits his head when he tried to follow.

On the phone, Jake finally laughs. Bitter, hollow. "You know what Barrett told me? He said to keep the hell away from his daughter." Jake laughs harder, a wet blur of sound that scares Andrew--could

Jake be crying? “I mean, a week and a half ago I walked into his house and he shook my fucking hand. He asked me about baseball and going to Temple U. And now he’s kicking me in the ass and telling me to stay away from his daughter. He told me if I gave his daughter AIDS he would tear my heart out with his bare hands.”

“Jake--”

“He told me if I ever came near her again he would take his gun and shove it up my ass and pull the trigger.” Laughing, crying. Jake is falling apart as he speaks.

“You should have returned my phone calls,” Andrew pleads. “I tried to call you, I did. I could have helped.”

“You fucking ran off! Don’t you get it? I don’t want to see you again.”

Jake’s declaration is followed by silence. He leaves Andrew hanging in the air, suspended, an anvil about to drop from above.

Andrew startles when Elizabeth pulls at his side, her fist wadded in his T-shirt, tugging. She sets her empty bowl on the table. “I need your help,” she says.

“Later,” Andrew tells her.

She keeps tugging until Andrew pushes her back, a little too rough. Glaring, Elizabeth slinks back to the TV as Andrew searches for words to soothe Jake.

“We need to see each other,” is all he can muster.

“I don’t think so,” says Jake.

“We should talk about this,” Andrew insists. “When Momma gets back I can leave Elizabeth. We can drive to Cheat River. We can--”

“What part of ‘no’ don’t you get? I can’t handle this shit, Andrew. I think of you and all I see is Barrett pounding me with his flashlight. Christ.”

“You’re upset.” Brilliant, state the obvious, Andrew thinks. His thoughts are swimming, and it doesn’t help that Elizabeth has turned the stupid TV volume up again. He strains to listen to Jake, who sounds far away now—not simply across town. “Let’s talk about--”

“What *is* that? Are you watching *cartoons*? Listen, Andrew. I’m leaving tonight. Driving to my uncle’s outside of Pittsburgh to hang there awhile. Fix the Camaro. Let this whole thing blow over. The only reason I’m calling is to say goodbye and ask you to have a shred of fucking decency and leave my mom alone.”

“But what about Philadelphia? What about you going to Temple, me going to art school? Living together? What about all that?”

Jake’s voice goes cold and low. “That’s a friggin’ pipe dream. Can’t you understand? I don’t want this anymore. I don’t want to be like you.”

And there it is, finally. A flash of light in Andrew's face, the sting of metal against ribs. "Jake," Andrew says once more. "What could I have done?"

"You could have stayed," Jake says. He hangs up the phone.

For a long time Andrew sits bent over the kitchen table, head cradled in his arms, dial tone buzzing in his ear. The sound of cartoon violence fills the kitchen. But after a while he becomes aware of the sweat and tears upon his face and feels suddenly embarrassed. He sniffs back the wetness, sits up in his chair. Elizabeth's attention is no longer on her cartoons, but on him.

She comes to Andrew then, with wide green eyes and open hands, her fingers cool as she peels the phone from Andrew's grip and returns it to its cradle. She looks at him a moment then gives him a hug, her arms clutching tight, the scent of her hair clean and sweet. "You all right?" she asks.

Andrew nods.

"Help me then," she says, switching off the TV. A smile blooms across her face as she takes him by the hand and leads him outside onto the back porch. The scent of pine rolls off the mountains and eddies in the shady yard. Andrew follows his sister down the steps and past the row of truck tires he had to whitewash and lay in a row, so Momma could fill them with black-eyed Susans she sewed from seed. Elizabeth squeezes through the side door of the garage, which won't open all the way due to the mounds of junk that have accumulated again since the Great Purge. Andrew sucks in his breath and follows, easing past piles of baskets and boxes Momma has bought at church bazaars and yard sales, sloping stacks that long ago choked out any room for a car. Atop one pile sags Andrew's busted beanbag chair, drooping now like a slowly melting brown Pleather turd.

"There's nothing in here that you need," Andrew tells Elizabeth.

"Oh, yes there is." She points to the far wall of the room, to the workbench unused since their father left half a dozen years ago.

Andrew follows the sight line of her finger with his eyes, but the garage is too dark. He squeezes over to the garage door, unlocks its latch, tugs up the fiberglass door. Sunlight floods in. "Okay, what is it?"

"There." Elizabeth points through whirls of illuminated dust. "That old shovel."

Andrew stoops to see what she's talking about.

"Under the workbench, see? Get it out for me."

"That's Momma's," Andrew tells her. The stupid-ass shovel they used to bury Buck.

"She doesn't need it," Elizabeth tells him.

"Don't worry. You can have it for all I care." Let Momma be pissed off. What does he care anymore?

Elizabeth claps her hands as Andrew shoves aside a pile of old detergent bottles, then crawls on hands and knees to past the bench legs toward the back of the garage. The top of his head brushes against

the underside of the workbench, clearing cobwebs. What has he gotten himself into? Cold concrete chills his palms and bare knees. He reaches for the handle of the shovel. A stack of *Reader's Digest* magazine leans against it, and Andrew knocks them over as he pulls the shovel free. "Shit."

"Don't cuss," says Elizabeth. "You sound like Momma. You should move that stuff first."

Andrew glances back at her. His little sister's fists rest on her hips as she hunkers down, trying to see past bench legs and her brother's rear end to keep an eye on what's happening. Behind her, the sun on the driveway sends up waves that shimmer.

"Put everything back right," she orders. "Momma will yell if it ain't back right."

To hell with Momma, Andrew thinks as he does his best to extract the shovel. Despite his best efforts, things fall and scatter. Andrew grabs the shovel, the one he used last year to bury what was left of Buck. He gives it a hard tug and the shovel pulls free, knocking him off balance as more boxes topple. Carefully he backs out past the bench legs until he's finally free. He stands up, brushes off, presents to Elizabeth her prize.

"Now pull off the handle," she tells him.

"What?"

"I need a handle."

"Come on. I didn't plan on spending my Saturday on some enormous undertaking."

"You *have* to *help* me *fix* the *handle*." Elizabeth tugs on Andrew's arm, pulls him out on the driveway.

"What handle? What are you talking about?"

"It broke," she says. She runs behind the house and pulls out the little red wagon. She must have brought it from Grandma Rose's house, probably had Allison help her hide it in the trunk of Momma's car.

Elizabeth jiggles the handle to show how its falling out of its socket. Andrew examines the wood, which has a bad split. He pulls the handle free.

"You're right, it's junked."

"So fix it." The look in Elizabeth's eyes is hard to resist. "Please?"

"All right," he finally tells her. Maybe having something to do will take his mind off Jake.

Andrew studies the snow shovel, compares its handle to the wagon's. Elizabeth is right; they're a pretty good match; the shovel's handle is just a mite larger than the broken one. Within a few minutes, Andrew has dug out a rusted hacksaw and begun cutting while Elizabeth runs inside the house to hunt for some Super Glue.

When he is done, Andrew lays the replacement handle out on the sun-bleached concrete of the driveway next to the wagon, as Elizabeth, returned now with the glue, sits down cross-legged beside him in the shade of Momma's Aspen. Andrew feels her eyes on him as he removes wood fragments from the wagon's socket with a pair of pliers. "What do you want this old thing for, anyway?" he asks her.

“I want to drive, too,” Elizabeth says. “You been teaching Allison to drive this summer, so I need to learn, too. I’m going to ride down the driveway, like in a car.”

The sun cooks the back of Andrew’s T-shirt as he pulls the last splinter free. “Oh, really?” he teases. “How you going to get a license?”

Elizabeth wraps her arms around her knees. “I don’t *need* a license to learn to steer,” she says. “If I can already steer myself then all I got to learn later is pedals, right? Then I’ll be ready to go when my time comes. Like you.”

Maybe she will be, Andrew thinks. Though he sure as hell doesn’t feel the confidence his little sister sees in him. He has saved his money. He has bided his time waiting for Jake. He is supposed to feel prepared. But does anything ever work out the way it’s supposed to? Certainly not this damn slipshod wagon handle, too darn big for the socket he’s jamming it into.

Andrew tries to whittle the end down with the hacksaw as he listens to Elizabeth prattle on about all the places in the world she wants to drive to someday. To waterfalls, to beaches, to Disney’s Magic Kingdom. She wants to see the world, like him. But hell, he thinks as he brushes away shavings of wood from his legs, neither of them has ever even been out of West Virginia.

“How’d you ever come across this handle?” Andrew asks, eager to change the subject.

Elizabeth stands, walks to the edge of the drive. Her hands find their pockets, her feet kick a stone. “Playing Hide ‘n Seek,” she says.

“Who with?” The paved road ends a good half-mile back. Old Man Beaman is their closest neighbor. There are no other houses once the road turns to dirt. “Who with?” Andrew asks again.

Elizabeth balances along the lip where the concrete gives way to grass. “With Momma,” she finally says.

Andrew laughs out loud. “I have a hard time believing that.”

“Momma doesn’t know she’s playing,” Elizabeth tells him. “I like to hide from her anyway. Sometimes I squeeze in the side door of the garage and hide, even if she isn’t looking.”

Who can blame her, thinks Andrew. It’s a family tradition. He pushes the thought from his head as he sands down the new handle to make it fit. Beside him, Elizabeth plays in the spot where the family once made their handprints in the wet cement, back before she was born. Andrew watches Elizabeth palm the dirty indentations from small to big: Allison’s, his, Momma’s, Daddy’s. How must it feel, placing her hand inside a man’s she has never known?

“Elizabeth,” Andrew calls.

She looks his way. “See how strong I am? I pushed my hand in the ground!”

“Yes,” Andrew tells her. “I see how strong you are. Now come here. I need your help.”

Sunlight flashes in her eyes as she sits down beside him. When she smiles, it’s like a fishhook lodging deep in Andrew’s chest. He feels the ache of being caught.

“When you finish,” asks Elizabeth, “and I ride down the driveway, will you pull me back up?”

“No way,” Andrew laughs, smearing some glue in the socket. He pounds in the handle with the flat side of a hammer. “That’s where I draw the line. Now hold this.”

“Come on,” pleads Elizabeth. “We can take turns. I’m strong. I can pull you back up.”

“You’re not that strong.” Andrew uses a fallen leaf to smear the excess glue around the base of the handle, brushing it in. “You know, in about a week I’ll be going away to college.”

“Let’s talk about something else,” Elizabeth says.

Andrew takes the handle from her and braces it while the glue sets. His mind drifts back to Jake’s accusations, how Andrew abandoned him. “I worry about you and Allison staying here alone with Momma Hyde.”

“Don’t call her that,” Elizabeth says, standing up.

“Well, it’s true. We all know she’s crazy, and it doesn’t help that she’s worried about Grandma Rose now.”

“Momma’s not crazy. Grandma Rose calls it ‘stress.’ That’s not crazy, is it?”

“Daddy used to call her ‘high strung.’ And sometimes I wondered how high he wanted to string her up. The point is, it doesn’t matter what you call it. All I know is that she runs hot and cold, no telling which. Our crazy Momma Hyde.”

“Don’t call her that, Andrew!”

“Okay, all right. I’m sorry.” It’s the easiest thing to say, even if he doesn’t mean it. But hell, helping someone shouldn’t mean sacrificing himself. He has his own life to think of. Philadelphia, art school. And maybe if there’s any good left in the world, Jake will forgive him, join him there. But damn, he’s got to get the hell out of here before he ends up crazy himself. Seven days. Tread water till then.

“The glue’s dried long enough,” he tells Elizabeth. “Give a pull on the handle.” She tugs while Andrew steadies the wagon. “Think it will hold together?”

Elizabeth nods her head.

“I’m going to miss you,” Andrew tells her.

“Let’s talk about something else.”

* * *

After the wagon is fixed and the garage closed up, Andrew sits beneath the maple tree where they used to chain Buck and watches his sister. Again and again, Elizabeth zooms down the driveway, steering the wagon by its makeshift handle in S-shaped swerves that threaten to topple her over. When she grinds to a halt in the gravel road at the foot of the drive, she climbs out, tugs the wagon back up to the garage, starts over again.

The sun shifts to hit Andrew’s face and he closes his eyes. The dappled shade against his eyelids reminds him of something else. Of being underwater, the play of light and dark on Cheat River’s surface

above him. He breaks the surface to see Jake in frayed cut-offs diving from embankment rock. *Boyfriend*. All summer long Andrew's tasted that word, savored it in his mouth but never spoken it aloud. Is that what Jake is to him? Thoughts drift. Andrew pictures Jake's wet body on the mossy riverside, drying next to him in the sun. Jake dozes, and Andrew wants to kiss him. His heart rises in his chest at the idea of it. But suddenly Jake's image is hard to hold onto; it slips away like Cheat River's tricky current, replaced by the something else—a sound. Andrew opens his eyes, once more back in his yard. His sister is still riding her wagon, its tires making a grating scuff against the concrete. But there is another sound in the distance, the one that woke him. The sound of Beaman's dogs barking and the Purple Turtle coming up the road.

Elizabeth and her wagon are in the road, blocking the foot of the driveway by the time Momma jolts to a stop. Andrew rises, wipes the grass off his pants. Momma gets out of the VW, but leaves the motor running.

Momma glares at Andrew. "Who the hell told her she could ride that in the road?" She waves Elizabeth onto the lawn, then gets back in the car, drives up and parks alongside her Aspen. Climbing out, she yells at Andrew to help her unload groceries from the back seat.

"What if your sister goes rolling out into the road and a car comes along and hits her?"

"Momma, you can see someone coming a quarter mile down the road. She'd have the good sense to get out of the way. Who comes out here anyway?"

"It only takes once. You remember the boy who burst his head open diving at Stuart's Park? It only took once." She loads Andrew's arms with a gallon of milk and a couple of bags.

"That's just a story."

"Don't contradict me," she says, starting up the back porch stairs.

Andrew follows her. "Let Elizabeth have some fun, Momma."

Momma elbows open the screen door, kicks the wooden one with her foot. "I might as well slit my throat, no more cooperation from you kids than I get. Not a one of you cares if this place looks like a pigsty. Just look at the table." She sets her bag down in the middle of the breakfast mess Andrew forgot to clean up. "Can't you show some respect? Goddamn it."

Andrew runs a dishrag under the faucet, glances through the window above the sink. The red wagon sits in the grass, but there's no sign of Elizabeth. Andrew scans the yard, notices the side door of the garage creeping closed. She's playing Hide and Seek again. Andrew swallows hard. Can't Momma see how her own daughter fears her as much as she loves her?

Momma dumps vegetables in the refrigerator. She always buys more than Allison can cook; half of everything ends up rotten.

Andrew says nothing as he wipes up the table.

"That's it, wipe it up," Momma's says, turning. "Force me to gripe to get you to do a damn thing."

Andrew rubs the same spot over and over again "How is Grandma?"

“I’m getting ready to go there now.” She crosses towards the door.

“Can you take Elizabeth? This is my day off. I got something important--”

“Elizabeth will stay here with you and that’s the end of it. I still need your car. And my head is hurting so much I can’t put up with her right now. Don’t whine to me about your day off. I wish I had a day off every now and then.”

“But Momma--”

“Don’t ‘but Momma’ me. Your grandmother needs groceries. What am I supposed to do, let her starve?” She leans out the screen door. “Elizabeth, shut the car door! Elizabeth?” Her jaw tightens. “Jesus Christ, where is she? Do I have to do everything myself?” She grabs the VW keys off the table and heads outside again. Andrew follows.

“Fix Elizabeth something to eat after bit,” Momma calls over her shoulder. “There’s Spaghetti-Os in the cabinet. She’ll like that. Fix yourself some, too.”

“I hate Spaghetti-Os.”

Momma stops at the bottom of the porch stairs to face him. “Then eat dog shit for all I care. Just try not to wreck the place. All right?”

Andrew sits on the stairs and glowers.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’m counting on you. I won’t be gone long, I promise.”

“Heard that before.”

Momma smacks Andrew’s leg. “Now look here,” she says.

Andrew purposefully doesn’t.

So Momma hooks her hand beneath Andrew’s chin, forces his eyes on hers. The cold metal of the keys in her hand press into Andrew’s throat. Momma’s eyes are chips of ice.

“It may not be fair for you to spend all day looking after your sister, but then again it’s not fair that I have to watch my mother dying of cancer. Now is it? Answer me!”

“Why do you always make me feel guilty?”

“Maybe you should feel guilty every once in a while.” On her way to the Bug she kicks Elizabeth’s wagon. “Find your sister,” she says. “Fix her lunch. Show me some consideration.”

But Andrew is already heading back inside. He sits at the table and listens to the gravel crunch beneath the Bug’s tires as it backs onto the road. The car sounds soon trail away into nothing. For a long time Andrew sits there, his head buried in his hands.

Finally, Elizabeth rushes into the kitchen crying. “My wagon!” she wails. “Momma took it!” Tears stream down her face. She pounds her fists against the table.

“Calm down,” Andrew tells her. “It’s got to be somewhere.”

“No!” cries Elizabeth. “Momma took it! She must have. Where’d she go?”

“She went to Grandma’s.”

Elizabeth grits her teeth, grabs the phone receiver off the wall. "I'm going to call her right now."

"You'll just get chewed out."

"I don't care," she says. "It's my wagon. You gave it to me. She can't take away what's mine. It's not fair." A fresh torrent of tears start down her face.

"You'd better let me call. She can't chew my ass out any more than she already has."

One phone call is all it takes to learn that Momma Hyde has indeed stashed the wagon in the VW and taken it there. She informs Andrew that it will be staying at Grandma Rose's house, where Elizabeth should have left it in the first place, in case Momma needs it to haul the oxygen tanks the doctor's put their grandmother on. If Elizabeth wants to play with it she can do so there, on the sidewalk, where there's no danger of running into the road. "Maybe she'll appreciate visiting her grandmother more if I move her other toys here as well," Momma says, but Andrew leaves this out when he relays the news to Elizabeth.

"Why'd Momma do it?" howls Elizabeth.

"Don't bother trying to figure her out," Andrew says. He returns the phone to its cradle and falls back in his chair.

"It's not fair!" Elizabeth screams, her voice ragged and shrill.

Andrew's head hurts. Is this the kind of headache Momma's always complaining about?

"It's not fair!" Elizabeth continues. "I want to know why! Why! Why!"

Something inside Andrew snaps. He grips his sister by the shoulders and yanks her towards him. Something molten rises inside him, becomes words before he can think them through. "Because she has to have her way," Andrew tells her. "Because she's a mentally screwed-up bully. Is that good enough? How about because Daddy left? Or 'cause she just hates you and me and this whole damn place! You can list a million reasons, but the answer's always the same. Nothing and everything is what pisses her off! And I hate it as much as you do, so just shut up. Shut the fuck up!"

Andrew shakes her. He shakes Elizabeth but she won't stop crying. He clamps a hand over her mouth, another against her neck. He wants to stifle her sobs because he can't stand them anymore, can't stand anything--not this place, not Momma's mind control, not the awful sounds that keep welling up, keep pouring out of his scared little sister. He wants to stuff the crying back inside her. His hand grows wet as she tries to bite, her red face still not shutting up. Andrew wants to choke her, wants to stuff his goddamn fist down her throat--make her shut up, shut up, shut the fuck up!

But suddenly he pushes her away instead—he doesn't want to be a monster like Momma. Elizabeth crashes into the cabinet beneath the sink. Andrew's arms drop, deadweight. He sinks back in his chair, shivering despite the kitchen's heat. Elizabeth, too shocked to cry anymore, kneads her throat with her hand, then scuttles crab-like backwards toward the door, watching Andrew, looking older than her years. Elizabeth rises, runs outside.

For a long moment everything is still, as if all the air has been sucked from the room. Andrew feels empty--a chalk outline at the scene of a crime. He is getting lost, becoming someone he doesn't want to be. Andrew cries, shaking with tears that that will not stop.

Part Three: On Their Own

Chapter 21: Who You Were Then

Andrew – Philadelphia, Summer 1991

Waif is one of them, if only slightly. In the Philadelphia coffee shop that has grown to be Andrew's second home, she orbits his circle of starving-artist regulars, pulling up a chair to cast her troubled face at each of Andrew's friends with a child's naked vulnerability. She rarely speaks; last summer, when she first began hanging with them, a rumor circulated that she was mute, a fact not contradicted by those who took her to bed. Andrew sits across from her now and imagines her thin fingers running through their hair, Waif's fragile-looking bones poking through her suit of little-girl skin as she takes her place beneath each boy. Today is the first she's been back since her suicidal freak-out back in February. Andrew knows the boys who fuck her want her only for her innocence. Though Waif is older than the rest of his friends, she appears years younger, her head as empty and melancholy as a cracked doll. It is too much to look at the black smear of her mascaraed eyes, her tangle of hennaed hair, her pouting lips and porcelain skin. She is supposed to be better now, back for a makeup course and to get her feet wet for a full load come fall. But has she really changed? Andrew wonders. Just last week a friend told Andrew that laying a hand upon her knee dredged up feelings as shameful as watching kiddy porn. Waif is so overexposed, even a glance her way takes advantage.

The rest of Andrew's friends consider themselves something akin to "expatriates", southerners and small-town escapees finding refuge in Philadelphia, a city they have chosen for its abundance of colleges, art schools, rents cheaper than New York City's. They spend their afternoons filling up on coffee and croissants here at The Last Drop, a smoke-hazy street corner rendezvous situated behind a glass door webbed with spidery cracks from a rock hurled late one night. The inner circle that buoys Andrew this summer consists not only of Aleta, Remy and Tommy, but also Tommy's new band-mates: Brenda Joe, a printmaking major and lead singer of their fledgling acid house-punkabilly band, Baby in a Microwave; Slim Jim, a music student and health food co-op worker by day, synthesizer genius/band-mate by night; the other Tom—the straight one—who alongside gay Tommy provides backup guitars not only for Brenda Joe's caterwauling vocals, but also for the but also the ramshackle orchestra that shores up the group's other endeavor, a performance art troupe known as the L'il Dump Cabaret—Remy's brainchild.

Looking at them all, gathered around a couple of pressed-together tables, Andrew wonders where they'll be a year from now or more. Certainly his friends are special, he thinks. But they're also simply typical of the atypical crowd here who come here seeking whatever camaraderie a cup of house blend can

afford. Though they've jokingly taken to calling themselves "slackers" lately--thanks to the indie movie of the same name that recently opened at the Ritz--it is probably not fair to say that the only progress they are interested in is progressing on home at the end of the day. Unlike most of their parental units, who get drunk after a burnout day, in their coffee shop hangout they are getting stimulated after a boring day. When Andrew dares complain about how much everyone smokes, his friends tell him they are intent on rebelling against a health craze that has Soloflexed across the country only to bring them too many Thighmaster and Buns of Steel infomercials. His friends let the gray trails of their cigarettes swirl around them, bringing a tightness to Andrew's chest that joins the anxiety always there. At times Andrew thinks they exist in a giant fish tank, the outside world intruding only at arm's length. Even living through the country's first war in the Persian Gulf--its spin-doctored media buildup last August, its, anchorman-narrated pyrotechnic resolution last winter--amounted to little more than the occasional sight of yellow ribbons looped around suburban neighborhood trees. Andrew's friends read their papers starting with the arts or entertainment sections, leaving front-page headlines for later, if at all. Not that Andrew and his friends are apolitical--some of them have joined ACT UP or various student protest groups--they simply have scant faith that the world can be changed. But maybe, thinks Andrew as he looks across the table, if Waif can get better, the world can too.

* * *

The problem with Waif, now that she's returned to them, is that none of them really know what to do with her. As a drawing model, she can't sit still long enough for anyone to render much more than a smudgy sketch. As a girlfriend, she tires out even the horniest of guys with her excessive compliance. And the extent of her skills as a conversationalist one can pretty much imagine. For some reason, she insists on lingering among the group like a ghostly orphan. Neither Andrew nor the others can figure out how she supports herself or affords her Ivy League tuition at Penn. If the rumors of a trust fund are true, she still never seems to have much money for rent or food. They do know she attends her humanities class with haphazard regularity, for cradled in her arms is an occasional book--the letters of Van Gogh, novels by Fitzgerald--though never once does Andrew spot her reading them. He wonders if she is on drugs, though her arms are clean and he is certain she lacks the verbal skills to negotiate a business transaction with one of the dealers on 13th Street. Yet from the moment she drifts back into their lives, Waif still seems to need help in some indeterminate way. But what to give? How to give it? Though none of them feels they truly know her, no one has the heart kick her out. They are all nice people, mostly.

And certainly there is enough room in their Rodman Street rowhouse. While friends with happier home lives have gone back to their childhood bedrooms for the summer, Andrew's inner circle takes bohemian pride living in dumpster-dive squalor in their boldly painted house. Each month they scrape together their rent from whoever belongs to the toothbrushes on the bathroom sink. If they run short, they

hold a house party and pass a hat. Summer nights are one long endless dance, sweating to music styles that blur together. New Wave, acid house, techno. Hip-hop, grunge and trance.

But too soon, college classes resume. Despite fun times being largely over, Slim Jim jounces into The Last Drop one early September afternoon, merry and jangling, the chains on his black boots clinking wildly. He straddles one bony leg over the back of an empty chair and slides into the seat. Cups rattle in saucers as he leans both elbows on the table, shakes his mane of curly red hair, and says, “Hi everybody. My hand is green.” He waves his right palm to prove that it is true.

Brenda Joe sets down her poetry journal and reaches out a tentative index finger to touch Slim Jim’s hand. Waif looks on, impressed.

“Good grief,” cries Andrew. “You look like you’ve been fisting Kermit the Frog.”

Brenda Joe rolls her eyes. “Green from what?” she asks in her Tennessee drawl.

“Third stage of syphilis,” jokes Slim Jim.

Brenda Joe withdraws her finger.

“Actually, I was painting a sign at the health food store,” he confesses.

“So it’s not due to envy of my good looks?” Remy laughs and runs his fingers through his hair. Bits of glitter float down onto his cheese danish. They’ve been playing a round of a conversation game they’ve invented called Who’s Family is the Worst. It’s the middle of Remy’s turn and he turns back to Andrew to resume his story about last autumn’s Thanksgiving-with-the-family fiasco. “The whole damn family is sitting around the dinner table, everyone stuffing themselves full of turkey and all the trimmings, except for me, because I have just been forced to listen to the gory details regarding my sister’s second miscarriage, and Uncle Vernon still hasn’t tucked back in his shirt from where he showed us all his open heart surgery scar, so I say what the hell and decide to throw myself whole hog into the air of talk show trashiness by whipping out my new nipple ring, which by the look on my poor mother’s face was not the right thing to--are you listening to me?”

Andrew’s eyes have drifted over to Waif, who has lifted Slim Jim’s paint-covered hand to lap at it like a dog. Slim Jim tries to pull away, but Waif holds tight, dropping to her knees as if before a king.

“Jesus!” bellows Remy.

Waif’s tongue turns green from the poster paint while the rest of them stare. Slim Jim looks around the table, bewildered, embarrassed. Perhaps turned on? Heavy-set Brenda Joe starts to laugh a deep, hearty belly laugh, even though Andrew repeatedly kicks her under the table. Slim Jim finally shakes Waif off and heads to the downstairs bathroom to wash his hand or possibly jerk off. Waif shyly retakes her seat, swaying dizzily as if perched atop a slender peak. Above everyone’s heads, a just-released Nirvana tune thrums what’s becoming a generational anthem: *I feel stupid and contagious...*

Not knowing how else to fill the awkward moment, Andrew offers Waif part of his cranberry muffin. Her blue eyes fix on him, her green lips part and out flows a thin shimmering voice. "I don't need to eat," she says. "A bird in my stomach lays eggs every morning."

How can one argue with that?

* * *

As a kid growing up on a lonely country road, Andrew never wanted to live in a neighborhood but rather on the set of a TV show's manufactured alternate reality. He wanted to wake up one day and find himself spliced into an establishing shot of *The Brady Bunch*'s ultra-modern two-story California home, where inside Alice the maid was baking an endless stream of apple pies. Without a second thought, he would have gladly swapped his fighting parents for Carol and Mike Brady or those *from Happy Days or Eight is Enough*.

Now, in the coffee shop, whole afternoons are whittled away recounting the plots of *Brady Bunch* episodes: Marcia's nose bloodied by a football; Peter's spewing model volcano; Cindy's *lithp*; Greg organizing the whole gang to sing those insipid pop confections that record companies have recently started to rerelease as CDs to cash in on the latchkey generation's Brady nostalgia. TV has not only been the cross-cultural babysitter of all their childhoods, it has also given them an ersatz family they can share. And yet now that they're older, chic with cynicism, the group can't help thinking shows like *The Brady Bunch* would be more interesting if the stakes were raised. Over cappuccino and cognac-flavored coffee, Andrew's Bradiacs invent their own cache of episodes they'd like to see.

"Y'all remember when Jan tried to hide crashing her bike into Mom and Dad's anniversary present?" asks Brenda Joe.

"Oh yeah," says Aleta, stopping at the table to sneak her friends a round of refills from the fresh pot in her hands. She has started working the afternoon shift. "The family portrait," she remembers.

Brenda Joe stirs some Nutrasweet into her coffee. "Well, how about if she tried to cover up a hit and run instead?" She pours in another packet. "I can just see her wiping bloody bits of forehead off the station wagon's dented fender."

"Maybe Greg and Marcia and the rest of the gang would have to kick in and do another 'Sliver Platters' benefit concert," offers Straight Tom, cleaning his nails with a guitar pick.

Remy throws down the copy of Douglas Copeland's *Generation X* Andrew recently lent him and joins the game. "How about Peter and Tiger the dog--the joys of bestiality?"

Andrew's turn. "Or Sam the butcher's arrest and conviction for coercing Cindy into posing for some pictures," Andrew smiles. "Here little girl, hold this sausage."

He looks at Waif, whose eyes are generally as glassy as a blank TV screen. But her attention has shifted to Remy's borrowed novel. The game moves past her.

"Marcia's botched abortion!" Aleta shouts out.

“Greg manufacturing LSD in his pad in the attic,” Slim Jim chuckles.

“Mom Brady’s discovery of Dad buggering Bobby!” Remy cries.

“Mike and Carol’s first spouses found bare-*nekkid* and chained up in the basement,” Brenda Joe says with a sinister gleam.

“Alice beating their skin raw,” Andrew adds, “her merry eyes glittering behind the narrow slits of a dominatrix mask.”

Everyone laughs. Andrew catches Waif slipping Copeland’s book into her backpack.

* * *

What the group doesn’t know yet is this: A few summers from now they will find the show’s explosive potential confirmed when they revisit this game at a party and someone mentions that Maureen (Marsha Brady) McCormick was recently in town peddling birth control implants and that the actor who played Dad has died of AIDS. But right then, at the end of summer 1991, “Do what makes you happy” has become, simply, “Do what keeps you alive”--whether it is the shitty job that puts bread on the table or the pocketful of condoms that keeps disease at bay. What plagues Andrew and his friends more than anything is a spiritual malaise, of the ennui of feeling adrift. Despite what author Copeland says, the designation “X” doesn’t altogether comfortably mark their spot;. And while neither Andrew nor his friends are foolish enough to claim to be the first generation to experience feel this way, knowing they are not alone is not the same as finding out who and what they are meant to be.

Back on that February night months ago Andrew’s purpose had been clear enough, Waif had come into his room naked and bleeding. Crisscross cuts marked her stomach, spreading a red veil over her lap and conspicuous pubic mound. Rubbing his eyes, Andrew wondered if he was dreaming. Despite being raised by a somewhat deranged mother, he was not used to being awakened in the middle of the night to find a friend mutilated with a permanent game board for Tic-Tac-Toe on her belly. And yet, he was not surprised, either. With the cold turn of the February moon, Straight Tom had entered an I’ll-fuck-anything-that-moves phase, Andrew had fallen asleep to the sound of the pair fucking. Yet certainly he couldn’t have done this to her. Andrew opened Waif’s curled fist to find the true answer, a silver razor blade cutting fresh lines in her palm.

Andrew wondered why Waif came to him. Could she seen in his eyes how much she reminded him of his sisters, how much she reminded him of himself? His questions went unasked as he led her led her by the hand to the bathroom where he rubbed her skin with peroxide. The cuts were shallow, a decoration. The damage not as bad as Andrew first imagined. With the same razor Waif had used to wound herself, he cut a clean T-shirt into bandages. He wrapped the cloth around her waist and considered what she’d done. Were these the typical hesitation cuts of someone who thinks of a suicide attempt as an emotional accessory? Andrew’s own left arm bore a few such scars from now-embarrassing teenage traumas, long baths behind a

locked door, one of his mother's smaller Ginsu knives on the tub's edge, ready to cut into the pain of growing up gay in West Virginia.

But this was Waif. Whereas Andrew had outgrown his romantic courtship of suicide, Waif was edging past twenty-five towards thirty. Beautiful but clearly disturbed. Andrew had felt it necessary to praise the virtues of consulting a mental health professional as Waif sat blank-faced before him on the edge of the tub, staring into the unflushed toilet.

Soon after, Waif dropped out of school and disappeared for a couple of months. Her parents sent her to a clinic in Florida. She returned by summer term with new clothes and a handbag full of prescription medication. But was she improved or merely better fed?

Now that she's back, a quiet bond lingers between her and Andrew. Waif has begun to speak more often, though neither Andrew nor his friends have any idea what she means, her mouth broadcasting static from some alien planet. She takes to giving Andrew gifts--exotic arrangements of broken glass and crack vials found on the street, a fractured bird's egg, a toilet bowl scrubber--things she has collected or shoplifted from the Dollar Store. This goads Remy, sitting with Andrew in the coffee shop one afternoon, to reprimand Waif: If she insists on going to the trouble of committing a crime, she should at least choose a more upscale venue. Andrew fingers the box of SOS pads Waif gift-wrapped and gave him that morning and wonders what message she is trying to telegraph.

* * *

Clearly, Waif's haphazard ingestion of Thorazine points to an internal dilemma--her reluctance to give up who she truly is for makeshift accordance with the rest of the world. Is muttering an intelligible sentence from time to time or understanding the local fruit stand vendor's knock-knock jokes really worth such a price? It is impossible for Andrew to argue with Waif, for she has done away with the ground rules of logic. Her strange philosophy gleams through in those rare moments when words rustle past the mysterious curtain of her mind: Food is dirt, once removed. A sparrow on her windowsill foretells rain. Lovers leave pieces inside her, a belly full of razors. She claims her life is time left over from the suicide of an older sister. The only problem is, Waif has never had an older sister.

Avoiding a madness of their own, the rest of Andrew's gang further immerse themselves in the simple pleasures of childhood, setting down beer bottles on their front porch stoop to engage in nostalgic games of Ghost in the Graveyard or Freeze Tag up and down their seldom-trafficked street. Though college classes are well underway, anxieties are low, major projects not yet due. Come one hot, humid evening in late September, they let Brenda Joe talk them into a last twilight picnic in Rittenhouse Square where they bring old mayonnaise and peanut butter jars and run barefoot through the grass to see who can catch the most lightning bugs before summer altogether fades. Older onlookers raise their eyebrows, but Andrew's friends don't care. They want to rewrite their childhoods, not relive them.

Andrew knows how they feel. Never before has a generation felt so naked before pop psychology's scrutinizing microscope: they are all just channel-surfing slackmeisters, bleary-eyed from Nintendo, growing fat on Doritos. Their clothes are too dark and too grungy. Their etched, topiary haircuts are billboards for vacuous endorsements of themselves. They are an insect blight on which no insecticide will work. This is how they are dismembered by the generation that has come before. *The Washington Post* claims these young men and women are unable to count out simple change at their McJobs. Andrew feels a wing pulled off. *Time* insists the trend in remakes of '60s and '70s pop tunes means today's youth are unable to come up with any original culture of your own. He feels a leg yanked off there. Statistics show that this new group's intellectual achievements fall short of their counterparts in Jordan and Sri Lanka. An eye gouged out. Today's generation is growing up faster but not necessarily politer. An antenna wrested away; no compass left to steer them away from the direction toward which *Newsweek* and *Psychology Today* predict they are headed—straight to hell. But right now they won't worry about the rest of their lives because they know they will be worrying about them soon enough.

Some will move to California to survive earthquakes, Rodney King riots, out-of-control fires that will blaze through future summers; a couple will get married, move to suburbs, repeat the mistakes of their parents. One will relocate to the gulf coast to buy a first home a hurricane will eventually steal. Yet another will yoke his future to a business degree, start wearing a suit, move to the Big Apple in time to watch the Twin Towers fall. Most, like Andrew, will continue to look for new people to love, clinging to the hope that maybe next time it will provide the respite, the escape, from whatever it is they are running from. No one tells them they will one day grow apart, lose track of each other, let friendships become casualties to foolish fights. Right now, lighting bugs twinkle in grass-filled jars at the edge of their picnic blanket. Andrew and his friends seem to have no cares at all.

They seem as free and without care as Waif, who sits away from Andrew and the rest, out in a patch of grass growing heavy with dew. Andrew watches as she teases a lightning bug crawling across the shifting altitude of her palm, vainly searching for a takeoff point. Waif rolls the insect over with her thumb and stares at the yellow-green blink of its belly. With her free index finger she digs into it, nail scooping out the bug's glowing abdomen. She lets the insect drop to the grass as she examines the luminous specks on her fingertip. Waif holds her hand at an admiring distance. She must feel the weight of Andrew's eyes upon her, for she suddenly offers him one of her rare smiles. She unscrews the lid to her jar and takes out one lightning bug after another, sacrificing each in turn as she extracts their fragile lights and wipes them across her face and arms, across her bare feet beneath her mirrored peasant skirt, until finally she is covered in radiant war paint. Andrew puts down the chicken leg he is eating and stares. With Waif once more among his group, the world feels stranger than usual. The night air vibrates.

Barefoot and nimble, she stands and begins a languid dance, moving across the lawn like a macabre A car honks. A church bell tolls the hour. Waif's smile broadens as her arms gesture upwards to

pinpoint something Andrew can only guess at--a skyscraper, a passing plane, the moon, God? Andrew calls out her name, but falls silent as Waif raises a glowing finger, first to her lips and then above her head, drawing in the dark a glowing arrow, a gleaming compass needle, pointing out the way, but to where?

Chapter 22: Bs at Gay Bingo

Thanks to Remy, that first Saturday night in Philadelphia I found myself heading to the Gershman YMHA on Broad Street to try my luck at Gay Bingo. The fundraiser was sponsored by the Philadelphia City AIDS Network, or Philly CAN, an organization Remy had come to work for first as a volunteer, then as an office temp, and now as a part-time organizer and host of special events like this one. Because Remy had to emcee, it was Aleta who waited for me at the door at a quarter past eight for the 8:30 show. The Jewish Y was much bigger than the YMCA back home where my brother and sister had learned to swim. Its hulking brick façade imposed itself on the campus buildings of an art school that lay on Broad Street just south of the big uptown hotels. A crowd of people stood outside the Y's door.

“Hey, Supergirl!” Aleta called out as I neared, a nod to the old T-shirt of Andrew's I'd chosen to wear with its big red S on the front. It was almost dark; my chance of getting stung was low, so I had left my purse with my EpiPen back at the apartment. Not carrying it better showed off the new Gap jeans I had gone back to buy after lunch with Remy. I felt proud that either stress or all the carrot sticks I'd eaten over the last who-knew-how-long had left me a size smaller since the last time I bought clothes.

Aleta herself was dressed in Doc Martens, tight black cutoff shorts and an even tighter black tank top, formfitting clothes that helped her pull off her one tacky accessory--a bingo necklace made of little troll dolls. She told me she had drilled each fuzzy figurine from ear to ear then strung them together with Mardi Gras beads. “Cool,” I said. She flung open the door of the Young Men's Hebrew Association and we went inside.

I waited in the packed first floor lobby while Aleta picked up our tickets from the reservation table. At fifteen bucks a pop, it was certainly more expensive than the fire-hall bingo games I once went to with Grandma Rose. An earlier, six-o'clock game had just let out, and the place was milling with people moving in all directions. The gathered crowd was definitely weighted toward a particular type--well built men in tight, fluorescent T-shirts whose angular perfectly coiffed hairstyles suggested some sort of advanced German engineering. Others, equally handsome, wore parachute pants or carpenter jeans beneath deliberately crumpled tuxedo shirts that matched their deliberately disheveled 'dos. I watched, a little dumbfounded, as some of them air-kissed each other hello.

“Are all these guys gay?” I asked Aleta when she returned to me.

She shook her head. “Nah, just the cute ones. You got to look beyond the haircuts and muscle-tees.”

I did, and noticed a few bewildered-looking families nearly hidden among the mix. I also noted a few outrageously dressed old-timers who seemed game for anything, old men or women—I couldn't tell with—in enormous straw hats and feathered boas, their bridgework beaming from tanned faces so wrinkly

they reminded me of baked apples. There were even a few women in work boots and sleeveless flannel shirts who eyed up Aleta appreciatively. Some even looked at me.

I settled up with Aleta and nervously followed her toward the back staircase that led to the auditorium where the game was to be held. We handed over our tickets, received a stack of bingo cards, and joined the throng heading upstairs. A stuffy, third-floor foyer was crammed with folks buying hot dogs and cans of pop, soft pretzels and bags of popcorn from workers behind informal concession stands. Volunteers from the Philadelphia City AIDS Network patrolled the crowd, selling extra cards for special games. Foldout tables were stacked with souvenir T-shirts and buttons for sale that bore pictures of rainbows and pink triangles. Above our heads, a huge banner read “You CAN, Gay Bingo CAN, We all CAN fight AIDS.” Aleta and I inched our way toward the auditorium, but a chubby black man accosted us and wouldn’t let us pass until we each bought a couple of raffle tickets.

Inside, above rows of crowded tables, floated white balloons bearing numbers in black magic marker. Aleta and I made our way to the one that matched our tickets, lucky number seven. Along the way, she said hello and hugged a few people in passing. Those assembled represented a broader spectrum of humanity than I had first thought downstairs. Besides gay men and lesbians, there were also All-American families and little old ladies out for a night on the town. Some were unpacking drinks and casserole dishes, as if the event were some sort of in-door picnic. A woman in a wheelchair boldly led the way for a regiment of tow-headed grandchildren following behind her, and I had to jump to avoid having my toes run over. As I found my chair, I noticed a few goodtime girls in short skirts whose button-popping cleavage told me they’d be hitting the bars after the game. All around groups of friends erupted in bouts of robust laughter as they hugged hello and settled in their chairs to gossip. But not everything was so rosy. Some of those in attendance looked thin and sickly, their cheeks hollow, their eyes haunted despite the brave faces they’d put on the night. They were the people we had come here for.

But what caught my eye the most were the colorful drag queens zipping through the crowd on roller skates. Aleta told me they were known as the BVDs--the Bingo Verifying Divas, and their chief duty was to check players’ cards when they thought they had a win. Right now, however, they flitted about, directing people to seats, selling raffle tickets, apologizing about the insufficient air-conditioning--all of them dressed in superhero outfits saved from Halloweens past or whipped up from the crazy detritus of thrift shops and closet floors.

Obviously the event was popular. People were crammed into their tables so closely their shoulders touched. I sat across from Aleta at the middle of table seven, wedged in tight between a pudgy man in spectacles and a young girl wearing too much makeup. Elbow to asshole, Grandma Rose would have said.

On tonight’s program were ten regular bingo games, so our newsprint packets contained a matching number of pages. Each thin sheet bore six bingo cards--six chances to win per round. In addition, Aleta and I got talked into buying additional tickets for the four extra games that would be sprinkled among

the regular rounds. These, my packet told me, were sponsored by various people or groups: the gay men's chorus, a Center City real estate company, a city councilman, a youth center catering to runaway gay teens.

We had barely sat down when the heavy gold curtains parted on the stage. Gay Bingo wasted no time. Sweeping spotlights danced across the stage as the darkness there lifted to reveal a scene: A man and a woman dressed in business attire sat across from each other at a large desk, clicking away at typewriters. Only the woman wasn't a woman; it was Remy, decked out in his drag persona, Iona Gunn. He wore a mercurochrome-red wig on his head, a chin-length pageboy 'do cut knife sharp. Despite his (her?) glamour-length nails, Remy/Iona clicked away at the keys of her old manual typewriter so fast even Momma would have been impressed.

The foreground of the stage had a window frame hanging on wires from the ceiling, and above it a mock building top with an enormous globe bearing the words *The Daily Planet*. To the back of the stage stood a prop door and a mock phone booth created from a dressed-up water heater box. There was also a big bingo board with light-up numbers like I'd seen in the fire hall with Grandma Rose back home.

At the desk in front, Iona stopped typing and reached for the microphone beside her. "Hey, Clarkie!" she said to the heavysset man across from her. He had risen to sit on the edge of the desk, and I could now better see his thick black glasses, blue suit and red tie. "We've got to finish our story for the Philly CAN newsletter deadline!" Iona told him. "But I don't know how to tie it up with a zing!"

Audience members chuckled at Remy's overly dramatic acting style--equal parts élan and campy naiveté.

"I hear ya, Iona," said the rotund Clark Kent rip-off into a mike of his own. He nodded at the typewriter. "Take this down. 'Philly CAN--that's the Philadelphia City AIDS Network--surpassed its fundraising goals last year by a whopping eleven percent!'"

Iona tucked her microphone into her cleavage and let her fingers click away. "That's great, Clarkie-poo! But inquiring minds want to know--Where does all that dough go, you big dough-boy, you?" She poked her partner in his belly with one of her glittering press-on nails.

The audience laughed more forcefully this time, eating up the way Remy threw himself into the part. He had the kind of unbridled enthusiasm seldom seen outside of Special Olympics participants. Of the two, Clarkie-poo was the more serious one; after enduring a few more of Iona's jabs, he launched into a rundown of all the partner organizations Philly CAN channeled money into Back in West Virginia, all the newspaper articles I remembered reading in *The Seneca Sentinel* about the disease had made AIDS appear strictly limited to gays and Haitians. But now I realized there were whole families affected, typically poor minority ones from the inner city. As the Clark Kent imposter hammered through his list, I learned that the organization Remy worked for was remarkably inventive in terms of its fundraising efforts. They hosted a Walk for the Cure each summer, sold gourmet pies at Thanksgiving, sponsored adopt-a-family gift drives come Christmastime. For New Year's Eve, they held a black-tie dance at a fancy Center City hotel, and

even auctioned off dates with eligible bachelors and bachelorettes just in time for Valentine's Day. Clarkie-poo's list went on and on, until even the well-intentioned crowd around me grew restless in their seats. Charity aside, they were here to play bingo after all.

Iona reeled her cohort in. "That's *swell*, Clarkie-poo! A feat not even a *superman* could beat!" She yanked her story out of the typewriter. "I think we've got it!"

Just then, a heavy-set girl with a boy's haircut rushed onto the stage. She wore a green plaid jacket and a bow tie and had a spray of painted freckles painted across her nose.

"Why, it's Jiminy Olsen!" exclaimed Iona. "Super-Duper-Man's lesbian photographer sidekick and moral sounding board! How's it hanging, Jiminy?"

"Terrible, Miss Iona! Someone just robbed the Philly CAN bingo ticket proceeds!"

Clarkie-poo gasped in horror. Iona turned to the audience and spoke. "See what happens when you put your money in a mattress?"

Iona and Jiminy continued working the crowd while Clarkie-poo tried to squeeze his big beer belly inside the water heater box turned phone booth. Finally he gave up and slunk offstage while , Iona made her high-heeled way down front to segue into the rules for tonight's game. "Hi, boys and girls!" she began. "I'm sure you all know me as Miss Iona Gunn, but tonight I've put all firearms aside because that is simply *not* the superhero way. And, as I am sure you know, tonight is Superhero Gay Bingo! Now, do we have any Gay Bingo virgins in the house? Yes? Good! Stand up please."

Aleta kicked me under the table until I rose with the rest. Despite our being packed like sardines, I managed to rise halfway. Remy caught sight of me and winked. Once we were seated again, he led everyone in the Gay Bingo Pledge. Following Miss Iona's lead, we lifted our dabbers and promised to remember the reason why we were there that night was to help people, that bingo was just a stupid game, but that we'd keep playing and playing it until the health crisis came to an end. When we were done she told us to sit the heck back down; there were just a few more rules she needed the old pros to help her demonstrate. "What do you do when I call out B-7?" she asked.

People all around the room started thundering their feet beneath the table.

"Right!" said Miss Iona. "We stamp our feet up and down like angry seven-year-olds. And if I call out B-13?"

"*Mazel tov!*" the audience shouted.

"You've got it," said Iona. "We congratulate all the recent bar mitzvahs in the house! Now there's just one more rule." Her voice grew slinky and low. "What do you do when I call out 0-69?"

Aleta and most of the rest of the room lifted their hands in the air and rose, as if doing "the Wave" at a stadium football game. "O-69!" they shouted, laughing, and I rose to join them.

"Excellent! Excellent!" praised Miss Iona as we fell back into our chairs. "Now I think it's time I introduce the girls who'll be checking the winning tickets at tonight's game, the Bingo Verifying Divas!"

The crowd roared as the BVDs wheeled out from both sides of the house to whirl through the aisles. Iona announced their drag names, a list that included monikers like Helena Handbasket, Amanda Reckonwith, Ida Dunham. I counted nine of them total, and they were all dressed up in outfits I more or less recognized from Andrew's old comics--Wonder Woman, Supergirl, Batgirl and more--big men, for the most part, squeezed into women's plus-size costumes that were nevertheless too small. Andrew was supposed to work as one of the BVDs this time, Aleta told me, and for a second I wondered if that wasn't partly why he bailed. . I couldn't imagine my brother in drag--hadn't the time Momma caught him in her nightgown been enough?

While Iona worked the crowd, a few stagehands redressed the stage, pushing a light-up bingo board to the front. When they were done, Iona melted back into the scene again to spoke to Jiminy, who had been taking shots of the crowd with an oversized camera.

"Well, Jiminy," Miss Iona said, "I guess if our bingo money's been stolen, then we'll just have to earn us some more. Howzabout you start calling out some numbers?"

Soon we were dabber-deep in our first game. But I had hardly made any progress covering my board at all by the time a little Asian lady piped up "Bingo!" a few tables over. Once they verified the win, the BVDs whisked the woman to the stage, where they lifted her up into the arms of a beefcake muscle-boy who was clad in nothing more than black boots, a bow-tie and a pair of gold lamé shorts. He gave the woman her prize, an envelope of cash and a tote bag bearing the name of a real estate firm that had sponsored the game. My eyes had a hard time letting go of him.

We went through one game after another. Playing bingo wasn't as easy as I remembered. I had a lot of sheets to keep track of with my dabber, and, instead of drawing a straight line or getting all four corners, each new game required completing a different design to win, like drawing an "S for superhero!" or a "W for all the Wonder Women in the crowd tonight."

In between two rounds the houselights dimmed and the theme from the Tim Burton Batman movies started to play. A cutout in the shape of the Philadelphia skyline had been lowered on stage. Spotlights washed over it as a slinky figure popped up, squeezed into a Catwoman suit from *Batman Returns*. The villain held a plump moneybag that matched her plump belly.

"Oh no!" cried Iona. "Catwoman's got the money from tonight's ticket sales!"

"What'll we do?" Iona asked.

Right on cue, the Batman theme gave way to the music from Superman. The prop door at the back of the stage burst wide open and out leapt Clarkie-poo in all his superhero splendor.

"Stop the press!" cried Jiminy Olsen. "It's Super-Duper-Man!"

"Stop the press *again!*" followed Miss Iona. "'Cause he's just come out of the *closet!*"

"And I'm here to defend the City of Brotherly Love--"

"--and sisterly affection!" a woman in a rainbow T-shirt yelled out from the next table..

“--against all enemies, especially those who steal Gay Bingo proceeds!”

With that, Super-Duper-Man lifted his arms clunked around the stage, pretended to fly, making his way back towards the skyline where Catwoman cowered and hissed, scratching at the air with her silvery claws. The audience laughed at the drama, which quickly resolved itself with Super-Duper-Man dragging portly Catwoman to the front of the stage where she was handed over to the custody of the BVDs.

“That’s right!” Miss Iona called out as the BVDs whisked her off. “Get Catwoman back to the SPCA before she goes and drops that litter of kittens she’s carrying. I want her *fixed!*” The audience laughed while Miss Iona fanned her face. “All this excitement’s got me worked up!” She pulled out a silver flask and took a drink. “That’s better. Who’s ready for more bingo?”

The audience hooted and hollered. Jiminy Olsen settled back beneath the bingo board, the sack of money safely returned. Iona and Super-Duper-Man took their seats, while the lamé-clad beefcake boy flipped the illustration on an easel to the pattern for the next game. He had more muscles on him than I thought could fit on a body, and I wondered if he wasn’t there as a distraction to make it harder for people to concentrate on their bingo cards. The heat of the room was getting to me. Aleta must have felt it too. Despite her bingo pledge, her nerves had worn thin.

“Why do they keep calling out so many Bs?” she complained. “I need some big fat Os. Not this swarm of fucking Bs.”

* * *

I wasn’t always afraid of bees. Long before the summer I got stung, Andrew and I used to catch them in big glass jars. We got them and they got Momma. I remember a Sunday a couple summers before Elizabeth was born when Daddy was still with us, how Momma pulled up at the house to drop us off with him so she could set off to do a week’s worth of grocery shopping. Daddy was supposed to be mowing the lawn, but his old buddy Lew Pingley had shown up, so Daddy sat drinking beer with him on the porch as Andrew and I headed into change. Behind us, still in the car, Momma blasted her horn until Daddy rose with a sigh.

Inside, Andrew and I pressed our noses against the screen door to watch them. Daddy crossed the unmowed yard, a tallboy in his hand. Momma finally laid off her horn. She gestured at the lawn, the garage’s unfinished foundation, Lew’s truck in the yard. Buck barked as Momma yelled. Daddy bent down to her window to talk, but whatever words she said made him draw back. I felt suddenly embarrassed that Lew had to see the hateful way my parents treated each other.

Lew lifted his big ass off the porch stairs and started over too, trying to play peacekeeper, I suppose. When Andrew crept back out onto the porch to get a better look, I followed.

“Hey there, Katie,” Lew called in his booming voice. “I got a riddle for you. Who is the most popular guy at the nudist colony?” He didn’t wait for Momma to guess. “The fella who can carry a cup of coffee in each hand and a dozen donuts.” Lew closed the distance to the car, walking like a bear on back

legs. “And you know who the most popular gal at the nudist colony is? The one who manages to eat the last donut.”

“Lew,” Momma said, “that kind of BS won’t win me over.”

Lew acted like he didn’t hear. He leaned against the car the way Daddy had a second ago. “Here comes the best one yet,” he said. “Do you know what you call a prostitute with a runny nose?”

“No, Lew. I’m quite sure I don’t.”

Lew himself was already cracking up. “*Full!*”

Daddy laughed, but Momma didn’t. “Good God,” she said as she started her engine.

Despite Momma’s claim, I knew big Lew’s bearish ways sometimes caught her off-guard. Once or twice, one of his dumb jokes had snuck a hearty laugh out of her in spite of herself. But not today.

“Cut the filth while my kids are around,” Momma said, “and *you*, David, get to feeding them before they starve to death. Don’t sit around and drink beer all day. I want this lawn mowed before the children get lost in it.” Without waiting for debate, Momma put her Aspen in reverse and backed down the gravel drive, glaring at both men as she executed a hasty three-point turn. Everyone watched her go.

Once she was out of sight, Andrew and I looked at each other. We were free! We forgot all about taking our good clothes upstairs. Andrew tore off his clip-on tie and white shirt. I followed suit, yanking my pink crinoline skirt over my head and slinging it across the porch rail. Daddy didn’t care. He and Lew had already sat back down on the porch steps to finish off their beers.

Soon Andrew and I were rolling in our underwear down the grassy bank along the woods’ edge--happy to be getting away with something. Bees buzzed the air around us, but I didn’t care. We took Buck off his chain and let him play too. When Daddy went back inside to fetch more beer, he snuck around the side of the house to ambush us with the garden hose, squirting us as we shrieked like banshees. Andrew and I tumbled and laughed, our brains churning to mush inside our skulls. Lew egged Daddy on, told him to drown us good. But after a while, Daddy grew tired of the game and returned to his friend. Andrew sprawled out on the high grass of the lawn and drifted to sleep. I sat in the porch swing with my coloring book and crayons, pretending not to listen as Daddy and Lew Pingley talked on the steps. “Up shit creek without a paddle,” is how Daddy described married life with Momma.

“Well, Davie-boy, at least your woman’s held onto her shape.” Lew sipped his beer. “I’ll be damned if my Melissa doesn’t put on another pound each time I blink.” Lew lived with a waitress who worked in a bar over in Elkins. He had brought her around once for a hamburger cookout. Big-boned and blond, she had boobs like watermelons and a mouth to more than match Lew’s own.

“If Katie gets her way,” Daddy said, “she won’t be holding onto her waistline much longer.” He lowered his voice. “She’s got the cockamamie idea to have another kid.”

“Pregnant or not,” Lew said, “that redhead of yours could eat her way through every KFC in the country and still never get as fat as Melissa.”

With his big old belly, I didn't see where Lew had any room to talk.

"When I first met that woman," Lew said, "I wanted to lay her like a set of floor tiles. Now I don't even want to walk all over her."

Daddy finally let out a chuckle as he cracked open another beer. He flashed Lew a half-hearted grin. "Enjoy your freedom while you got it." He glanced back my way, but I hid my face behind my coloring book. His voice went even lower, and my ears had to strain to hear. "Lew, you don't know what it's like to have *any* kids, let alone two. Hell, I love 'em, but I've got no mind for another." He nodded his chin at Buck, hooked backed to his chain in the yard. "If I want to hear the pitter-patter of little feet again, I'll put tap shoes on that dog over there."

Lew laughed. "Like I say, you don't know how good you got it. Melissa's threatening not to put out unless I hand over a wedding ring. Am I ambivalent? Well, yes and no. I try to tell Melissa she's too much woman for me to marry. So damn fat she'd be like marrying a set of twins, only half the pussy and twice the headache."

Daddy elbowed Lew in the ribs. "Keep your voice down."

Lew must have been too drunk to hear. "Getting hitched to a woman as big as Melissa would be like becoming a bigamist." He slung his big arm around Daddy's skinny shoulder. "And you know what the punishment for bigamy is? Two mother-in-laws." Daddy didn't laugh. "Katie doesn't want another kid, she just wants someone new to boss around." He sipped his beer. "I've taken to wearin' a raincoat, if you know what I mean. But I wouldn't put it past her to poke holes in 'em. Maybe I ought to let the doctor take it out of our hands. Snip, snip and that's it."

"Jesus H. Christ," said Lew. "I'd keep the scalpels away from my jewels if I were you. A kid doesn't sound so bad. That's probably what Melissa's really after, more than any old wedding ring." Lew's tone softened. "Can you imagine a Lew Junior pissin' around?" He flexed his arm. "With my muscles and Melissa's pretty blond hair? Don't get me wrong"--he paused to put a pinch of tobacco in his cheek from a can he kept in the pocket of his shirt--"I still love her, I guess. I just wish there wasn't so damn much of her to love. I told her last week, if she gains another five pounds of fat, by God, she'd better grow a nipple on it."

"Talking 'bout bigamy," Daddy said, looking off in the distance. "Maybe *I* need another wife. That there dog gets more excited to see Katie than I do. And last week she hit him in the face when he stole a piece of chicken."

"Let's not start in on the fried chicken again. I ain't had lunch yet." Lew held up his can of Old Milwaukee. "And this here's breakfast. You know, for all the waitressing Melissa does, you'd think she could feed me once in a while. But she doesn't even know what breakfast is. I poured a bowl of Cheerios yesterday morning and she thought they were donut seeds."

Daddy's faraway look reeled back in. He chuckled and sipped his beer.

Lew kept going. “The only time I ever get a sandwich from her is when I try to squeeze myself between her thighs. I tell you, it’s like screwing the crack between two bricks.”

Daddy laughed again.

“You know, it’s a good thing God made men like blondes,” Lew said, “or women like Melissa wouldn’t survive. You know what you call a smart blonde?”

“What?”

“A golden retriever.”

“Very funny,” Daddy said. He shook his beer can, but it was empty. I really should fix these kids their PB and J. Then get to work on that lawn like I promised.”

Lew drained the last of his own tallboy and stood. “I better go myself. Maybe I’ll drive to Elkins and get me some fried chicken. Say, Davie-boy, do you know why screwing Melissa always reminds me of eatin’ the good colonel’s KFC?”

Daddy played along. “No, Lew. Why’s that?”

“Cause by the time I’ve finished with the breast and thighs, all I’ve got left is a greasy box to put my bone in.”

“Well, you best take what you can get.” Daddy stood up, and the two men shook hands as if shit-shooting was some kind of business deal.

“We’ll have to play some pool at Wimpy’s this week. You free Wednesday?” Lew asked.

“That sounds like a plan,” Daddy said. “We can drink somethin’ stronger than this cheap shit Katie buys. But I’ll have to check with her first.”

“Now I know who runs the show,” Lew laughed. “Your pretty firecracker, that’s who.”

“Aw, go to hell,” Daddy said.

Lew started over to his red Dodge pickup. “K-Fried-C, here I come!”

Daddy called after him. “Be sure to plant a Cheerio in the ground and grow yourself some dessert.”

With a laugh, Lew got in his truck and headed off. The sound woke Andrew from his nap in the yard. Daddy hollered at him to go fill the mower with gasoline, then come to the kitchen for lunch. Me, he called sweetie and asked to come help him make sandwiches.

After lunch, Daddy opened a forty-ounce beer from the back of the fridge and strolled outside to start up the mower. At the sound of it catching, Buck grew scared; Andrew let him off his chain so he could hightail to the woods. Daddy walked back and forth in swaying rows, trimming the grass while my brother raced ahead to check for any fresh messes the dog might have left in the yard. When Andrew found them, he scooped them up in a piece of cardboard torn from an old cereal box before the lawnmower blades could send the poop flying. When he had finished minesweeping the yard, Andrew washed his hands beneath the hose and picked some of Momma’s off-limit lilies to adorn my hair. I paraded through the front

yard like a model, a bath towel draped across my shoulders like a mink stole. Andrew snapped pictures with an imaginary camera.

Tired of playing fashion model, Andrew invented a new game. We each dumped out our previous night's catch of lightning bugs so we could take our old mayonnaise jars to the road's edge where wildflowers ran rampant. Bees buzzed in lazy spirals through the air, gathering nectar. Jar in one hand, lid in the other, I bravely captured bees under Andrew's direction. Honeybees, three of them. They rammed the walls of their glass prison over and over.

Andrew crept towards a patch of daisies and pounced with his jar to capture a striped bumblebee. We got more jars and caught a mud wasp from the ditch by the road. When a sweat bee sought us out, Andrew got him too. We lined up our trophies along the rail of the porch, while Daddy, now finished, lay snoring on the swing.

In the kitchen, Andrew dumped beets out of a two-gallon pickling jar Grandma Rose had left us. He wanted something arena-sized, he said as he rinsed the maroon juice from the jar. Andrew punctured holes in the lid with a nutpick. The wet glass felt cold against my chest as I carried it out onto the front porch steps.

There, Andrew dropped clover inside. He dumped the bumblebee into the beet jar and slammed the lid. In rapid succession we added the sweat bees and mud wasp. The honeybees we left alone. Andrew shook the jar into action. The bumblebee hid behind a sprig of clover as the other two went to war.

Andrew imitated a TV sportscaster announcing the play-by-play. "Ladies and gentleman, the wasp is on the attack! Look at him go! Feel the pulse-pounding terror!" Amidst the smell of beets and fresh soap, the wasp curled his stinger into the sweat bee's stomach. Both stumbled drunkenly against the glass, then fell to the bottom to die. I bit my lip and slowly unscrewed the lid to the honeybee jar, sending new contenders into the fray.

Engrossed in our battle, Andrew and I never heard the car pull up, never noticed Momma's door slam or the sound of her footsteps up our flagstone path. We were surprised when her hands thrust between us, seizing the beet jar. "What the hell is this?" she wanted to know.

Daddy sputtered to life behind us. Momma jerked his way, and the loose jar lid tumbled to the porch floor. Andrew and I watched openmouthed as the honeybees whirled up before her. The beet jar slipped through her fingers and shattered against the porch next to Andrew and me. "Jesus Christ!" Momma yelled as she fanned the bumblebee away from her face. "Fucking bees!" The honeybees rose into the rafters, then escaped into the yard. But the bumblebee avenged himself on my mother's left earlobe. Momma screamed and shooed it away.

Beside me, a glass splinter had lodged in the back of Andrew's hand, sending out a trickle of blood. But Andrew didn't cry. He left that to Momma. Daddy came and tried to comfort her, told us kids not to move because of our bare hands and feet. Momma fought him off.

“Why the hell do you let them do this?” she screamed.

Daddy looked away.

“What the hell kind of father are you, letting them run half-naked, letting them play with a bunch of goddamn bees? You stinking drunk. You don’t care!” She raced into the house. Daddy crunched over the broken glass after her. Their voices rose in shouts and wails.

In the yard below, Buck had come back to sniff through Momma’s open car door at the bags of groceries crowding the backseat. Gingerly I pulled the glass from Andrew’s hand.

* * *

“Earth to Allison. You still with us?” Aleta shook my arm, bringing me back to the world of the bingo game.

“Yeah, just thinking. About my family. ‘Bout Andrew.”

“Well girl, you’d better think about your bingo cards. ‘Cause if you keep playing like this, you ain’t never gonna win. You need a soda to wake you up.”

All around us, people now stood to stretch. While I had been lost in thought, we had arrived at intermission. I followed Aleta out to the concession stand to get a drink. “What is it about Andrew?” she asked on the way. “You’re obsessed. I got two brothers plus a stepbrother to boot. Sometimes I think the less I hear outta them, the better.”

“We were very close once,” I told her. “At least I think so.”

After we paid for our drinks, I asked Aleta about something I’d been wondering about ever since Remy had mentioned it in passing the other day at Taco House. “What happened at the Bellevue Hotel?” I asked. “Remy said--”

“The riot,” Aleta interrupted with a sigh. “Maybe that’s where it all started to hit the fan for Andrew. I know at least that’s where he got his first glimpse of Steven, though he didn’t know it at the time. And that’s when the idea took root in his head to trade in his old boyfriend Ethan for a not-much-better model.” Aleta shook her head. “Your brother always had a complicated love life.” She began to tell me all she could.

Chapter 23: The Bellevue Riot

Andrew – Fall 1991

Coming back from the bar, Andrew looks for Jake's ghost and thinks he almost sees it--there in the curve of the shoplifting mirror at the all-night convenience store where he stops for coffee. But by the time he woozes around, what might have been is gone. The loss saddens him; he wants closure; boozing all day and smoking Tommy's weed ought to be enough to transport him to whatever plane is required to see such things. Yet still no Jake. Not mornings, when lit on bloody Marys Andrew searches for him among subway car passengers on his ride to campus. Not afternoons, when he pauses outside Woody's bar to look across 13th Street, hoping to see Jake peering from the little alley where drug dealers lurk. Not even now, after a long night of getting hammered and even higher, thanks to lines of coke offered him in a bathroom stall.

The only thing he can count on these days is the bar, the smoky certitude of older men always willing to buy a college boy a couple rounds. Andrew is good at laughing at the dumb jokes of aging businessmen. When his drink runs low, he lets their hands linger on his ass as they buy him another. In his black Goth clothes and hint of eyeliner, he know how he must appear to them--part MTV kid, part street hustler. He doesn't tell them his costume is a nod to martyrdom. He will let nothing inside him again. The world stops at his skin.

But Andrew doesn't want to think of those men now as he pays for his coffee and heads around the corner to home. The night air is cold; the city near dead at three a.m. But not dead enough for old Jake to visit. Andrew wants to see Jake in his camouflage fatigues, the way he must have looked just before he died. He sits on the steps of the Rodman Street house and drinks his coffee. If given the chance, he tells himself, he would have shielded Jake's body with his own. But this is a lie, he knows. He dumps his coffee in the gutter and fishes for his key. He is a coward; if Jake stood before him, he would have no choice but to look away. And feel what—regret? Shame?

Upstairs, he strips down and collapses on his mattress. He'd like to jerk off to Jake but that doesn't feel right. A headache's coming on. He closes his eyes and hopes Jake will seep into his dreams; he imagines him floating above, a wicked angel almost close enough to kiss. Andrew thinks he deserves to be poisoned by something stronger than drugs or the drinks at Woody's bar, something he can't sweat out through pores or piss away. He needs nightmares to make him toss and turn. Anything is better than numbness, even pain.

* * *

Andrew doesn't share any of this with his sometimes boyfriend, Ethan Ostfield. Andrew met him last winter at Independence Mall when a group of college students held a rally in the field next to the pavilion

housing the Liberty Bell. These days, Andrew can't even remember the name of the visiting politician everybody had been so upset about; he had simply followed his housemate Remy there on a lark. But after meeting Ethan—cute Ethan, with his curly chestnut hair—Andrew's political interest was kindled. Now it is the primary connection Ethan and he share, the reason why he let himself be dragged to this protest rally outside the Bellevue Stratford Hotel on a sunny September afternoon when he should be in class.

Ethan claims that he and Andrew are soldiers in their own right, that they, like Andrew's ex-boyfriend Jake, have been forced to head off into battle as well. But Andrew wonders if it is fair to call it that; this is, after all, a public protest--what's the worst that can happen? Today's adventure is fraught only with the danger of getting arrested, not getting killed. Not like Jake, dead from a Scud missile in the Persian Gulf that snuck through the US's defense system thanks to a software glitch. Thank you very much, President Bush.

But Ethan is good with words, speeches, arguments--though he has never once been able to say the words "I love you" to Andrew. Love is bourgeois, in need of new definitions, Ethan has explained several times. He is older than Andrew, a senior at the University of Pennsylvania (a Women's Studies major, of all things--as close as he can get to a degree in queer studies). Since they met at the rally last winter, Andrew has taken to wearing Ethan's old jean jacket, covered in political buttons. And while Ethan may have provided Andrew with some radical ideas, he didn't need to fuel Andrew's hatred toward President Bush. The loss of Jake in the war last winter took care of that. A war waged for Kuwaiti oil and the establishment of "a new world order"--a sound-byte, Ethan has argued, any Nazi would have been proud of.

Andrew and Ethan head toward the Bellevue Hotel, past shop windows filled with back-to-school supplies. They close the distance to Broad Street, where Andrew is nearly overwhelmed by the shouts of protesters and the ear-splitting blast of whistles. For as far as he can see, people fill the sidewalk and street: senior citizens, trade unionists, navy shipyard workers, pro-choice groups. Hundreds of hand-lettered signs and printed placards jut into the air. A television reporter is busy interviewing people. Two young men scamper atop a shuttered newsstand to tape a yellow poster to a street lamp: *Stop Bush, Stop AIDS Now*. Beneath it hangs an American flag, its stars replaced with skulls.

Ethan pushes through the crowd, toward the spot where all the signs feature pink triangles and slogans about AIDS. Andrew follows. A young, wild-eyed woman screams, "Two, four, six, eight--you can't make us procreate!" Beside her stands an old man who wants health coverage for senior citizens. He shakes his head and clutches his homemade sign, embarrassed. Andrew nears the front. An ACT UP ringleader smiles at Ethan, slaps SILENCE = DEATH stickers onto his and Andrew's shirtfronts, then hands them whistles saying, "Blow the whistle on Bush's indifference." Beyond him, more members of the group swarm the street, plugging the east lane of the city's main thoroughfare while police in blue uniforms work to corral them behind wooden barricades.

Across the street, BMWs and limousines pull up one after another in front of the fancy entrance of the Bellevue Hotel. Out spill rich Republican couples glitzed up to meet President Bush at tonight's thousand-dollar-a-plate dinner, a benefit for former attorney general Dick Thornburgh's fight for the US Senate. The Philadelphia bluebloods hurry inside, while a constant chorus of "Shame! Shame!" rises from the assembled protesters. Ethan raises his voice to join in, elbows Andrew to join in as well. Andrew's voice swells, matching the rest, until it no longer seems a part of him.

Andrew remembers how, back when Bush first announced plans for Operation Desert Shield, the whole undertaking had sounded like a joke. 'A new condom for Arabs,' he had remarked to Ethan. But then American troops started pouring into the Middle East and the joke soured into Desert Storm. Ethan's circle of friends began debating whether gays should be asking to openly serve in the military if doing so meant providing cannon fodder for American oil interests. The January night war was officially declared, Andrew had been at Woody's bar—his first time at happy hour. The music stopped; the video monitors abruptly cut to CNN where a correspondent offered nervous commentary from a hotel room in blacked-out Baghdad. Andrew downed one drink and ordered another. He prayed that if Jake had gotten out of the army by then that he'd enough sense not to sign back up. It never occurred to him that Jake would have joined a reserve unit in Greensburg, Pennsylvania where his uncle lived. But that's how Jake ended up in Saudi Arabia; that's how he died. On a February evening nearly seven months ago, an Iraqi Scud arced through the desert sky, ghosting past the Americans' missile defense system due to a stupid software error. Andrew has spent hours in his college library poring over newspapers and databases reading about what happened. An internal clock drifted by a third of a second, enough to fool the radar into tracking the wrong spot in the sky. The Scud might as well have been invisible; no missiles were fired to shoot it down. At just past eight-thirty, the world around Jake and the other soldiers exploded as the scud slammed into a warehouse being used as a temporary barracks. Altogether the dead tallied twenty-nine, with ninety-nine more wounded—"the single, most devastating attack on US forces during the war," the reports eventually concluded. What the papers didn't say was what Jake had been doing. Sleeping? Playing cards? Writing letters home? Too cinematic, Andrew decided. Probably scratching his ass or taking a shit. Now the war is over, Andrew thinks as he watches the well-heeled Republicans file into the hotel. The yellow ribbons that once festooned suburban trees and decorated city streetlamps have all fallen away.

"Come on," Ethan says, pulling on Andrew's arm. Together they slide along a police barricade deeper into the throng, toward the main ACT UP contingent at the very front of the crowd. Andrew sees his Remy in the distance and waves at him. Thick slats of yellow wood separate the protestors from an array of grim policemen--some on foot, others on horseback--the cops' jaws clenched, their eyes steely. Because of the president, they are accompanied by stiff-backed Secret Service agents wearing black suits and shades, thin radio wires trailing from their ears to shirt collars. Several of the cops wear white latex gloves, and each time Andrew looks one in the face, he shifts his eyes away.

Next to Andrew, a lesbian in a tie-dyed shirt waves a sign that reads NO NEW THORNBURGH, HE'S THE SAME OLD DICK. "Bush arrive yet?" Andrew asks her.

The woman rolls her eyes. "They'll slip him in through the back or the side, they always do. So scream loud. Politicians never want to see us, but by God we can make them hear us." She raises her plastic whistle to her lips and lets loose with such a blow that Andrew lurches into Ethan.

Andrew grabs hold of him to right himself. He uses the opportunity to pull Ethan tight. He nuzzles Ethan's chestnut curls, rooting for a whiff of sex beneath the scent of strawberry shampoo. Andrew's dick still feels raw from their recent go-round back at Ethan's West Philly apartment. Protest rallies make Ethan horny, and Andrew's glad to take advantage. He wants to feel happy with someone. Anyone.

Andrew closes his eyes, tries to conjure the ghost again. He should have smoked one of Tommy's joints earlier, or stopped by Woody's for a couple shots of whiskey. Against the screen of his mind electric pinpoints flash as rods and cones settle down. He tries to whip them into an image of Jake Munroe, no matter how terrible the sight of him must now be. Nothing.

* * *

Jake Munroe. Not the first boy Andrew ever felt himself stirred by, but certainly the first he ever loved. But back in West Virginia, love had to be a closed-mouth secret. Small-town Seneca reaped shame like a cash crop, left oddball gay boys like Andrew--when they weren't getting punched out in high school hallways--to unzip their pants in cars parked along dark back roads. And Jake? His heart may have been confused but his beauty was clear, emanating from inside him like a bird taking flight. Or was that simply the feeling he inspired in Andrew--a rising up, a sense of weightlessness in space? All Andrew knew for sure was that he could never get his fill of Jake's body. The way he shook when he came inside Andrew's hands, mouth or ass.

Andrew doesn't want to lose hold of Jake's memory the way his mental picture of his father has begun to fade. But even now it's a struggle to recall how handsome Jake looked that night right before Sergeant Barrett caught them and their world changed. A light rain had fallen as the two boys sat parked in Jake's car. Open beers stood sandwiched between their thighs, the rest of the six-pack on the floor at their feet as they drank down the courage to touch each other again. Andrew could tell Jake was anxious from the way he scanned the trees and the strip of road, his hands never leaving the steering wheel except to lift his beer to his mouth. Andrew studied the clench and release of Jake's jaw, the bob of his Adam's apple as he swallowed. Andrew rambled about rock bands and potential majors, while Jake responded in a shy, distracted way, always nervous about getting down to business. Andrew ran his finger down Jake's bare arm. The fine hairs there stood up, electrified. At last Jake looked at him. He took Andrew's palm, pressed it to his cheek, and Andrew could feel the quickness of the pulse in Jake's throat. Andrew set his beer on the dash, slid over, pressed his body awkwardly against the taller boy's--and Jake pressed back. They kissed. Andrew closed his eyes, wanting it to last. He breathed in the Jake's smell--perspiration and

cologne mixed with beer and fear, and behind that the clean smell of the rain that bounced off the car's rooftop in the dark.

That night, Andrew was determined to have all of Jake. The furtiveness of their prior trysts had required concessions; Andrew saw Jake naked only in pieces—shirt unbuttoned to bare chest, pants bunched around knees. Only the most animal parts of him revealed when more than anything Andrew wanted to stretch out somewhere, lie totally naked in Jake's arms. That night in Jake's cramped Camaro, Andrew would not take no for an answer. He pushed Jake's seat back, pulled off his shoes, tore off his jeans. He tugged Jake's shirt up and trapped his arms behind his head. Jake laughed nervously as Andrew went to work.

But then came discovery. Jake pushing Andrew off him as a flashlight beam cut across the steamed-up windows of the car. The sound of Jake's *oh shit oh shit oh shit* as Andrew pulled up his cut-offs and grabbed his T-shirt from the dash. Jake wiped a forearm against the window—*Fuck! A cop car.* Everything happened fast. Andrew couldn't think; he could only react. He hit the door latch and launched himself outside, heading for the tree line of the woods. He glanced back through the slackening rain. The beam from the flashlight washed over his chest, his face, blinding him. But not before he caught a glimpse of Jake in the car, pants still off and arms fighting against the tangle of his shirt. Andrew turned from the light and ran.

How jackrabbit clever he'd been, tearing into the brambles in the slackening rain, ignoring the voice that shouted stop. Maybe the cop hadn't got a good look at him, would think he was just an embarrassed girl. That would make things go easier on Jake, right? But he realized that was just wishful thinking by the time he stopped to catch his breath and slip his shirt over his head.

Andrew had deserted Jake when he needed him most. He'd left him naked and alone. So it was his fault Jake had to suffer the fists of that sonovabitch sheriff. His fault Jake had to endure his parents' subsequent humiliation, the tension in their house getting so bad Jake was forced to leave. Fleeing first to his uncle's place up in Greensburg, then a few days later to eastern Pennsylvania to stay with his dad, a shipyard worker in South Philadelphia whom Jake had barely seen since his parents' divorce twelve years before, a man blissfully ignorant of what had transpired, a man Jake barely knew. It had been Andrew's fault Jake had been forced into a new family, a new life, one he wasn't sure he wanted. The one letter Jake wrote that August told Andrew how he planned to make the best of a bad situation. He would start classes at Temple in the fall after all, maybe get a degree in business or engineering. The letter held no sentiment, as if Jake feared someone might comb his words for incriminating evidence. He did not include a return address.

Still, Andrew took the letter as an invitation, decided to follow Jake's lead and head to Philadelphia as planned, as if escaping his hometown was all that stood in the way of the two of them building a life together. With a little scraped-together money in his pocket and his clothes stuffed into Hefty bags,

Andrew and his old purple VW Bug arrived in the City of Brotherly Love at summer's end, 1988. Andrew resolved to search the campus of the school until at last he found Jake.

Of course, it would not be that simple. When Andrew finally tracked Jake down a month into their freshman year, Jake wanted no part of him. He blew Andrew off and strolled past the campus bell tower to class. For the next week he shadowed Jake like a stalker, following him from class to subway to his father's home in South Philly, always returning defeated and alone. He resolved to leave Jake be—first one month, then two. All the while his heart chewed itself alive. Andrew resolved to leave Jake alone, first one month, then two, All the while his heart chewed itself alive. Jake would come around, wouldn't he? By Christmas, Andrew had more or less given up on him. It was obvious Jake was trying hard to be the perfect straight young man while Andrew had fallen in with queeny Remy and all his misfit friends who shared the ramshackle rowhouse on the south side of Center City's Amble-Through

But then, come second term, Andrew and Jake shared a math class together. Though they sat rows apart among strangers in a room the size of a movie theater, Andrew felt a renewed sense of connection. They never spoke, but Jake's eyes sometimes skirted Andrew's in the crush of students leaving. As spring neared, Jake showed up unexpectedly at one of Remy's Rodman Street house parties. He arrived drunk with friends of the grunge band setting up to play on the second floor. Jake had forgotten to BYOB, and so Andrew, drunk as well, walked right up to him and graciously offered to share his bottle of Boone's Farm wine. Words slid loose on Andrew's tongue as Jake leaned against a door jamb and eased into his company, talking to Andrew as if nothing bad had ever happened between them. Jake's ice melted away like slush out in the street. For the first time in months, Andrew felt happy. When Jake's friends slunk off to hear the band, Andrew refilled Jake's plastic cup and led him staggering upstairs to the bedroom that Remy promised Andrew he could move into once the landlord repaired a leak in the ceiling. A bare mattress lay on the floor, piled with coats Andrew threw into the hall. He pushed Jake down and the two discovered each other all over again.

Morning, however, meant regret. Jake had drunk so much that he threw up in the toilet. Andrew's head pounded even harder than his heart had the night before. As Jake put on his clothes in silence, Andrew felt his grip on Jake slip away. One drunken night together wasn't going to jump-start anything. As Andrew escorted Jake outside, he realized the truth: their touch-and-go affair had come and gone.

And soon Jake would be gone completely. His grades lackluster, his father unbearable, Jake had already decided to leave yet again. This time, the army. He told Andrew the news one day when they met by accident near the Bell Tower at school. They snuck into an off-campus bar and got drunk together. Over cheap whiskey, Andrew listened as Jake said he didn't want this fag lifestyle, didn't want the bad habit Andrew was sure to become if Jake didn't hurry and get out of here. The words stung, but Andrew ignored them as he used his last ten bucks to buy Jake one more round.

Jake left for boot camp at the end of freshman year. Andrew tried to forget about him, took solace in a string of one-night stands and short-lived romances. At his new digs at Remy's, he would listen to The Cure as he got ready for a night out on the town in his late-New Wave best: purple paisley shirt, black thrift shop jeans, scuffed motorcycle boots. Off to the bars the two of them went. Woody's, Kurt's, Key West or Equus. Places that didn't care if you were young and white and flashed a smile at the doorman. The music was loud, the drinks strong, and after Andrew downed a few, nearly anyone in his age bracket would do: All it took for him to want someone was a gesture of a hand, the crooked corner of a mouth, the way a T-shirt draped young muscle. Any minor tip of the scale could turn a piece of average eye-candy into something irresistible, something Andrew needed to touch, feel, taste. Love only had to last till dawn. Sniffing a friend's coke in a back alley, smoking pot in a bathroom stall, quaffing courage at the bar--all blended into a magic concoction so intoxicating that Andrew could read chivalrous motives into any stranger's eyes, convince himself that *this one* just might be able to rescue him from whatever tragedy he was heading toward. All it took to be lulled into safety was having his head pillowed against a man's firm belly, his chest pinioned beneath buff arms. Purpose and peace of mind would arrive soon enough if a strong man would just hold Andrew down, keep him still, interrupt his momentum before the next disaster found him. Andrew didn't want much, just whatever drugs or words of assurance it might take to make him forget, make him relax, make him allow sweat and blood and come to mix--one river in two bodies.

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Andrew tries to kiss Ethan at the protest now, but Ethan squirms away to greet a young woman whose hair is dyed bubblegum pink. Of all the men Andrew has been with since Jake, only Ethan has been able to reconcile the right combination of desire and disinterest necessary to prolong an affair into the possibility of something more. Even now, after a slowly building courtship of several months, Andrew is still trying to define what it is he and Ethan share. Having initiated Andrew into the world of queer activism, Ethan now primarily romances him at rallies where he doles out kisses that have begun to feel more like carefully planned political statements than bona fide gestures of affection.

Andrew watches the young woman hug Ethan hello. She air-kisses his cheek then hands him her sign so she can help carry a prop coffin ACT UP wants to place on the Bellevue's steps. Ethan hoists the placard and resumes shouting slogans as the pink-haired girl slips along the barricade. Andrew might as well not be here, no more attention than Ethan is paying him. Andrew studies Ethan from behind, his lanky shoulders and bony hips, his jean-covered ass as tight as any teenager's. Boyish, willful—is he enough of a man to take refuge in? Sometimes Andrew wishes he could strip Ethan of his politics as easily as he might strip him of his clothes. At lunch, for instance, had it really been necessary for Ethan, when the waitress brought their check, to pull a lavender inkpad from his Guatemalan shoulder bag and stamp the words 'Queer Dollar' onto each and every bill?

Andrew forgets about his misgivings as the crowd's chanting rises. The police press close. The activists shout slogans into their faces. Twenty feet away, Ethan's friends heave the coffin onto their shoulders, trying to negotiate a break in the barricade. (Is that Remy among them, face half-hidden by their bulky black prop?) Ethan turns around, hands Andrew a piece of chalk. "We're going to stage the die-in now," he says. "Do what I told you."

Move to the street, drop to the ground, draw white chalk outlines around each other.

The crowd surges forward, trying to take the street. The police push back--resolute, anxious. An officer tells Andrew to let go of the yellow barricade, and when Andrew hesitates, the man smacks his fingers with his nightstick, causing him to drop his chalk.

"Asshole!"

The man glares at Andrew, mutters something under his breath. *Faggot?*

Beyond Ethan, another group of cops is using a section of the barricade to inch back the pallbearers. Ethan's lesbian friend stumbles, loses her grip as the wooden box pitches forward, smacking the shoulder of one of the cops. The coffin hits the pavement and splinters, spilling gray-colored bone meal--the symbolic ashes of the dead. They hit the ground and puff up in a pitiful cloud.

The injured cop looks up with a mean sneer, whacks Ethan's friend with his nightstick. She falls against the man behind her; it *is* Remy, stone-faced and serious, not at all his campy barfly self. He and a couple of protesters slip under the barricade and lay down in the street where friends trace their forms upon the rough asphalt. Billy clubs fly as the cops push against the throng, shoving their wooden barrier into the front line until the protesters are tripping over themselves. Ethan gets sucked away as Andrew struggles to remain upright. A cop on horseback charges the crowd. Andrew doesn't know what to do. He backs into someone and falls. More horses. The flash of badges and blue uniforms. He raises his hands to cover his head.

By the time Andrew makes it to his feet, the cops have pushed the barricade behind him, back to the sidewalk, leaving him stranded on the wrong side. Where's Ethan? The circling horses scare him. He runs back to the front line, dodging swinging nightsticks as he makes his way toward the crowd. Cops drag a protester by the arm and ankle toward a waiting van, heedless of the way the unconscious man's head smacks against the ground. Another protester lies pinned by two officers, with a third kicking him in the groin. Andrew races toward the safety of the crowd. He reaches for the barricade, but a cop blocks his way.

Andrew sees the baton rise. He lifts his arms just in time to cushion the impact. He dives forward, head knocking against the barricade as he falls. Someone from the crowd reaches under and pulls him through, but not before the cop's next blow strikes Andrew hard on the thigh.

Hurled placards whirl overhead as Andrew is dragged backwards, the air shrill with whistles and chants. "*The whole world is watching! The whole world is watching!*" Miraculously Andrew isn't trampled

as he's towed onto the sidewalk. His head hurts as he finally looks up into his benefactor's eyes--gray like Jake's. Even upside-down the stranger's face is handsome. The man smiles. "You all right?" Andrew nods dumbly. A camera dangles from around the man's neck, and he steadies it with his hand. "I've got to take pictures. Watch that cut on your head."

Before Andrew can thank him, the guy is off. Andrew braces his hand against a building and rises shakily to his feet. His leg aches; his head throbs from where it hit the wood. Andrew limps forward, scanning for Ethan, for Remy, for anyone who might help. Police have forced back the crowd. Red and blue lights flicker to life as the arrested are hauled away in white vans.

Several yards down, Andrew finds Ethan lying with several others on the sidewalk. Unconscious? Dead? Then Andrew spots a young man with angular side-burns drawing a chalk outline around Ethan's body. The die-in. A pathetic sight, here on the sidewalk, among the confused aftermath of what has just happened--ACT UP members shouting bitterly, unionists shaking their heads in consternation. Andrew's head feels woozy, and when he raises his fingers to the bump on his skull, he discovers a trickle of blood. Catching sight of him, Ethan rises up like a ghost, spins Andrew around, surveys the damage. "Don't drip blood on my jacket," he teases, facing Andrew forward again. He takes the ACT UP sticker from Andrew's shirt and slaps it like a band-aid to the cut on Andrew's head.

Later, back at his apartment, Ethan cleans Andrew up, holds him tight, calls him his "brave activist soldier," his "handsome demonstration hero." He says he's sorry he wasn't there for him.

As they crawl in bed, Andrew tells him not to worry. All he needs is sleep and silence.

He puts his arm around Ethan, wishing he had the words to tell him about Jake, wishing that doing so would make the two of them closer. But the sleepy catch and release of breath in Ethan's throat stops Andrew. Already Ethan is fast asleep, lost to him. Andrew knows he does not love him. Their time together is but a stopover for Andrew, a way station between selves old and new.

Chapter 24: Franks at Dirty Frank's

After intermission Remy retook the bingo stage amidst a flash of imitation lightning and the roar of manufactured thunder. He wore a new costume: a skimpy black superhero outfit complete with thigh-high boots and a cape. On his head was a platinum wig, and his exposed flesh had been covered with some sort of body-length approximation of blackface. More than one person gasped at the politically incorrect sight of this new version of Miss Iona.. It didn't help that Remy was a pretty hirsute guy who, despite working as a drag queen, appeared never to have stepped within ten feet of a depilatory device.

"Who the hell are you supposed to be?" someone yelled.

"I am Storm, mutant goddess of wind and rain!" Miss Iona cried. She threw her arms in the air as the lights flashed to another peal of thunder. "I'm an X-Man!" She shot a glance at the yeller. "And no, that *does not* mean I'm a post-operative transsexual."

The audience chuckled, forgiving the inappropriate Vaudevillian sight of her. Miss Iona announced it was time to acknowledge the super women whose volunteering efforts made all of tonight's festivities possible: the BVDs. "So let's parade them back out," she said, "and find out who these tired old drag queens are trying so hard to be."

The BVDs rolled back in to line up in front of the stage like extremely homely debutantes at a ball. Some of the characters they impersonated I recognized from old TV shows or my brother's comics; others were more obscure, like the one painted green and wearing torn-up clothes. One by one, the BVDs skated up the center aisle waving as Miss Iona called their names and poked fun at them. "First up, Wonder Woman! Honey, you're so hairy maybe you'd better trade in your magic lasso for an Epilady.... Next is Supergirl--well, maybe *Bizarro* Supergirl. What's your power, hon? Stopping Lex Luthor with that face of yours?... Who's next? Elektra Woman and Dyna Girl? My god, I don't think I've ever seen spandex pushed to such limits--you working on some sort of lab test, Dupont versus Doritos? *Now* I see why you two never made the cut for the Super Friends.... And who are you? ...Danger Dame? Oh, honey, you're making that up; move along. Who's behind you? The savage *She-Hulk*? What happened, did Bruce Banner start mainlining estrogen? Stop growling at me! Oh, I get it. Your special power is super PMS."

The audience laughed. Up next was a black man in a fishnet stockings and a blond wig. "Who are you?" Miss Iona asked. "The Black Canary? What's your special power? ... You shout a supersonic scream? Half the people here are screamers! I'd have thought in that get-up of yours your name would be Super-Ho. No glove, no love, baby. Remember that tonight when you're out working Broad and Pine."

Behind Miss Iona's back, Jiminy Olsen had turned pale at the racy banter. Iona didn't care; she was too busy digging into Sheena, Queen of the Jungle. "How's Tarzan? You don't know? What good are ya? ... What's that thingy in your hand?"

Sheena held up a stuffed tiger.

“Ohmigod!” exclaimed Miss Iona. “Put that away! When you’re in public you’re supposed to *cover up* your pussy!”

Most of the audience roared, but a skeptical look passed between the husband and wife at the end of my table who had brought their children. On stage, Jiminy Olsen beamed Iona with a piece of paper and mimed a slashing-throat gesture. Miss Iona rolled her eyes. She produced a flask from her cleavage, took a sip and ripped on the last BVD: Batgirl. “You poor second banana,” Miss Iona said. She shook her head as she looked down at the dynamic damsel in her shiny purple and yellow bat-suit. Something about this BVD struck me as familiar.

“Girl, tell me this,” Iona said, “I used to watch that old TV show. How come Batman got all the good stuff? He had Wayne Manor, the Batcave, the Batmobile, the Batboat. That sexy little Robin. But you! All you got was a walk-in closet and a moped. He make you sign a pre-nup or something?”

Batgirl shrugged and skated off.

“Is that--?” I started to ask Aleta.

“Yep,” she nodded. “Batgirl’s Tommy.”

“Remy and his flask sure make a convincing drunk act,” I remarked.

“Who said it’s an act?”

The next game was starting, so I let the remark go. As we played the next few rounds, I thought how Remy was right; Andrew would have liked seeing all their planning come together in this superhero extravaganza. What had gone so wrong that he would take off before seeing it through? I pushed the thought from my head as the games went on. Aleta and I always came up

an unmarked space or two behind someone else’s whooping cry of *bingo*. We stamped our feet alongside the crowd’s at the call of B-7, we shouted “*Mazel tov!*” at the announcement of B-13, all to no avail. Meanwhile, more fortunate souls won envelopes full of cash, theatre tickets, passes to upcoming bingo games. If more than one person shouted out bingo at the same time, a face-off was held--more numbers drawn until there was a single victor. Some people donated a portion of their cash back, causing Miss Iona to stuff her flask back in her cleavage to lavish them with thank-yous. Still, as the night wore on, I began to feel the effects of my long walk with Duke and the afternoon hours I had spent hunting down the phone and electric companies so I could get the services switched back on in Andrew’s apartment.

“I’m tired,” I told Aleta. “How about if I just lay my head down on the table?”

Aleta shook her head. “The next game’s special.”

In fact, thunder and lightning once more bounced off the scalloped edge arch surrounding the stage as Remy *cum* Miss Iona *cum* Storm the mutant weather witch pretended to control the electrical maelstrom with the hand not attached to her flask. “Get ready for Storm’s electrifying lightning round!” she cried out before slurring through the rules.

Aleta interpreted for me. “There’s a thousand-dollar prize,” she explained. “But only if you cover your bingo board in fifty-two calls or less. Otherwise they get to keep all but a hundred bucks of the pot. “Watch out, though. They don’t call it a lightning round for nothin’.”

The pudgy man beside me cracked his knuckles in preparation. Aleta and I readied our game sheets. Iona and Super-Duper-Man took turns announcing the numbers as fast as Jiminy Olsen could pluck them from the spinning plastic barrel. The electric numbers on the board above Jiminy’s head lit up faster and faster, while the muscle-boy in the gold lamé shorts kept track of the number of draws with a pad of paper clipped to his easel. My gamesheet began to fill.

We were fifty-one calls along when finally Miss Iona called out O-69--the first time she had done so all night. Metal chair backs clanged as the audience reeled up on their feet to do the requisite shout and wave. As I eased back down, my legs got tangled beneath the table. I fought them free, then scanned the cards on my newsprint sheet for the number, while Super-Duper-Man moved on to the next.

“Wait a minute,” I said, low and to myself as I dabbed off O-69. I did a double-take, then looked up to find Aleta also staring at my sheet.

“You got it, girl! Say it! Say it!”

I smiled and cried out at the top of my lungs. “*Bingo!*” I felt like the Black Canary delivering her supersonic scream. “*Bingo! Bingo! Bingo! Bingo!*”

Jiminy Olsen ceased handing over balls. Miss Iona and Super-Duper-Man man went quiet. Everyone at lucky table number seven looked at me. The party girls in their thick makeup. The jealous guy to my right. The squeaky-clean family at the far end.

A moment later, the savage She-Hulk snatched my sheet and began to tick the numbers off against those lit up on Jiminy’s board. Batgirl winked at me and peered over her fellow BVD’s big green shoulder. They nodded at Miss Iona.

“We’ve got a winner!” she announced to the crowd, which issued a collective groan. I didn’t care. I’d won! I’d never won any prize in my life, but now I finally had. And it was a thousand smackeros to boot!

Batgirl and She-Hulk pushed me to the stage. When I got there, the muscle boy in the gold shorts reached down and hoisted me up like I was made out of cotton candy. Maybe it helped that I was feeling so good, like my insides were a mix of helium and laughing gas. I couldn’t stop smiling. My ears burned, but I didn’t care. I was happy.

“Congratulations!” Miss Iona told me as the muscle-boy handed me over to her. Up close, I could see past all the makeup and costume camouflage to the Remy I knew beneath. I could also smell his breath, which had that paint-peeling reek I’d learned to recognize thanks to Daddy and Andrew. “I know this girl!” Remy told the audience. “*Allishon McKenna* is family! If not for her brother Andrew, who dreamed up this

whole superhero shebang, we'd probably be rehashing the same *Wizard of Oz* schtick we did last month. Let's hear it for Allison and Andrew!"

The audience applauded. Sexy Mr. Gold Lamé carried out an oversized envelope, holding it above his head so everyone could see that "\$1000" was written across it in big block script. He flexed his chest muscles at me as he handed over my prize. He had two Superman-S stickers pressed over his nipples, and the sight of them made me laugh. Remy made him perform his flexing pectoral dance again, and the audience applauded with fresh hoots and hollers.

"So what ya gonna do with all that dough?" Remy asked, arm around my shoulder.

"I don't know. Maybe give some back?"

"Why that's *shuper*, girl! How much?"

"Half?"

Remy's eyes got big. He looked at the audience. "Now that's the spirit!" And with that he delivered a big fat kiss to my lips. He stumbled drunkenly against me, and I dropped my envelope trying to catch him. Mr. Gold Lamé pulled him off me. Jiminy Olsen ran grabbed the mike and announced there was just one more regular round left. Jiminy handed the mike to Super-Duper-Man and pushed Remy toward the side of the stage. "He's too drunk! Get him away!" Jiminy fumed to the muscle-boy. I had barely enough time to collect my envelope before they started calling the next game.

In the wings of the stage, I helped Mr. Gold Lamé ease Remy into a folding chair. The little Hercules turned to me and spoke. "So you know him?" His voice was too deep and comically froggy. Now I understood why they never let him talk on stage.

"Yeah, I know him."

"He's gotta stop doing this." He turned to Remy. "I know it's tough working two back-to-back shows, but you gotta knock it off before they can your ass."

"I jus' need a rest," Remy said. "And a wee nip." He lifted his flask.

"Gimme that!" Mr. Gold Lamé snatched the flask and marched back on stage.

"You want to go home?" I asked Remy when we were alone.

"No, no, no," he said. "Some of the BVDs and I are goin' to a bar after the show."

"Do you really need another drink?"

"I promised! You and Aleta oughta meet us there. She knows where it's at. I gotta stick around for the closing number." Remy rose a little unsteadily to his feet and headed for the stage.

* * *

That's how I found myself walking with Aleta to Dirty Frank's bar a few minutes later, skipping the last game as beat the rush out the door. It was around eleven, and traffic was slow once we got away from Broad Street to the edge of the Amble-Through. Aleta pointed out the coffee shop where she worked, closed now for the night. The glass door was cracked, so I asked if anyone had broken in. No, Aleta said, it

had been that way for as long as she could remember. Cattycorner across the intersection sat Dirty Frank's, which would have been just another dingy corner bar if not for the mural that wrapped around its walls. Aleta told me this was another of Andrew's murals. I got the joke: In shades of gray the faces of various famous Franks had been painted. Ben Franklin, Frankie Avalon, Aretha Franklin, Frank Zappa, and, of course, Frankenstein's monster--the old Universal Studios version that Andrew had a model of as a kid. Again, I was impressed at the good job he'd done.

Aleta tugged open the bar door and a blast of music hit us, REM's "Man on the Moon." A bouncer slouched against a dirty gumball machine just inside the door, looking a bit too handsome for the motorcycle jacket and Sex Pistols T-shirt he wore. His bleach-blond hair was slicked back in an old-fashioned DA, making him look like some sort of punk version of Sha Na Na. I was about to fork over my ID, but the guy knew Aleta by name and simply waved us through.

Past hanging electric beer signs and walls posted with flyers stood a shabby central bar mobbed by a grungy-looking young crowd. Aleta pushed to the bar and ordered a beer for herself and a Diet Coke for me. I scooted the back wall where messed-up-looking paintings by local art students hung for sale. The whole place smelled like one of Momma's ashtrays. A booth next to me opened up so I grabbed it. The gray Formica tabletop felt sticky beneath my forearms. When Aleta brought my drink, I used the napkin wrapped around the glass to wipe the table.

"You're the one who should be buying the drinks tonight," she said with a wink. "Miss Lucky-Money!"

I laughed. "I wish I could have won that guy in the gold lamé."

"Little Oscar? Honey, he's as queer as a three-dollar bill. When he's not working for Remy, he makes his living dancing on the bar at The Post. You don't know much about men, do you? You ever have a boyfriend?"

I shook my head. "I'm not as lucky as you think." My ears burned as I thought about what Charlie made me do in his truck. I pulled my hair forward and tried to make a joke. "When Remy gave me that smooch on stage, it might as well have been my first kiss from a boy."

"And guy in drag to boot!" Aleta laughed and gulped her beer. "Girl, you gotta get some action. You need to get *laid*."

Charlie had kissed me, but I hadn't kissed back. I could at least cling to that.

"Don't look so sad," Aleta suddenly said. "You can do better than you give yourself credit for. Get rid of those glasses and get yourself some contacts. You got good hair." She reached out to touch it. "Like Ariel in *The Little Mermaid*. You oughta let Remy style it for you."

I looked away. People had carved their initials into the brown paneling beneath the gallery wall next to us. Aleta pointed out an inscription: ANDREW + STEVEN.

"What was Steven like?" I asked, glad to steer the subject away from me.

“Handsome. Artsy-fartsy like your brother always liked. He took pictures for the local weeklies, sometimes did freelance work for *The Daily News* or *Philly Magazine*. Andrew thought he was full of talent. I thought he was full of shit.”

“Why’s that?”

“I think he might’ve even tried to talk your brother into doin’ some shots for some porno magazine, though I’ve no idea if anything ever came of--”

Just then Remy blasted into the bar with Batgirl and the made-up one, Danger Dame, in tow. “Anyone call for superhero backup?” Remy shouted, still dressed in his blackface and white wig. Further pursuit of Aleta’s revelation would have to wait.

“Halloween’s not until October!” a stocky patron sitting at the bar shouted, getting a few laughs.

Remy snapped his fingers at the guy. “Then that gives you just enough time to scrape out your head and tuck a candle behind those Jack-O-Lantern teeth of yours. ‘Cause that’s about the only way you’re gonna light up a room, Punkinhead.” The man blanched as everyone laughed at his expense.

Remy parted the awestruck onlookers like a drag version of Moses before the Red Sea. At least the BVDs had taken their rollerskates off. Aleta waved them to us. People laughed and made more wisecracks, but I got the impression such sights weren’t unusual even among Dirty Frank’s mostly heterosexual crowd. After all, the Amble-Through lay almost entirely inside Philly’s Gayborhood. By the time Remy and the BVDs arrived at our table, the rest of the place had pretty much gone back to getting hammered.

Remy hugged us hello. Batgirl slid off her cowl and attached wig, revealing Tommy and his headful of sweaty curls. He followed Remy’s lead with a kiss to my cheek.

“I can’t believe I let him drag me here in this get-up,” Tommy said with a smile. “We’re lucky we didn’t get shot in a drive-by on the walk here.”

“We’re lucky somebody didn’t offer us five bucks for a blowjob,” said Remy. He plopped down across from me next to Aleta, where he shook out a cigarette from a pack he had stuffed down into the skimpy black top of Storm’s outfit. “I need a goddamn drink!” he said.

“You’re getting a Coke,” said tiny little Danger Dame. He pulled off his bouffant wig and set it on the table. “Hi, I’m Henry,” he said to me. He stuck out his gloved hand and we shook hello. Henry’s Danger Dame outfit was really just a pair of orange go-go boots paired with a matching ‘60s mini-dress. If not for his lime-green cape and the double-D emblem atop his double-D breasts, he could’ve been singing with the B-52s.

“I’d mush rather have a vodka and orange juice,” Remy insisted. He raised his eyebrows and blew a smoke ring.

Henry looked at him. “Brenda Joe already has it in for you. You better--”

“You’re not the boss of me!” cried Remy, sounding like Elizabeth when she didn’t get her way. “We pulled in more money tonight than we have since we started this thing. Where does that bitch get off--”

“One more screwdriver and that’s it,” said Tommy. “Remember, you have to make it home.”

“--telling me what to do and how to do it? I swear, one of these days--”

“I’ll buy a round.” My pocket was flush with the five hundred dollars left over after my donation. I waved a couple twenties in the air. “I am, after all, Miss Lucky-Money tonight.” I smiled at Aleta. Despite being of legal age for the past year, I had never hung out in any bars back in Seneca. So the idea of buying a round of drinks struck me as a rather thrilling and grownup thing to do. I took everyone’s order and headed to the bar, repeating in my head the funny-sounding name of the beer Aleta and Tommy wanted.

“What’ll it be?” the bartender asked. I rattled off the order, finishing up with the two draft beers, glad from the look on the bartender’s face that I had gotten the name right. “Cancel the Diet Coke,” I said on impulse. “Make that three Yuenglings.” What the hell, I thought.

A couple next to me debated with all due seriousness whether NASA losing track with the Mars Observer earlier in the day had been an act of sabotage by aliens. Beyond them, a black fellow in geeky glasses was explaining the significance of his artwork to a girl licking downing shots of tequila. When the bartender finally brought my order, Tommy and helped me carry the drinks back to the table.

We all clinked glasses, toasting the bingo show and my win. The beer was cool and not hard to get used to. But no sooner than we’d set our glasses down than Remy started to complain again. Tommy whispered in my ear that Remy always got like this after a performance. .

“I wish Andrew coulda seen the show,” Remy said. “But if we ever do it again, some changes gotta be made. Nobody but the comics geeks knew who the hell Storm was.” He pulled off his platinum wig and tossed it atop Danger Dame’s bouffant.

“I paid good money for that!” Henry snatched his wig and placed it back on his head.

“Henry, what you shoulda paid good money for was a better coshtume.”

“Don’t mock my creativity!” Henry cried shrilly. “You’re a mean drunk.”

Remy laughed. I tried to tell Henry I didn’t think he looked so bad, but he was too busy slugging back his Manhattan. “I’m outta here!” And with those words Henry tucked his rollerskates neatly under his arm and sashayed off as Danger Dame, his blond bouffant leaning off to the side like a lumpy Tower of Pisa. A guy in a flannel shirt wolf-whistled and laughed as he passed. Remy didn’t look sad to see him go. I leaned back and listened to Andrew’s old gang talk.

“Why must everyone torture me so?” Remy asked.

“It’s just a freaking bingo game,” Tommy said. “You make it sound like you just staged *The Phantom of the Opera*.”

“Where’s Andrew?” Remy moaned. “He knew what it was like to suffer as an *artiste*.”

"I'm sick of suffering," Aleta said. "There's too damn much of it in the world."

"He was finally gonna dress up as a BVD this time. We had his costume all picked out--"

"Do you think the bartender'd get pissed if I lit a doobie?"

"--Super-Duper-Girl." Remy wiped at his blackface with a bar napkin, leaving behind muddy streaks. "I was gonna let him wear my good blond wig and everything."

"Shit, Tommy. He'd probably walk over here and help you smoke it hisself."

"And that damn Brenda Joe as Jiminy Olshen!"

"Then I better hold onto it for later. I'm not Johnny Appleweed."

Remy grabbed Tommy by his cape and pulled him close. "Where the hell does she get off? How could I have ever been friends with such a micromanaging *control queen*!"

"She just needs to get laid," Aleta said. Was that her answer to everything?

Remy's was merciless. "The only way that stocky bull dyke is going to get any action is if she smears a jar of peanut butter on her cootch and lets her rottweiler go to town."

The others laughed, and I did too, despite myself.

"Shit," Remy said. "Now I'm getting hungry. I wanna hotdog."

"Dude, you should've got one at bingo. They threw out a bunch at the end of the night."

"You don't need a hotdog. You need to get laid. I don't think this place has freakin'--"

"Goddammit, I want a hotdog!" Remy pounded his fist against the table. "If you guys won't get it for me, I'll get it myself." He put back on his wig and hoisted himself up and out of the booth.

Aleta followed, saying she had better keep an eye on him. The two of them had barely reached the bar when one of the flannel shirt guys who had mocked Danger Dame with catcalls slapped Remy hard on the ass.

"Hey there, good-lookin'. You working the street tonight?"

"No, but you're working my nerves." Remy pushed aside empties so he could lean against the bar.

Flannel Shirt couldn't take the hint. "Pretty *and* sassy," he mocked, causing Remy to turn around again. Nearby conversations grew cold. Maybe I was wrong about this place.

The man raised his middle finger and scraped it roughly through the brown makeup on Remy's cheek. "What's this?" Flannel Shirt asked jokingly. "Dark meat." I couldn't believe the guy had the nerve to kid with Remy like that when a real-life black woman like Aleta was standing right next to him. Still, the guy persisted. "Half white, half black. A *mulatto*, like my old lady. You know, when she nurses my kid, white milk squirts out her left tit, chocolate milk squirts out the right. How 'bout you?" He gave a rough squeeze to Remy's make-believe boobs and laughed.

Remy slapped his hand away.

"Now you wait a minute, you racist mothafuckah--" Aleta started.

Remy waved her off. “Never you mind what I am,” he said to the guy “But you look like you’re half dick, half asshole. How ‘bout you bend over the bar and go fuck yourself?”

Flannel Shirt’s face went red. He pushed Remy hard in the chest, causing him to stagger back on his high-heeled boots. The bartender caught sight of the action and signaled for the bouncer. Meanwhile Flannel Shirt grabbed Remy by the neck. “Fuck you, faggot,” the guy said. Remy looked scared. “That shit on your face, shitface?” He pushed Remy hard. “How about going back to your own bar where you can eat all the ass you--”

Crack! The sound of glass smashing against the wood filled the room. Aleta waved a broken beer bottle in Flannel Shirt’s face. “Let go of my friend.”

The man backed off. But by then the pretty-faced bouncer had appeared, and with more gusto than I would have given him credit for he managed to haul the dumbass redneck out into the street. The bartender reprimanded Aleta for breaking bottles and causing fights, and her voice rose as she tried to explain how it hadn’t been her or Remy’s fault. Remy rushed back to the table to down the rest of his screwdriver in one big gulp, then swooned across Tommy. But if Remy thought he was going to get off the hook, he had another think coming. A moment later, the bouncer appeared at our table to tell him to go.

“But it wasn’t our fault!” Aleta kept yelling. “That guy baited us!”

Remy shed big crocodile tears and wondered aloud, “What if that asshole is out there just waiting to pounce?”

“Bar rules,” the bouncer said. “I can call you a cab.”

“That won’t be necessary,” Tommy told him. “We’ll walk them home.” He glanced at me as he collected his mask and wig. “My tights are sagging toward my ankles anyway. I better take off too before one of these bat-holes tries to make it into my Batcave next.”

* * *

A few minutes later we were out on the street again complaining about what had just happened. Aleta went on and on about how she could’ve taken the guy, no problem. Remy said it was his own damn fault for looking so irresistible in drag. Tommy observed that things like this would never happen if everyone in the world smoked a joint a day. I confessed how this had been my first time hanging out in a bar. “And I got kicked out!” I added proudly.

We all laughed and made our way down 13th Street to Rodman. Remy sagged between me and Aleta as we helped him navigate the tricky bumps in the sidewalk. It must have been well past midnight by the time we reached their door. I helped Aleta take Remy upstairs to his bed, then went up to Andrew’s old room to see if there was anything else I should take with me, and ended up carrying back downstairs a heavy shopping bag full of paperbacks and more of Andrew’s old sketchpads and journals. Tommy brought Duke in off the back deck so I could give him a pat hello, then offered to walk me back to the apartment if I could wait long enough for him to change. I told him that wouldn’t be necessary; I’d shove off now. I had

my first day of work tomorrow at More Than Just Ice Cream, and I wanted to be ready for it. He gave me a last hug goodnight before I went out the door.

Though it was half a block out of my way, I headed over to Broad Street for the walk up to the apartment on Spruce, figuring the city's main thoroughfare would be better lit than the Amble-Through at this hour. A crescent moon hung in the cloudy sky above the city like a picture out of an old storybook. There were far fewer stars here than at home, but home didn't have people like Remy or Aleta or Tommy, all of whom lit up the world in their own way. I could see why Andrew had made his home among them, at least for a time.

As I passed the 8-Twelve Convenience Market, I saw that progress had been made on the mural there. Though the fluorescent lights had been turned low inside the locked store, the moonlight and streetlights were more than enough to illuminate the changes for me to see. Behind the scaffolding, the brick surface had been fully primed with a thick looking layer of white paint, and an enormous grid had been drawn upon the wall, the same as in the sketch I had seen. Within the symmetrical squares the figure of the young black girl had been laid out, and though she was not yet filled in with color I could tell how beautiful she was. From the way her long gown draped across her chest, I realized she wasn't a girl at all, but a young woman whose face still radiated innocence. And yet she embodied strength as well. In the stance of her legs, in the tilt of her head, in the casual, confident way she pushed her long hair off her shoulder. Her eyes looked up into the night like she was waiting for something. I wondered what that might be.

I headed on. Across the street a couple of the prostitutes people had joked about were eyeing up the slow-moving cars that sharked past. In their high heels and short skirts they looked as cartoony as Miss Iona and her BVDs. The irony wasn't lost on me how they were working the corner in front of the health department's STD clinic, that funny-looking building made up of glass blocks and blue brickface that I had stopped in front of my first morning in town.

As I headed up Broad Street, I couldn't help but think about Charlie again, and the price he'd made me pay for my passage here. He had pulled over at a turnpike rest stop wanting sex. I had tried to fight him off, but new if I did so I'd end up stranded. Snowbird had fallen and I needed to tell Andrew.

So I compromised. I gave Charlie what he wanted, not with what he wanted between my legs, but with my mouth and hands. I tried not to think about how awful it was as I did it. I thought instead of a cold evening in the garage alongside Andrew, a flashlight set on end before us shining up like a campfire.

The hillbilly in my brother's voice faded as he told me for the first time about the Indian tribe that used to hike through the mountains to winter in our woods long ago. "It was on a fierce winter night that the wisest chief of all the Senecas found himself looking for a cave to shelter his people," Andrew intoned. On their long southward journey the Senecas had faced many enemies and braved many battles, and it had cost them much time. Now the tribe found itself struggling against the winter snow as they searched for

safety. The tribe was starving by the time they finally reached their secret underground cave. Bald Eagle's wife, White Rock, was with child, and the struggle of their journey brought upon her a painful labor. Bald Eagle had survived many wounds in many battles, but he could not endure the sound of his wife's pain.

Knowing he was no use to her, Chief Bald Eagle wrapped himself in heavy skins and set off in search of food to sustain his tribe. But the snowdrifts were high and there were no tracks to follow. Then through the storm he saw a shape moving through the snow--a white bird the likes of which he'd never seen. The chief followed the creature. Finally it lit upon a tree branch, which caused a stirring in the brush beneath.. Bald Eagle narrowed his eyes until his gaze drew as sharp as his namesake's. There, through the storm, he spied a hearty buck. He lifted his bow and said a silent prayer. The wind was strong and sure to make his arrow stray. But his people were starving. He fired his arrow and killed the deer, enough food to sustain his tribe for several days. But too soon night fell and the landmarks that would guide Bald Eagle back to his tribe's cave were swallowed by the dark. The storm had ceased, but his footprints had long since been covered. As the temperature grew colder, he feared he would never again see his wife and coming child. As if in response to Bald Eagle's despair, the ghost-white bird again took flight. The chief again followed it. Sure enough, the bird lit down near the glow of the cave's entrance. Bald Eagle thanked the snowbird, which surely must be one of gods in disguise.

When the medicine man lifted the child into his chief's arms, Bald Eagle saw that his heir was a girl. Yet there was no disappointment in his eyes. He walked to the mouth of the cave and held his daughter up to the sky to show her to his new friend. And as he did, he announced to his medicine man and all his braves, to the winter sky and the godlike creature that had helped him, that now and forever his daughter would be known as Princess Snowbird.

"Isn't there more?" I begged of Andrew. "Tell me how Snowbird found the man she would marry."

"After that night," Andrew continued, lifting the flashlight so it shone spookily beneath his chin, "the white bird was never seen again. But the princess who carried its name grew up to play in the shadow of the towering rocks of the tribe's new homeland--the prettiest and cleverest of all the young maidens." I loved listening to Andrew describe the girl's nimble grace, how independent and mysterious she was. She'd disappear for days at a time, only to bring back to her tribe some wonderful bounty from the forest. Sometimes it might be a magic herb, an ancient charm, or a woodland creature full of mischief. Andrew liked to surprise me. But always he included how Princess Snowbird liked to scale the heights of Seneca Rocks so she could feel the wind on her skin. Standing at the very top, her heart would lift like the wings of her namesake. She kept that secret climbs all to herself.

When the princess came of age, a problem arose. Her rank and beauty bought many suitors from many tribes, and the rivalry that broke out among the young men posed a threat to peace. Chief Bald Eagle announced one day that a contest would be held to determine who among the men deserved the most to have his daughter's hand in marriage. The nature of the challenge he left for his daughter to decide.

On the day of the contest, the braves assembled before the chief at dawn. He led them from his cave to a clearing at the foot of Seneca Rocks. Snowbird did not disappoint her audience as she emerged from the woods in the royal garments of her people. The suitors and onlookers held their breath as she spoke.

‘Since I was born,’ she said, ‘I have watched the great rocks of the Senecas push their rugged summits toward the heavens. And many times I have climbed the up to behold this land and contemplate our fortune as a people. These have been the happiest moments of my life. Of all the Seneca Indians, only I have managed this climb and seen the world from such heights. A moon ago, on my last visit, I decided upon the contest of my suitors--a trial of bravery and endurance. To the one who swallows his fears and meets me atop these heights, I will give my honor, my love, and my life.’ And with that declaration the nimble-footed princess stepped to the face of the rocks and began her upwards journey to the top.

Those faint of heart took one look at the summit and drew back. Only seven braves accepted the challenge. But as the rock surface grew sheer and the climb more difficult, three of the braves turned back in shame. Another navigated a treacherous pinnacle, yet became so tired he had no choice but to give up. He soon spotted a fifth suitor trapped at a seeming impasse and seized by fear, and so he led the man back safely of the ground. The two braves that remained followed closely on the heels of the sure-footed princess.

The most difficult stretch of the journey loomed before them. But the princess had made this climb before and knew which rocks would hold and which would crumble at the slightest touch. The men behind her had only their determination and strength to guide them. They pressed forward, closing the distance between themselves and the Indian maiden as fast as they could.

At long last, the princess reached the summit and turned to look into the face of her most persistent suitor. He was only a few feet below. When the young brave looked up, the sight of the beautiful princess filled his heart with wonder and longing. The slower climber seized this moment to pull a loose rock from beneath his competitor’s foot, causing the faster brave to reel back in the air.

The Indian maiden did not hesitate. Was this man not the bravest and most worthy of all the Senecas? How would she ever again find his equal? Certainly not in the traitor behind him. With the quickness of her namesake, the young princess caught her beloved by the hand and drew him to her. For a long time they sat, talking of their lives to come. And then, as night approached, the two lovers descended the rocks to stand before Bald Eagle and his wife. The great chief conferred upon his newfound son-in-law the leadership of the tribe, but not even that great honor could match what had already been given him by Snowbird--his life and her heart.

At least that’s how Andrew told me the story that first time. He knew this was an ending I’d want to hear.

“But what of the bad guy?” I remember asking. “The one who loosened the rock?”

“Oh, him?” Andrew grinned. “They kicked his sorry ass off.”

We both laughed as pretended not to hear the sound of our parents fighting from beyond our imaginary Indian cave. Sweet as it was, we both knew better than to believe it. If what Andrew said was the case, why then was the gendarme of stone that stood so solemnly in the notch at the top of Seneca Rocks said to be the Indian princess herself? Over time, he would tell me darker versions of the tale, how her favored suitor was not saved after all, but had fallen to the sandstone below. The princess could not believe it; she stayed atop the mountain waiting for her fallen brave to come, her tears slowly petrifying her into a rocky pillar.

Andrew’s story varied depending on his mood. Sometimes the final two suitors were jealous twin brothers, the princess but a trophy in a longstanding rivalry. Sometimes the girl had struck up a love affair her father didn’t approve of, and it was Bald Eagle himself who sent the young suitor to his death. One time, Andrew had Snowbird’s bitter mother plotting to do the young lovers in. Each variation became a lesson in how many ways a young girl could be disappointed. Andrew’s stories began to remind me of water flowing beneath the frozen surface of a river—a solid thing nevertheless full of change.

At the apartment, I fished Andrew’s keys from my pocket and thought of how I had felt two days ago when I learned Princess Snowbird had finally grown tired of waiting. I was tired of waiting too.

Chapter 25: The Catalog of Boyfriends, Real and Imagined

Andrew – Philadelphia, Fall 1991 to Summer 1992

In the weeks following the Bellevue Riot, Ethan urges Andrew to sue. Several protestors arrested or injured have filed a lawsuit against the city with the help of the ACLU, charging the police with excessive brutality and other offenses, including denying a couple of those incarcerated access to AZT medication. Remy signs on as one of the plaintiffs, and takes to spending his evenings at The Last Drop prattling on and on to anyone who will listen about how egregiously his civil rights were violated. At home, the Rodman Street household is in chaos, roommates constantly arguing over politics and how Remy should spend his settlement if the suit wins. Andrew would prefer to forget the ordeal entirely. The bump to his head had been a wakeup call. It's time he straightens his life out. Parties less and studies more. Gets a new job to replace the comic book shop on South Street, where'd he'd been too depressed to return after the riot. Beyond that, Andrew's not quite sure.

He stays at Ethan's West Philadelphia apartment as much as he can, but doing so offers little respite; activist Ethan chides him relentlessly. "'Straightening your life out' is bullshit," he tells Andrew one early October evening. "Straight *anything* is bullshit. What good is your pulling everything together when the rest of the world is so screwed up? How can you be happy and not do anything—about the riot, about gay rights, about all the people suffering from AIDS?"

At first, Andrew wants to defend himself. He wants to enumerate for Ethan all the things he *has* done. A year ago he raised over a thousand dollars in pledges for the annual AIDS Walk along Kelly Drive. Last November he and Aleta sold Thanksgiving pies at Liberty Place to raise money for an organization that delivers meals to homebound PWAs. Two Decembers in a row, he's helped Tommy pass out white candles on World AIDS Day to the crowd keeping vigil on the mall next to the Liberty Bell. And since meeting Ethan, Andrew has gone to more ACT UP protests than he can remember. In between, he has manned the cash register at the Thrift-for-AIDS shop on South Street, has licked and sealed so many envelopes for the gay community center in the Amble-Through that his tongue goes numb just thinking about it. And before the riot created so much squabbling among his friends, Andrew had spent long hours at The Last Drop, sketching out sets and costumes for the new bingo fundraising project Remy plans to start.

But with Ethan, nothing is enough. In order to appease him, Andrew rides the 23-trolley up to Mt. Airy following his classes come Monday afternoon to volunteer at a hospice for people with AIDS. Almost instantly he regrets it. Barely twenty-two, life hasn't yet toughened him up enough to look into the eyes of the terminally ill without a lump catching in his throat. Still he does his best. He hides behind a smile, takes

refuge in small talk with residents whose minds haven't been lost to dementia. But it's hard to make chitchat when someone down the hallway is howling in pain because his morphine has run low. Andrew is ashamed that he is so ineffectual, that he cannot even change soiled sheets without a wave of revulsion hitting his stomach. He hates that he is not as strong as he hoped. Will he ever be? With so much real dying around, he feels foolish he ever dreamed of being haunted. He was wrong to diminish Jake Munroe's memory.

It's a lesson he takes with him when he finally quits. The Friday before Halloween he gives the hospice director his notice. Then he walks through the leaves to Germantown Avenue where he boards the 23-trolley for the long ride downtown. Andrew finds a seat next to a window. He leans his head against the glass and thinks of the last time he saw Jake alive, the day the two of them stole off to the dive bar near campus. Jake parroted stupid "see the world" recruitment ads as if they were the answer to everything—his failing grades, his hateful sexuality. His mother and stepfather had brainwashed him into thinking that joining the service would make a man of him. Andrew's arguments to the contrary fell on deaf ears. When the boys' drinking money ran out, there was nothing to do but simply accept Jake's handshake goodbye.

On the creaking trolley, Andrew struggles to hold on to his last mental picture of Jake, but time is erasing him like it's erased Andrew's father. Andrew has no photographs of either one of them. And he's not a good enough artist to draw a picture of Jake from recollection alone. He's tried. He's filled sketchpads with pencil, charcoal, ink, but his efforts never add up to the way he knew Jake to be.

Instead of Jake Munroe, he has the consolation prize of Ethan, the make-do boyfriend Andrew can't quite force himself to give up. Andrew doesn't want to be alone with himself. He needs someone beside him on cold autumn nights when he awakens at three a.m. He needs someone who will, once he jostles the bed enough, stir from sleep for a moment, pull him close, fold warm arms around him and provide the security of familiar skin. Here is comfort. Does that mean love?

* * *

Winter arrives. Snow piles against windowpanes as Ethan hurries off to a seminar titled the Constructs of Sexuality. Andrew stays in Ethan's bed, skipping his own classes to proofread Ethan's thesis, an analysis of the distinctions between heterosexual and gay pornography. Soon to graduate with his degree in Women's Studies, Ethan has pinned his hopes to a final research project he feels certain will secure his acceptance into a doctoral program at Penn's Annenberg School, where he plans to combine coursework in communications with his longstanding interest in gender studies.

Ethan seeks to prove that feminist theories on pornography do not hold up across sexuality lines, and--under the guise of scholarship--he has finagled a grant from the University of Pennsylvania that has allowed him to purchase a new Mac, a state-of-the-art VCR and unlimited tape rentals from adult video stores. Ethan believes, along with a bastion of anti-porn feminists and postmodern scholars, that visual

depictions of penetrative sex inherently victimize females. Yet this line of argument has never been applied to gay porn--and can't, Ethan argues:

In viewing visual pornography, gay men may identify with either the active or passive party; such fluidity of identification means gay viewers need not ascribe to a single, fixed on-screen signifier, but may switch identification at will, thus allowing viewers to identify with both active/male/penetrator and passive/female/penetrative roles--and thereby providing valuable sexual reassurance in a world reticent about validating gay identity.

Andrew does his best to make sense of all of Ethan's convoluted gobbledegook--all his semi-colons, "thuses" and "therebys"—and also tries to suspend his disbelief in the credibility of Ethan's pet theory. Where Andrew comes from, gay porn viewers are perverts, not stars within their liberal studies division. But Ethan is the only male in his program, a rarity, which along with his broad smile and eagerness to right the wrongs of the world makes him the darling of his Women's Studies department.

Thus, Ethan views sex as an abstract concept, not an act to ground him in the here and now. Ethan's preoccupation with porn tape after porn tape aggravates Andrew, as does the way he alternates between advocating then neglecting each new gay cause that splashes across the cover of *Advocate* magazine. But Ethan, despite his faults, seems so much more motivated than anyone else Andrew knows. Isn't he the kind of out and proud boyfriend Andrew ought to have? Andrew grits his teeth and forces himself to wear his affection for Ethan as prominently as the bright pink triangle on the jean jacket Ethan has given him. Nevertheless, a fault line grows between them. Over the cold months, their love life sours. Ethan spends too much time pleading sexual rights and not enough time practicing the privilege in bed with Andrew.

As winter thaws into spring, Ethan invites Andrew over less often, and when Andrew does get to come by, Ethan's living room is littered with videos Andrew has to brush aside just in case—heaven help them—Ethan manages to get inspired enough to throw him down on the floor.

One night in early March, Ethan does just that. Miniature TV screens reflect in the pupils of his eyes as he focuses on the video above Andrew's head, where naked men pump and groan to see who can shoot the biggest load. Ethan's hardly a top, but tonight's *Hard Lovin' Twinkies* has him worked up enough to jump to the other side of the seesaw when it comes to experimenting with active versus passive roles.

Ethan presses into Andrew, eyes glued to the TV.

"Shouldn't we use precautions?" Andrew asks.

Ethan scans his bookshelves full of videos, sex guides and self-help books. He fixes Andrew with an *I'm Okay, You're Okay* grin. "Don't worry," he coos. "I don't like getting fucked, and you're relatively inexperienced that way. We're *fine*."

Andrew thinks of the men and women at the AIDS hospice, wants to tell Ethan that he thinks some things should be done on principle. But he knows his grip on Ethan is tenuous at best. He reminds himself that Ethan has his best interests at heart—doesn't he?—and turning a blind eye isn't so hard after all.

As Ethan's graduation nears, he receives a job offer in New York City as a director of AIDS education at Gay Men's Health Crisis. He never once mentions the idea of taking Andrew with him. One early spring night he pries his attention from his porn videos long enough to announce four terrible words: "We need to talk."

"You know," Ethan begins, hitting the mute button on his remote. "I *love* raspberry jam. And I care about you more than raspberry jam. But I'm not in *love* with you."

There it is, as blunt as can be.

Andrew has long given up expecting the earth to move when it comes to Ethan. But he's not quite prepared for the ground to give way—at least not as clumsily as this.

"I simply can't settle down," Ethan continues. "I still have a lot of self-actualization to realize before I'm ready to nest. You understand."

Andrew suddenly feels as empty as one of the chalk outlines they drew the fall before at the Bellevue. "I understand fine." The truth is he feels foolish for not being the first to make this move.

Ethan's smile flickers from high beam to low. "Don't be upset." He slips into thesis mode. "You really shouldn't succumb to the pitfall of heterosexual paradigms. It's questionable whether gay men really have an instinct for permanent mating--"

"Hold that thought," Andrew tells him. He grabs his jacket and heads to the door. "Maybe that and a jar of Smucker's will help you and your tiny prick survive those cold New York City nights."

* * *

Andrew wishes he could run off somewhere too—be bold, adventurous, like Ethan. Like Jake before him, had it all not worked out so disastrously in the end. Any escape attempt, however, is spoiled by lack of funds and inadequate opportunities. Desire decomposes as Andrew work through a series of dead-end jobs in video stores, pizza parlors, book shops--the ceiling on advancement so low that most days he walks to work stoop-shouldered. His only recourse is to imagine the trips he can't afford. He tapes a map to his bedroom wall and carefully draws routes in red marker through Eastern Europe, the Mediterranean, South America. Wandering past Andrew's door, Aleta rolls her eyes at Andrew's extravagant cartography. He explains he's expecting to meet a rich lover or win the lottery. He wants to be ready.

In the meantime, Andrew puts in more hours waiting tables at the Astral Plane. As the semester comes to a close, he makes a half-assed attempt to salvage his bachelor's in Art History—a default major, as he's never quite gotten his portfolio together enough to transfer into Temple's art school. In a dim-lit lecture room in Anderson Hall, an effeminate professor clicks through slides of classical Italian architecture while all around students' eyes flicker shut like Venetian blinds, their propped chins sinking slowly to rest

on books. Andrew falls asleep as well. He dreams of traveling by gondola through the canals of Venice, a new foreign lover by his side. As evening falls, lights from the vaporetta mix illuminate crumbling palazzi and watchful gargoyles in shades of orange that slowly purple. Andrew's Italian plaything nuzzles his neck, murmurs strange syllables, though touch alone nearly says enough, the Italian's fingertips decoding the Braille of Andrew's desire. They travel together to Rome to explore the heart of ancient antiquity: Colosseum, Pantheon, Catacombs. Andrew takes snapshots of stray cats roaming the ruins, of drunken tourists peeing on ancient architecture. In Pompeii, they walk in the shadow of Vesuvius along ancient ruts carved by chariot wheels--veins of commerce, arteries of conquest. In broken English, the Italian tells Andrew he loves him. A look in his eyes and Andrew becomes heady with the temptation to crush. Instead he draws close the young man's face to kiss him.

But before he can, he's jostled awake, class over. All around, students stretch and gather books, shuffling past the professor as he slowly shakes his head. Andrew lingers, waiting for his hard-on to fade.

* * *

When summer comes, Andrew resolves to escape as best he can, decides to pack up his Purple Turtle and head south then west. He envisions a meandering pilgrimage to the great sights of this country--Dollywood, Graceland, the Grand Canyon, who knows? He will restore his sense of lost innocence through a childhood trip never taken. He will slough old cares, camouflage himself in tacky Americana, get drunk in smoky bars and nurse his hangovers in diners shaped like spaceships. He will keep needs simple, quench desires as he can. Wild, rugged men must surely be out there. He pictures himself now, standing by a cactus to scour the hills for a long-limbed Tonto willing to soothe his Lone Ranger spirit.

But a week before departure, Andrew's VW breaks down and a new guy enters his life, courtesy of happy hour at Woody's bar, fate conspiring to derail his plans once more.

Craig Hansen.

He lacks the Mr. Potato Head contrivances--Doc Martens, funny cap, long sideburns, goatee--that mark the politically initiated. At a time when grunge flannels are on the upswing, Craig prefers chinos, penny loafers, white button-down oxfords—a look that contrasts sharply to Andrew's black wardrobe. But Andrew likes that Craig doesn't fit The Last Drop café's carefully cultivated bohemia, a place he take him, to sober him up with coffee before taking him home to bed.

Craig is Andrew's first lover younger than himself, and Andrew enjoys Craig's physical awkwardness, like a kid suddenly thrust into a body too big for him. In their small talk after sex, Andrew learns Craig got kicked out of Iowa State after being busted for manufacturing fake IDs. The boyfriend he left Ames with dumped him once they got to Philadelphia, sending Craig into a downward spiral Andrew can relate to. Craig looks good in grief, Andrew thinks; it brings out the blue in his eyes. Andrew is glad to have someone with whom to spend rainy afternoons smoking pot and listening to Morrissey's *Viva Hate* or *Bona Drag*. Craig is bright, articulate, seems actually in *need* of Andrew, and his cornflower eyes and

white-blond hair--far blonder than Andrew's own--suggests an innocence Andrew hopes Craig might actually live up to.

A landlocked Iowan like Craig should share his desire to travel, to cross the Atlantic to faraway places, so Andrew tries to interest Craig in a trip to Amsterdam, a city ripe for indulging their shared vices. "If we economize," Andrew tells him one night in bed, "cut back on beer and pot, pass piss tests and fly as couriers, by Thanksgiving break we could be smoking hash and grooving on Van Gogh."

But Andrew's words fall on deaf ears; Craig's vision reaches only as far as Atlantic City. Andrew ends up spending the last of his savings taking his new boyfriend to the Trump Plaza for his birthday in mid-July. Craig claims to have a system for counting cards, but ends up drinking so much free casino vodka he can't even count his change. Back in their hotel room, Craig turns on Andrew, his boozy tongue as merciless and unsparing as a plane crash in a schoolyard. "You want too much from me!" he screams. "You want to be an artist; I want an MBA. We don't even look right together. I mean, you're not just a fashion *disaster*," he says, narrowing his bloodshot eyes at Andrew's vampire-black wardrobe. "You are a fashion *holocaust*."

"Clothes mean nothing," Andrew tells him as he undresses, feeling hypocritical, having only days before spent forty bucks at Zipperhead for the new black shirt he's wearing, a wrinkly just-rolled-out-of-the-coffin look.

Craig stumbles to the bathroom. "And you can't play blackjack worth shit, Andrew. Folding at sixteen is for pussies!"

What happened to that sweet boy from Iowa Andrew first met? He must be lying at the bottom of a vodka and tonic somewhere. Andrew crawls into bed. Bringing Craig to Atlantic City is like frying bacon naked—seems like a good idea, but ends up stinging.

Craig returns from the bathroom, where Andrew is sure he has either thrown up or pissed all over the toilet seat. Craig kicks off his wingtips, pulls off his clothes, sinks in beside him. He puckers his lips to offer a sour kiss, and now it is Andrew's turn to criticize. "Birthday boy, if the eyes are the window to the soul, you need some glass cleaner."

"Turn out the light before I punch you."

Andrew rips the lamp cord from the wall, grips the wire like a garrote. It doesn't matter who you kill; you'll always make someone happy. Andrew breathes out slowly, lets his anger go.

In the dark it takes him a moment to discern the outline of Craig lying beside him, legs against his chest, feet twitching in the air.

"Suck my toes!" Craig cries. "It's my birthday!"

Where does an Iowan pick up such fetishes?

Andrew does as he is told; it's the quickest way to shut Craig up and offers fewer repercussions than strangulation.

Craig comes and Andrew goes.

* * *

One night in early August a few weeks later, Andrew walks to Penn's Landing to stare at the murky Delaware, lamenting he has no ship on which to book passage away from the frustrations of his life. Every relationship since Jake has felt superficial, somewhere he simply ends up, the way a finger touches down on a spinning globe. What world was it Jake thought he'd get to see? Rippling waves? Distant palms? Surely not the doomed barracks in that godforsaken dessert. He must have imagined someplace far better.

Andrew closes his eyes, tries to picture such a place himself. The idea of an anonymous Colombian village appeals to him. Forget drug money or guerilla danger, he will spend his afternoons playing pool in a shabby billiard hall just off a dusty plaza. Thoughts of old lovers will vanish as his gaze drifts to a handsome local's brown-sugar eyes. Heady from sun and too much rum, Andrew will follow his newfound prospect down to the coast at sunset, past plump ladies in bright curlers packing up parasols and touristy wares. In some shadowed leafy nook, Andrew's new man will undress him. Andrew's cock will grow as fixed as a compass needle. Never mind that he doesn't speak the guy's language; the man's touch feels too good, is insistent and practiced, lulling Andrew to climax inside a slippery mouth. And after, the man will pull Andrew down into exotic flora to prove himself upon Andrew's bent body. (Does it matter Andrew doesn't love him? That he doesn't even know the man's name?) And when he is finished, the tanned-skin man will slump atop Andrew, hold him tight, until Andrew dozes off.

And if the man carries away Andrew's wallet, wouldn't that be a fair price if he could carry off Andrew's memories as well? Let lovers and friends and families become lost to him, recalled not even in sleep. His dreams impenetrable, his history blank. What might be possible, freed of the past? Maybe he'd hitch a ride along the Ecuadorian coast, down to the port town of Guayaquil. There he could stow away on a vessel headed to the Galapagos, take refuge in the islands Darwin once sailed to, let his own personal evolution begin anew. He could sit among the basking lizards, wave goodbye to his departing ship, spend his days watching giant tortoises lumber across the sand. But through it all, wouldn't a nagging question remain: What is he really without the prop of a lover?

* * *

Of course, perpetually underemployed Andrew can't scrimp together a bus ticket, let alone boat or plane fare. He finds it hard enough to maintain his parking permit for the Purple Turtle. Remy, unable to endure any more of Andrew's stay-at-home moping, makes Andrew meet up with him at a gay after-hours club one night. Andrew considers the place equal parts pleasure dome and lout lounge. But Remy has just gotten paid and has promised to buy; he needs someone to complain to about the slow progress of his class-action suit against the police department. Yet once Andrew arrives, Remy changes his mind. He chain-smokes his way through a blow-by-blow description of his latest sugar daddy while they wait for their first round of drinks to arrive.

Andrew, a little stoned, only manages to half-listen as his eyes reflexively scan the men on the dance floor for the right combination of good looks and best intentions.

“Jerry’s so sweet he makes me chubby!” Remy trills. “Which isn’t surprising considering how he’s on the board of directors of Tastee Bake!”

“As in cupcakes?” Andrew asks as the bartender hands him his cocktail.

Remy nods. “Talk about rich!” He spins on his bar stool and a spray of braided cornrows whips the air to lash Andrew’s cheek. “He bought me these hair-extensions!” Remy says. His beads clack as he whirls around to face Andrew again. “I just snap my fingers and *voila*, money-honey shells out,” Remy says. He runs his fingers through his hair. “If it’s good enough for the girls on MTV, it’s good enough for me.”

Andrew laughs and rolls his eyes.

Remy snuffs his cigarette and immediately lights another. “Sure I gotta put up with squeezing the cream filling from his ole ding dong, but it’s worth it. I think even I’m in *love*.” Puff, puff. “I’m even fond of the hair on his back.... Take my advice. Date guys who’ve dated women. They spend more. If Jerry keeps this up, I won’t need my settlement to buy more wigs for Miss Iona’s drag act.”

Andrew surveys the room. Out on the dance floor bodies gyrate to a techno beat: waiters, bartenders, go-go boys—workers from other clubs now closed for the night. Waves of light make their shirtless torsos shine. A black drag queen breaks a heel coming up the stairs from the basement, causing a group of drunken gym bunnies to burst out laughing at the end of the bar. Beyond them, a couple hustlers down kamikaze shots, trying to get a few last kicks in before night gives way to dawn. Potential clients stalk the room’s perimeter, pot-bellied closet cases who don’t want to go home. On the dance floor, the lights dim, break into a pinhole wash, then burst into a seizure-inducing strobe. Desperation peppers the air like the scent of poppers, everyone trying too hard to get high and get laid.

Remy gulps his drink, waves his hand at the dancers. “Who *are* these haircuts that pass for men?” he asks. “There’s more mousse in here than in every *Bullwinkle* cartoon ever made.”

“This club’s a pit,” Andrew tells him.

“True,” Remy replies as he checks out the ass of a muscled hunk trying to wave down the bartender. “But I wouldn’t have it any other way.” Remy chuckles, pulls in close to Andrew. “Jerry’s out of town,” he confides. “And I’m horny for somebody my own age tonight.” He surveys the crowd and sighs. “Eight miles of dick out there, and I can’t get eight inches.”

A half hour later, they’re already into their third round when Remy decides to make a toast. “To love!” he cries, clinking glasses.

“Not to love,” Andrew tells him. He takes a sip and lets his eyes drift back to the dance floor. Could an observation of the place be anything but an indictment? “Love pisses me off,” he says.

Remy wags his cigarette and flares his eyes like best Bette Davis. “Don’t whine about love. Your problem is you take light matters seriously and serious matters lightly.”

“No. My problem is I only date assholes.”

“Honey,” tsks Remy, “don’t let a few saddle sores scare you. When you fall off the horse, get right back on.”

Andrew looks him straight in the eye. “I say, ‘When the horse dies, get off.’”

They laugh for a moment then look away from each other. Andrew takes a drink, lets the combination of alcohol and fruit juices tilt-a-whirl through his stomach. Someone jostles his arm, and the glass slips through his fingers to the floor. He kick a few ice cubes off his boot before the water can penetrate the leather.

“I’m sorry,” a voice says, warm and intimate against the background mix of disco music and spinning lights. “Let me buy you another.”

Looking up into the man’s eyes, Andrew wonders if he’s been rescued. The stranger’s face looks familiar, trips his *deja vu* alarm, though Andrew’s not sure why. Dark hair tumbles down the man’s forehead in soft curls, and his sculpted nose has a slight cleft in the tip to match the deeper one in his chin. His high cheekbones slope down toward a set of husky lips, and his eyes are a light cool gray--light glinting off ice. But what elevates his features from handsome to striking is the asymmetry of his eyebrows. A small cloud of white hair graces the right brow’s apex.

Andrew’s bones have gone jelly. Thankfully his tongue still works. “I was, um, having a fuzzy navel,” he tells the man, embarrassed by the girly name of the drink. Andrew leans back, but misses his barstool, starts to fall. Remy catches him, launches him forward again. The stranger seizes Andrew’s arm.

“Easy,” he jokes. “It’s too early to fall for me.”

Andrew feels his face go red. The stranger still has not let go. His fingertips brush the fine blond hair on Andrew’s arm. He calls the bartender over by name, places an order of fresh drinks for them both. Remy stage-whispers, “Go for it!” Andrew elbows his friend in the ribs as he studies his handsome benefactor, in his black T-shirt and tight jeans, his wildly patterned designer vest. Just who the hell is this handsome jostler of arms?

The question must be written across Andrew’s forehead, for the stranger suddenly announces his name. “Steven Carver,” he says. His fingers skim down Andrew’s arm to slide into a handshake. His grip feels stronger than Andrew’s. Andrew likes that.

“Andrew McKenna,” he tells him.

“And I am Remington Montgomery the Third,” Andrew’s housemate says, leering over Andrew’s right shoulder.

“How do you do.” Steven offers his hand with perfunctory politeness.

“Oh, I do everyone I can and the good ones twice,” snorts Remy, making a gooey show of pumping the newcomer’s arm.

Steven withdraws his hand, leans back against the bar, gives Remy a look as if he'd like to wipe his palm on his trousers.

Remy catches the chill. "I'm not so sure about this one after all," he whispers.

Andrew elbows his friend until Remy gives up and turns away.

The drinks arrive, and Steven clinks his screwdriver against Andrew's fuzzy navel with a smile. Damn, thinks Andrew. That black hair. Those gray eyes. His outfit like something out of an *International Male* catalog.

"Have we met before?" Andrew asks, hating the question's clumsy pick-up sound, but Steven simply beams. He looks away then back again, a gesture that leaves Andrew feeling every bit as disarmed as the *Venus de Milo*.

"You don't remember," Steven smiles. "Last fall. The demonstration outside the Bellevue. I was taking pictures. You were duking it out with the police."

Andrew remembers. The hit to his head, the stranger with eyes that reminded him of Jake's, the way he had pulled Andrew out of harm's way. "That's it! I should be buying *you* a drink. Thanks. I really mean it. I wish I could have thanked you sooner."

Steven lifts his shoulders, a don't-mention-it shrug. "I thought maybe I'd see you at the hearing for the lawsuit. They used a couple of my shots as evidence."

Andrew shakes his head. "I'm not part of that mess. Though Remy is, excessive force and all. He was one of the ones who got arrested. Me, I just want to forget the whole thing." Andrew bites his lip. "Not you, I mean--"

Steven grips Andrew's shoulder and gives it a squeeze. "You're welcome."

By the time Steven treats him to another round, Andrew learns that besides rescuing people at protest rallies, Steven Carver has been out of grad school only a year, yet already he's sold pictures to *Newsweek* and Mexican *Vogue* and is getting steady free-lance assignments from *Philadelphia Magazine* and the local dailies. Andrew's impressed. To supplement his income, Steven teaches evening and weekend photography courses at Temple's Center City campus on Walnut Street and at Fleisher Art Memorial in South Philadelphia. For the most part, he says, he sets his own hours, make his own rules. If work slows down, he can always fall back on ad work for his father, who owns a chain of appliance stores in New Jersey. But that hasn't happened so far.

Steven moves in so close Andrew can smell his cologne. "Tell me about you," he says.

Andrew segues from a rather succinct account of his escape from smalltown hell into a hopefully amusing but not too bitter series of character assassinations of all his previous boyfriends. But he's drunk and he fears his words fail him. He rattles the ice in his glass to dilute the alcohol and lurches through an impromptu meaning-of-life seminar, getting a little sad and philosophical along the way. Miraculously, Steven doesn't seem to mind, not even when Andrew tries to offset his rambling with a feeble attempt at

humor. "I thought true love meant loving someone's faults as well as his virtues," Andrew says. "*Fine*. I'm perfectly willing to accept character flaws, but why do I keep ending up with so many flawed characters?"

Steven chuckles. "You're cute," he says. He reaches out and runs his finger along Andrew's chin line. "Pretty handsome, actually."

Andrew blushes at the compliment but pretends not to hear. "The problem *is*," he tells Steven, his voice drunk with italics, "I don't know what's *real* anymore."

Steven arches his silvery brow in interest, studies Andrew the way the hustlers at the end of the bar size up tricks. Andrew gets the sense Steven is taking stock of him, searching for fissures and cracks. To take advantage or to climb inside? Andrew can tell Steven possesses a deliberate edge, but senses that Steven's patience with him is a sign he wants Andrew to genuinely like him. As they talk on, the corner of Steven's mouth curves into a smile as if he can reasonably count on this.

"I'm going to run off and join a monastery," Andrew jokingly tells him. "Maybe then I'll stop waking up alone, trying to figure out which rocks-in-the-head boyfriend left the impression on the pillow next to mine."

Steven tousles Andrew's hair. "You think too much."

Lost in Steven's wolfen eyes, Andrew has forgotten all about Remy. Until now, when a fart rips out loud enough to be heard over the din of music, and a noxious, unmistakable smell hits Andrew's nose.

"Good grief," Andrew exclaims, turning to his housemate. "You break a colostomy bag or *what*?"

"*Excuse me*," Remy says. He waves his cigarette in the air to burn off the methane. "This girl's had too many *enchiladas*!" Shamelessly he flashes his pearly whites at Andrew and his new friend. "Give me a bugle and I'll play 'The Star Spangled Banner.'" He shoots Andrew a scolding look for ignoring him, then rises from his barstool amidst the clack of beaded cornrows to make his way toward the bathroom.

"Your friend's a piece of work," Steven says, pivoting around Andrew to steal Remy's seat. Andrew sits down himself. Steven places his foot upon the metal base of Andrew's stool, his jean-clad thigh insinuating itself between Andrew's legs. "Not a very pleasant fellow."

"Just terrible," Andrew tells him, playing along. But then he realizes that's not such a nice thing to do. "Actually, Remy can be pretty nice. When he tries."

Steven sticks an index finger into Andrew's watery drink, flicks a few wet drops at Andrew's shirt, then his own. "Come on," he grins, and Andrew can see the silly pick-up line coming from a mile away. "Let's go get out of these wet clothes."

Afterward, Andrew lies awake in Steven's apartment a long time, listening to Steven's breath thicken with sleep. Andrew's mind reels, his body feels slick and warm, content in Steven's embrace in a way he hasn't felt in ages, perhaps ever. Andrew tries to match his breathing to Steven's, to let this new man's warmth soak inside him. He closes his eyes to let sleep come and carry him off. But all too soon Steven's embrace goes slack, and in the shifting of some dream he rolls away.

Chapter 26: Potatoes and Postcards

Sundays at More Than Just Ice Cream were extremely busy due to the brunch crowd. All morning long I worked alongside Tracie to rush out food. Brunch soon blurred into suppertime; suppertime melted into evening dawdles over café lattes and desserts. A hanging chalkboard listed forty-four varieties of ice cream people could choose from, and it was my job to cross out whatever flavors ran out whenever there was a slow moment. This was no easy task since the day was hot and orders came in as fast as we could scoop them. A lot sold through our takeout counter, which customers accessed through outside door altogether different from the main café's. A couple of times Tracie had me man that station when the guy working it had to take a pee break. By the time Tracie finally locked the front door, I was spent. But I felt a sense of victory when she handed me my share of our tips and complimented me on what a good job I'd done. By the time I headed home, I had been at the café for over twelve hours.

But because Mondays were slow, I didn't have to go in the next day. I got up and put on a sleeveless T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants that Andrew had cut into shorts. I found my glasses and thought about making breakfast, but the stove was electric and wouldn't work, and I had no food anyway. I tied my hair back and went downstairs to the deli, where I bought an egg sandwich and a small carton of milk. The owner of AppleJack's—Mr. Jack, himself—had noticed my comings and goings, and made a point to introduce himself and ask who I was. I told him. He knew that Steven had moved out, but he wondered why he hadn't seen my brother in so long, either. I suppose the sight of Andrew's piled mail had made him suspicious. I lied and said Andrew was out of town on family business and that he had asked me to housesit. Mr. Jack gave me a free coffee and told me not to be a stranger.

I carried my food up to the roof to watch the morning sun crawl across the city. I watered the plants and considered how to best spend my day. Back in the apartment, the curtains pushed wide, there was light enough to further organize the old journals, drawings and paperbacks I had hauled over from Andrew's old room on Rodman Street, so once I was finished eating that's what I did. I cleared a shelf in his living room and arranged the paperbacks there, titles I figured he had been assigned to read in school: *The Iliad and the Odyssey*, *Dante's Inferno*, *Arabian Nights*. Altogether they filled a shelf. Besides the classics, there were contemporary novels about family dramas or love affairs between men. Some, with shoddy binding and particularly lurid covers, seemed to have dispensed altogether with any pretense of the heart in favor of pleasing an organ decidedly lower. I wasn't sure if these last books amounted to literature, but I kept them too, albeit one shelf lower. For I was already feeling a little regret at having thrown away Andrew's dirty magazines in case what Aleta told me at Dirty Frank's was true—that Steven might have taken photos of my brother for a gay adult magazine. While I wanted to avoid seeing my brother like that, what if the secret to wherever he was lay inside the pages of a porno mag I'd tossed away? What if by talking about Andrew

thinking he could be a “model” Remy had really meant some sort of adult movie star? I was being silly, I finally decided. I at least knew my brother better than that.

I moved on to arranging his notebooks so I could more methodically sift through them later. His notebooks ranged from pocket-sized pads to spiral-bound composition books to nicely lined journals with page-markers made of ribbon.. I wondered if I had put off looking through them for so long because I was afraid of what I might find. A glance through a few showed me they contained as many sketches as they did journal entries, and they were stuffed here and there with colorful scraps of other paper—notes to himself, old ticket stubs, things like that. I put them into what I hoped was chronological order, judging by how beat up the covers were, and selected a couple of older ones that I laid by the door, telling myself I would look through those before evening came.

Next I decided to fix Andrew’s old tandem Schwinn. I found a hand pump and tested the flat. The inner tube was busted. I remembered passing a bike shop while I’d been out with Duke the other day, so I set out for it. The shop lay among the tightly packed trinities of the Amble-Through. A rack out front had all sorts of bikes chained to it, and a man I took for the store’s owner was down on his knees before one of them fiddling with its chain. Behind him in the shop window sat an antique high-wheeler bicycle from the turn of the last century. I had only ever seen clowns on TV riding those oversized things, but there next to the bike was a framed photo of the shop owner actually pedaling it in period garb. Like a lot of Philadelphians, the man was gruff at first, but once I had explained to him the type of bike I had, the size of its wheels and what I needed, he was able to fix me up with repair kit, which was a cheaper than having it done there. I was still worried about money.

Back in the apartment, the lamp by the door had come back on. Now that my power had been hooked back up, I turned the fridge on the highest setting so it would be cold enough for groceries come nightfall. The temperature in the apartment climbed as I set about repairing the bike. I had never been gifted mechanically, so it took me forty-five minutes to find the right tools and get the damn tire off, and another forty-five to replace the inner tube and wheel and then secure them on again. I was grateful the pumped air in the new tube held. One of the keys on the ring I’d found the other day fit the Kryptonite lock clamped around a length of chain coiled beneath the Schwinn’s back seat, so I counted that as another problem solved.

I packed a sandwich from the deli for lunch and put the pair of Andrew’s notebooks I’d selected inside a plastic bag that I tied to the tandem’s second seat. My map told me that a big park lay up by a river whose name I knew I’d need help pronouncing correctly—the Schuylkill. The Philadelphia Museum of Art was there, too, so I figured I could stop in and visit the old office where Andrew worked to see if anyone there knew where he might now be, though I of course had no idea how I would couch the subject. That could wait until I got there, I figured.

Awkwardly I managed to get the overly long bike down the flight of stairs to the street. When I climbed on the front seat—the back one, with its fixed handlebars, wasn't an option for a single rider--I immediately felt funny. Not only was the bike hard to pedal, the fact that it was made for two added extra drag. Nevertheless, I managed to grow accustomed to the feeling as I took a few test drives up and down the block.

I left the Amble-Through and made my way up busy Broad Street to City Hall, a building so seemingly important it bullied Broad Street into looping around it instead of plowing straight through. Rising from its center was the tall tower I had seen upon first stepping down from Charlie's truck cab, and I noticed that the hands on the clock facing south were still off. The building was full of fancy columns and tiers, like the base of an expensive wedding cake--but it was a dingy wedding cake that I didn't want a piece of. Ugly scaffolding obscured much of the structure--an effort, it appeared, to clean away years of gray stains and corrosive grime.

A few people shot an amused look at the sight of me and my invisible backseat partner out riding together on our bicycle built for two. Let them laugh, I said to myself as I sped past. Further on, past a small plaza, I came upon the handsome expanse of the Benjamin Franklin Parkway, which led to the city's art museum up ahead. The parkway was lined with flags from foreign nations. Near my end, an immense fountain transformed a traffic circle into a work of art, and to either side stood stately buildings that helped the boulevard stake its claim as Philadelphia's answer to the Champs Elysées. Though it was the middle of the workday, well in between what I figured to be a big city's morning and evening rush, traffic was unlike anything I'd ever seen back in Seneca, and it made me nervous to have so many cars whizzing by me.

The Philadelphia Museum of Art resembled an ancient Greek temple. A handful of tourists stood snapping pictures halfway up the wide steps that led up to it, but otherwise the place didn't look too busy. I recognized the steps from the movie *Rocky*, but there was no way I was going to run up them the way Sylvester Stallone had. Nor did I feel like lugging the Schwinn up them. A paved sidewalk trailed around the museum's landscaped grounds, so I followed it to a road that led up in back. The lot there was strangely empty. I locked the Schwinn and went to the door. A portly man in a Hawaiian shirt was shaking his at his skinny wife, telling her the place was closed on Mondays.

Hell, I thought. I walked back to the bike in a cloud of irritation. (I didn't realize at the time that this meant the place was simply closed to visitors and that I might have found my way to Andrew's old office had I thought to try the service entrance around the side.) With a sigh, I unlocked the Schwinn and sailed back down to the bottom of the hill. Andrew had once told me how beautiful the bike trail behind the museum was, so I decided to find out for myself if that was true. A brief pause with my map told me that the trail looped up one side of the river and down the other, crossing at the Falls Bridge. I set off for it.

To my left, the Schuylkill twinkled in the sun; to my right, Kelly Drive zigged and zagged, whooshing with traffic as it mirrored the bend of the river. In between lay a strip of green where bikers,

joggers and rollerbladers whipped around pedestrians on a shared asphalt path. I followed the flow past Boathouse Row where various college crew teams had erected wood and stone houses with gingerbread trim. Out on the water, they practiced in their long thin boats, and I let my eyes take in the symmetrical sweep of oars hitting water at the call of the coxswain.

Further up, the path drew back from the bank to make room for picnic tables, but the only ones taking advantage of the area were a flock of Canadian geese. Periodically, bridges for cars and trains spanned the river's surface, and one by one, I passed beneath them. A cemetery full of vaults with marble columns rose up theatrically on a hill to my right like a set out of a Dracula movie. The marble vaults were too expensive to ever see back home--and certainly not at the bargain-basement cemetery where last Christmas Andrew and I had gotten into such a row with Momma that my brother swore he'd never speak to her again. But the day was too pretty to dwell on that.

A woman in a tight Lycra outfit overtook me on a serious racing bike. Watching her disappear into the distance made me tired. White chalk marks on the path marked off the miles, and since leaving the museum I had biked more than four. I finally came in sight of a blue steel bridge set at path level: the Falls Bridge. I stopped near where a couple of fishermen stood casting lines in the river. On a cement ledge by the water, I laid my bike on the ground and ate my lunch. As I did, I read through the two notebooks of Andrew's I had brought.

* * *

The notebooks were old ones my brother must have started in middle school or perhaps even earlier. His handwriting was different back then, his cursive letters exhibiting fat whorls and crisp points, which told me he had not yet forgotten all our elementary teachers had taught us about producing penmanship in what they referred to as a "fair hand." Dates were inconsistently kept above Andrew's entries, and when they were they included the day and month but not the year. Nevertheless, I gleaned that a 5th or 6th grade teacher had made him start keeping the first notebook as part of a class project when the students read Anne Frank's *The Diary of a Young Girl*. Andrew had named his, fittingly enough, *Diary of a Young Me*.

Andrew's first entries were bored and forced ("I don't know *why* we have to write in this dumb thing *every day*..."), but these soon gave way to increasingly ambitious stabs at creativity: character sketches of fellow students, little poems with embarrassing rhymes, entries that contained as many pictures as they did words.

Several entries detailed career paths my brother once considered. These included magician, artist, and "archeologist/adventurer" (*Raiders of the Lost Ark* came out in theaters the summer Andrew turned twelve, and for months after I heard him talking to himself as if were Indiana Jones each time he slunk off to the woods). Next to these choices were illustrated lists of the wardrobes and tools he'd have to acquire. For instance: "top hat, tuxedo, white gloves, scarves, rabbit, balloons, throwing knives, assistant (more than one???)".

The lists went on for pages, and included such lengthy asides as to whether or not the purchase of a beret was essential to one's fine art career:

Berets

A beret (not a *barrette!* barrettes are for girls!) might be useful in keeping the sun out of an artist's eyes when painting outdoors. Except a beret doesn't have a brim. But a beret is rather floppy—does the floppiness somehow block out the sun? (Consider conducting an experiment at Beau Brummel's downtown, where, as I've told Momma, they have berets for \$12.99 and a big glass window that lets in lots of light.) Also, glare is bad for art. A solution must be found. Even if berets are no good at blocking glare, berets are made of wool, and wool is warm, so if a painter—a real painter, not a house painter—wishes to paint outside in winter, a beret might still be useful. Hats, as any fool knows, help stop people from catching colds. But Momma says berets are ridiculous and will not keep my ears warm. \$12.99 is a lot of money. I am supposed to shut up about it. The only way I am going to get a beret, she says, is if I join the ~~foreign~~ foreign legion. But didn't the reporter on Sixty Minutes the other night mention something about ~~legionair~~ legionnaire's disease? (I'm quite sure he wasn't talking about the Legion of Super-Heroes!) I guess berets don't help stop people from catching *that*. But I'm sure they don't *cause* it, either, and I think all those legionnaires the reporter talked about were cured or died a long time ago. Still, what is Momma up to? Whose side is she on? And anyway, I am *already* cold. Freezing! When I walk to the bus, when I ride to school, when Allison and I go in the garage because Momma is yelling and *won't shut up!* My coat has a hole in it, and I have told her this a ~~million~~ *billion* times. So I am cold, cold, cold, cold. All the time! And as for hats, I don't have *any* that I can stand to wear. They all itch or don't fit my head right. I am certain a beret would fit. I will conduct my experiment and we'll just see what Momma has to say after *that*. All of France cannot be wrong. I don't give a crap what Momma thinks. I want a beret!

P.S. A *red* one.

My poor brother. I couldn't help but laugh out loud. I don't think he ever did end up getting the damn thing.

I opened the second notebook and read on. Soon I encountered Andrew's elaborate character assassinations of certain teachers he once suffered under at middle school. Each of these was illustrated by caricatures that made fun of the instructor's bad breath, loose bowels, or inadequate bathing. There were also glowing appraisals of teachers he did like, written as if Andrew were the principal of the school and handing out performance evaluations, and they included such radical recommendations as having Coach Wyatt model nude for a new life drawing class.

Andrew's drawings of old Universal Studios monsters showed an increasing mastery of skill. On another page I found an old cartoon he'd drawn of our mother turning into the monstrous Momma Hyde, and in it stood an embarrassingly chubby version of me, standing with a shade over my head as I tried to hide from her as a floor lamp.

In the back of the book, I found pages of sketches that had obviously been inspired by Andrew's humble tree fort next to Cheat River. But on the lined page my brother had thrown out all principles of architecture and rules of physics. The tree fort grew into an extraordinary structure that put to shame the efforts of the Swiss Family Robinson. At staggered heights, large rooms were spread out upon thick branches that occasionally grew right through the rooms' floors, windows or ceilings, everything connected by an elaborate network of staircases and slides. A central elevator in the trunk of the tree operated on a pulley system, and emergency Tarzan vines were on hand to swing away in case of attack. I became lost in Andrew's elaborate schematics of trapdoors and dropping nets. He'd been dreaming of safe refuges far longer than I'd imagined.

I was finished with lunch, so I shut the book and rose. My rear wasn't eager to climb back on the Schwinn's poorly padded seat, but the rest of me was ready to get back to the Amble-Through. Because the path steepened, I walked the bike up to the bridge and mounted it there. On the other side, the asphalt path resumed in steep descent along the west bank, so I enjoyed the feel of wind on my face and nearby pines in the air as I let gravity do the work. For a while, I kept pace with the cars on my right.

Somewhere between miles five and six something terrible happened. The trail took a sharp left in an area so overgrown with bushes I couldn't see ahead. As I took the turn, I came upon a flock of Canadian geese blocking the path. They honked and flapped and raced to get away. I swerved too sharply to avoid hitting one and went down. The impact knocked the wind out of me. For a long moment I lay on the grass next to the path with my legs tangled up in the Schwinn. Slowly I opened my eyes. My right knee hurt like hell.

"Hey, you okay?" a voice called. A second later I saw its source, a young black man. He gingerly pulled the Schwinn off my legs.

"Ow!"

"It's okay," the man said. He laid the bike off to the side and kneeled down beside me. "Anything broken?"

I gulped a mouthful of air. "I don't think so." I pulled myself up on my elbows. "But my knee hurts."

"Yeah, you banged it up good."

I glanced at my bloody knee then looked up again. The guy was a much nicer sight. He had on nylon shorts and a tank top that showed off his muscles. He wore rollerblades and must have been coming the other way.

“Got any tissues wit’ you?”

I sat up straighter and told him no. “No prob, we can still clean you up.” He pulled a fresh bottle of water from a black pouch tied around his waist and poured some of it over my wound, washing the blood away.

“What’s this?” A skinny blond guy, also on rollerblades, staggered across the grass from the path to join us. A tight green shirt hugged his skinny torso, and the pads on his arms, elbows and knees were so thick I wondered if he was heading off to play hockey. “What’s going on?” he wanted to know. He eyed my rescuer suspiciously and then looked at me. “You okay?” he asked.

“She’s fine,” the first man said.

“What’s the matter, can’t she speak?”

“I’m fine,” I told him. “Just an accident is all. I came around the turn and the geese--”

“Fucking geese!” the crazy blond man said. “They should shoot them all. Make some pillows.”

“Hey, bro’, you got any tissues?”

With a flash of his skinny arms, the tall blond man whipped off his backpack and plowed through it. His green shirt and skinny build made him look like a grasshopper.

“Will these do?” Mr. Grasshopper asked.

Before anyone could reply, he dropped a pile of fast food napkins into my handsome benefactor’s hands... along with a couple of ketchup packets. The handsome guy gave Mr. Grasshopper a funny look then proceeded to blot my wounded knee. He poured on more water and dabbed again, and I was grateful he stopped short of adding the ketchup.

“Here, use this!” Mr. Grasshopper said, and before anyone could stop him, he bent down with a spray bottle in his hand and doused my leg.

“Ow!”

“It only stings for a minute.”

“What is that stuff?” Handsome Guy asked.

“Bug spray. It has alcohol in it. It’ll disinfect—“

“It *stings*.”

“It only stings for a minute!”

“You got any band-aids in there? Let’s fix this girl right.”

Mr. Grasshopper dug deeper, spilling out a paperback novel, a Frisbee, a can of cheap beer--even a couple of raw baking potatoes—until finally he managed to produce a roll of electrical tape. Before I could object, he had, clamped more napkins to my knee and begun wrapping me up in the tape.

“That’s *too tight*,” I finally said.

Handsome Guy raised his voice, too. “Bro’ I was doing just fine without you.”

Mr. Grasshopper drew back at our double-barreled critique. “Hmmp,” he said as he ran out of tape. “Fine.” He packed up his things and stood. “Have a nice day,” he said sourly before skating off in the direction I had been heading.

Handsome Guy and I watched him go. We looked at each other and laughed.

“Who *was* he?” my rescuer asked. “The freaking hall monitor?”

A control queen, I almost said, but didn’t.

“I’m Jeremiah,” the young man said, settling back on the grass in a more relaxed position. He handed me the rest of the bottle of water and told me to drink it. I wasn’t sure if he was as refined as Billy Dee Williams, but I liked his strong broad face and pleasant way.

“Allison McKenna,” I told him.

“You’re a country girl, ain’t ya?”

I sipped the water. “My accent’s giving me away again.”

“I like it. It goes with your pretty hair.”

I realized then that my hair had come loose during my fall, and I brushed it forward with my fingers, hoping to disguise that my ears were surely glowing bright.

“Thanks,” I said, feeling suddenly self-conscious about my sweaty face and old clothes.

Jeremiah didn’t seem to care. “These yours?”

He picked up my glasses from the grass and handed them to me, but I didn’t put them back on just then.

“Thanks again,” I smiled.

“I like your bike,” Jeremiah said. “It’s a classic.”

I started to say it wasn’t mine but Andrew’s, then thought better of it. “Thanks, one more time,” I said with a chuckle. “I worked hard fixing it up. I hope it’s not broken.”

Despite being on rollerblades, Jeremiah hopped up pretty quickly and stood the Schwinn upright. “Naw,” he said. “I think it’s okay.” He rested the bike on its kickstand. “So, who’s the lucky guy who gets to ride on your bike wit’ you?” He offered me a hand up.

“Nobody. Just me.”

Jeremiah’s grip was firm and warm; he pulled me up from the ground as if it required no effort at all. I liked how tall and wide he was—but not too tall, not too wide.

“For real?” Jeremiah asked. “That’s a damn shame.”

I tested my weight on my knee. I was sore but otherwise okay. We talked for a few minutes more. I told him I was new to town; he told me he had moved here to start law school. The way he looked at me with his big brown eyes left me feeling tongue-tied and shy. Still, I didn’t want the conversation to end.

Jeremiah’s eyes skirted the ground where the two of us had been sitting. “Hey, check it out,” he said. He bent down and scooped up something to show to me. “That dude forgot one of his potatoes.”

We both cracked up. But once our laughter subsided, I couldn't think of anything else to say. I took my bike by the handlebars and reluctantly nudged the kickstand up. Jeremiah moved to trap my front tire between his thighs.

"Tell you what," he said, a sly grin sliding across his face. He pulled a marker from the pouch at his waist and wrote with it on the potato. "You ever decide you need some company riding that bike of yours, I'll be happy to occupy the back seat." He handed me the potato, his name and number now on it.

No guy had ever given me his phone number before. I didn't know what to say. All I could do was hide behind my glasses and stumble through a goodbye, then watch Jeremiah glide away, back up the path in the direction I'd just come.

Once more I hoisted myself back atop the Schwinn and pointed its nose in the direction of downtown. Before that day, it had been a long time since I'd been on a bike, let alone a ride this long. As soon as I started up again, my legs burned and my butt hurt, as if trying to match the soreness of my throbbing right knee. But I didn't care. I sailed on, feeling high from the flattery of Jeremiah's offer. Eventually I rounded another bridge and saw the black backpack and green shirt of Mr. Grasshopper come into view on the path ahead of me. I raced ahead, catching up to him, and let out a whooping *thank you* as I passed.

* * *

I passed the last bridge and the distant city skyscrapers of downtown came in view again and I breathed a sigh of relief. The low trees fell away as the path hugged the river more closely, bringing the boathouses once more in view, now on the far side, away from me. I tried to imagine them the way Andrew had described, their gabled rooftops trimmed in fairy lights, and knew it would be a good sight. Beyond them, the city's former waterworks stretched out low along the riverbank beneath the art museum's hill, the empty pump house and forlorn waterwheel looking romantic and European, I thought. Just ahead, water fell over a low dam, churning up a woodsy, slightly fishy smell that reminded me of West Virginia, a place that felt far away now.

All of this I needed to share with somebody, so I biked to The Last Drop without even stopping at the apartment to clean up, hoping I'd find Aleta there. A couple men worked to repair the coffee shop's door, carefully removing the pane of glass that branched out like a cobweb from a point of impact just beneath the stenciled letters that spelled out the establishment's name. I stepped past them. Even with the door open the cigarette smoke in the place was so thick I practically needed a pair of scissors to cut my way through it. I thought of the smell of Momma's bedroom. The place was long and narrow, and might have reminded me of a train car if the stamped tin ceiling hadn't been set so high. Customers who appeared to be mostly students sat puffing cigarettes and sipping coffee at a series of mismatched tables set before a bank of tall windows. I found Aleta in back, making a pot of fresh coffee and managing the counter. She leaned across to hug me.

I told her about my knee, my rescuer and the funny story about the potato, which I showed to her. “I think he was trying to pick me up.”

Aleta laughed. “Girl, of course he was trying to pick you up. You got the kind of junk in the trunk black guys like. Why don’t you be nice and give that brother a holler? Hell, he sounds so good I just might steal your potato and call him myself.”

We both cracked up. I put the potato back in the bag with Andrew’s notebooks. Maybe I would call Jeremiah once the phone company turned Andrew’s number back on.

I ordered a cup of coffee and sat at the counter on a barstool talking while Aleta fixed it. We didn’t have places like these yet in Seneca, and as I scanned the menu board on the wall, I was amazed at how many ways a cup of coffee could be reinvented to talk people into paying a whole lot more than fifty cents.

“What do I owe you?” I asked.

Aleta waved my money away. “First one’s on the house,” she whispered.

Remy stopped in then on his way back home from the bookstore. “I see you’ve made it to slacker ground zero,” he said as he joined me at the bar. He bought a cup of coffee and I repeated my story, which we laughed and joked about some more. He said the Florence Nightingale with the masking tape sounded like someone he knew. His eyes drifted over to the big buff men who were starting to install the brand new glass. “Oh, I almost forgot!” Remy said. “This came to me today at the bookstore for me, but I think I should really give it to you..” He reached into a pocket on his cargo shorts and pulled out an oversized postcard, which he gave to me. The front featured a reproduction of a watercolor map of the Outer Banks of North Carolina depicting strips of land surrounded by water and a series of historic lighthouses keeping watch over the shore. I flipped it over and saw that it was from Andrew.

Dear Remy—

Emergency! When I tore out of town, naturally I screwed things up. If you haven’t got the L’il Dump and bingo props out of my apt. yet, or even if you have, I need you to go back at once and get my footlocker out of the back closet and keep it for me. It has some letters and stuff I should really hold onto. Old family things, very important. Please do this! Don’t leave it for the landlord to throw out. Not sure when I will be back to get it, and haven’t settled down yet for you to mail it (maybe?) to me. In NC right now, the beaches at the Outer Banks, but don’t think I’ll be staying. Too touristy, not my scene. Saw the Wright Bros. museum at Kitty Hawk at least. Having trouble with the engine in the Purple Turtle, but hopefully by the time you get this I’ll have shoved off. FL maybe? I know, I know--just in time for hurricane season. Will try to let you know where I end up, once I figure it out myself. Don’t know yet. I’m sorry for all the trouble my Jack Kerouac moment may have caused. I’ll get my shit together sooner or later. In the meantime, give Duke a scratch between the ears for yours truly.

 + OUT!

--Andrew

As I read it, my heart began to beat faster in my chest.

“See, honey?” said Remy. “He’s not coming back. Not anytime soon at least.”

I stood to go, not sure if the falling feeling inside me stemmed from a sense of sudden defeat or from the expectations I had concerning whatever “family things” I might find lying in secret wait once I’d dug up the footlocker back at the apartment. I said my goodbyes to my new friends and set off at once to find out.

Chapter 27: A Strange and Distant Country

Andrew – Philadelphia, Fall 1992

No one is more surprised than Andrew when his hookup with Steven becomes part of a regular nightly routine. He is further shocked when, not long after fall classes start up at Temple, Steven asks him to move in with him. This is too fast, thinks Andrew. This is crazy. But it is also like something out of a movie Hollywood hasn't yet made, a movie where two young men fall in love just as fast and romantic as any straight couple. Andrew can't help but say yes.

The transition is eased somewhat by the fact that the close-knit community of friends that has seen Andrew through the last few years has started to unravel—straight Tom has moved off to the Bay Area to work for a company researching ways to better harness the new Internet. A couple more have decided to bet their luck on the Big Apple. Moreover, Steven is not fond of Andrew's place, where at any hour one of the others who remain might barge into his bedroom looking for styling gel, a rubber, a shoulder to cry on. Steven doesn't care for Andrew's scruffy friends, and so Andrew finds himself spending less time with them as his own life quickly becomes eclipsed by Steven's. Moving in seems a natural part of the progression.

There's no need to bring much, Steven says. His place above the deli on Spruce Street is already full of crisp Ikea furniture, an enormous television, dishes and silverware that actually match. Back in his leaky Rodman Street room, Andrew leaves behind boxes of old comics and textbooks, paperbacks with broken spines, the notebooks he has kept since middle school. He leaves behind a broken stereo, milk crates full of record albums and cassettes (Steven doesn't like the gloominess of The Cure, Dead Can Dance or the Cocteau Twins; he likes only bubblegum pop songs, Top 40 remixes he can dance to). Andrew leaves behind a closet full of old sneakers, frayed sweaters, the denim jacket he hasn't worn since saying *sayonara* to limp-dick Ethan. He leaves behind friends with whom he's gotten drunk and high, with whom he's snorted Special K (once), dropped acid (twice), and swallowed ecstasy (more times than he can count on both hands). Old friends he's laughed with, cried with, and once even kissed (Remy, drunkenly, one New Year's Eve, when they worked for a caterer and stole some Moet). He leaves behind friends with whom he's shared good times and bad. Steven reassures him that the two-bedroom apartment in the Amble-Through has plenty of space for the two of them to live, make artwork, entertain Steven's friends. Still, Andrew brings only his best clothes and art supplies, the treasures he can fit inside his old sticker-covered footlocker. Within a week of moving in, he culls his possessions even more, his Goth-black clothing hitting the streets in trash bags the day after Steven takes him shopping at the Banana Republic for a less alternative look. Andrew doesn't complain as his old life is whittled away. Change requires sacrifice.

Evenings, Andrew blasts pop tunes on Steven's expensive CD player to drown the sound of his boyfriend's massive fourteen thousand BTU air-conditioner, a gift from his father that Steven refers to as the peacekeeping machine (Steven has long abhorred humidity of Philadelphia summers, the way the mugginess, like this year, drags into September). After a sticky day at work—Steven teaching photography or shooting ads for area businesses; Andrew working part-time at the art museum thanks to the strings Steven has pulled--the two of them come home, flick a switch, snuggle naked under covers in their artificial Arctic world. Andrew's good fortune with Steven feels almost unimaginable. Some nights after they've made love, Steven crawls back in bed with coffee-table-size books of photography to show Andrew pictures by Man Ray or George Platt Lynes. Once in a while Andrew reads Steven a poem from a book by Whitman. Unlike other lovers, Steven is quick and eager to say *I love you*. Andrew makes sure to say it back. This must be how it's done, he thinks. How people create a life together.

So it's barely a surprise when the two of them are out antiquing in Bucks County one weekend and their abundance of love spills over onto a puppy they find there, a stray abandoned at a roadside gas station. Andrew picks the floppy pooch up. Steven smiles and takes their picture. There's no debate; in complete accord they agree to adopt the foundling--which, they decide, on the drive back to the city, is a surreal mix of retriever, terrier, dalmation and dachshund. Before the skyline comes in view, they have already dubbed their new addition "Duchamp."

Andrew is happy. At least for a while.

* * *

Days build into weeks; the weeks become a month. Andrew starts to realize that living with someone is not always easy, even when that someone is as perfect as Steven. It's an observation he keeps to himself. Who would there be to tell, after all--the dog? He sees Remy, Aleta and Tommy only once in a blue moon, either by chance when he's out walking Duchamp, or by careful arrangement on nights when Steven works late in the darkroom at Temple and Andrew can sneak out for coffee at The Last Drop. His old housemates try not to let their bruised feelings show, but Andrew can tell they feel betrayed. He keeps his mouth shut about any misgivings he has concerning the choice he's made. Steven is a "catch," someone who has opened a window onto a better world and beckoned Andrew to follow him there.

Though the two live fairly modestly at home, the world of their social scene is the world of older wealthy gay Philadelphia. A world of silver-haired men resting comfortably on family fortunes, of doctors and lawyers and Log Cabin Republicans, patrons of the arts who have taken to collecting Steven's fine art photographs. It is a world of expensive restaurants and parties at penthouses on Rittenhouse Square. Of nights out at the theatre, the orchestra, or—Andrew can scarcely believe it—the fucking opera! A world of men who pick up the check and wish they could just as easily pick up Steven or Andrew—if they dared. But they are held in check by Steven's assertive way with them. When Andrew moves through this new world, he is reminded how his attraction to Steven stems not just from his good looks, his unique silver-

browed handsomeness; rather, it arises from the self-possession Steven exudes despite his youth, the unconscious control he exercises over Andrew and everyone else, an effortless reassurance that seems to whisper in one's ear *don't worry, everything will work out perfectly*. When Steven enters a room, every set of eyes washes over him approvingly. Yet Steven simply shrugs off such appraisal; he neither peacocks nor preens, never bullies his way into the spotlight to prove how handsome or witty he is. He lets attention seek him out--and it does. When they're out, people invariably know Steven's name; they elbow up to buy him drinks, listen to his stories, ask how he's doing. And when Steven introduces Andrew to money friends or old classmates from Penn, Andrew imagines a portion of that esteem rubs off on him.

But as autumn nears, Andrew begins to wonder if he is worthy. He starts to doubt what Steven sees in him. Time and again he examines the photograph Steven took of him the morning after they met. Certainly the blond young man in the picture possesses Andrew's size and shape. The two knit their brows alike and sleep leaves both with the exact same cowlick. But Andrew can't quite believe the person in the photo is truly himself. He had been drunk the night he met Steven, drunk and stoned off the last of a roach Tommy had left him. Yet despite the obvious hangover of the young man in the picture, pure bliss radiates through his every pore. Is that how Andrew looks in Steven's eyes? That other Andrew embodies the easiness the real Andrew has always hoped for but never quite achieved. Steven has made a mistake. His camera has pulled a trick. Andrew isn't the person Steven thinks he is.

How soon before Steven wises up, realizes that Andrew is damaged goods and gets rid of him? Everything between them happened so fast. What swings one way can swing another.

Andrew needs a plan. For too long he's moved from one disappointment to the next, leaving his heart as black and morose as his old thrown-out clothes. Now, for both their sakes, he must try to become that other version of himself. For more than anything he wants to hold on to Steven's admiration, keep him happy, despite his increasing difficulty maintaining the ruse.

What is required is more sacrifice, he thinks. He stops scoring weed from his old pal Tommy. He swears off hard drugs. He drinks alcohol only when Steven does, and drinks only what Steven drinks. He joins the gym on 12th Street where Steven works out. The systems of his body become cleaner and healthier than they've been since high school. He expects getting clean to make him feel like a sleepwalker waking, but instead it only makes him more nervous, more keenly aware how their relationship lives on borrowed time.

He must discard even more of his old self. He stops returning his friends' phone calls altogether. He thinks only of Steven.

But it still isn't enough. He must give up more.

He wishes there was an acid bath he could step down into, a chemical like what Steven uses to develop his photos. Andrew would let it strip him down to flesh and bone, would let it purify him and make him worthy.

He wants to scour away his imagination and memory. Wants old boyfriends to grow faint to him now, as flimsy and insubstantial as the makeshift pornography he used to hide in his old tree fort, pictures of underwear models from Sears and Montgomery Ward, Andrew's first catalog of boyfriends, real or imagined. He must get rid of all of it. Make room for what's real, even if it isn't.

Then their air-conditioner breaks down while the late-September air is still too uncomfortably warm for Steven's liking. Duchamp—now Duke—resists Andrew and Steven's best efforts to housebreak him. Steven begins to prove--like Jake and all the rest—to be less affectionate in public than Andrew had hoped, even in gay bars where rude looks and physical threats are not a consequence. Andrew tells himself it does not matter; it is simply enough to be standing beside Steven, basking in his halo. To have drinks pressed in his hand, to be spoken to by people who wouldn't otherwise look twice at him—all because he is Steven Carver's new boyfriend.

More than once, in the bars, Andrew catches a glimmer of *how-long-will-this-one-last* in the arched eyebrows of Steven's circle. But Andrew doesn't let it intimidate him. Anytime he touches Steven, even casually--handing him a glass, say--a fresh surge of longing courses through Andrew's veins. Lights seem to dim. Perspective deepens. And Andrew feels like he is stepping out into an endless fall.

* * *

At home Steven is as forthcoming as ever. "Scratch my back," Andrew entreats one early autumn morning, and Steven obliges, raking his fingernails over Andrew's skin while Duke yips outside the bedroom door.

"Harder," Andrew says, drowsily into his pillow.

Steven laughs. "You like it rough." His lips brush across the freckles on Andrew's shoulder, left over from a deep Labor Day tan—a trip to the Rehoboth shore house of one of Steven's rich friends. "Chocolate jimmies," Steven says, a smile in his voice. He seals his new metaphor with a kiss.

Try as he might, Andrew can't help thinking of the guys in his past. Whatever their faults, he has learned things from them. They have taught him truths about desire, shame and consequence. Practicalities concerning condoms and risks. They have taught him how to kiss, how to blow, how to bite lip and let a man inside. How to fuck, and how to fuck *fucked-up*. Even small-dicked Ethan, in his own clumsy way, managed to teach Andrew a little more about the pleasures two bodies might produce. Not even perfect Steven can erase all that.

Andrew breathes deep as Steven's fingers dig further down, coaxing slugging blood to circulate once more. Perhaps it is enough that Steven finds pleasure meting out such simple needs. Just because he doesn't ache to know every secret agony of Andrew's past doesn't mean he's in danger of falling out of love--does it? Perhaps love is as simple as this, Steven scratching Andrew's bare back, his nails pushing Andrew to the edge of agony, then slackening to ease him back again.

This morning Steven starts in on a school-kid's game, writing with his index finger letters or words he makes Andrew guess. Between Andrew's shoulder blades, Steven begins spelling his name, and Andrew

guesses correctly before he's even half done. Steven finishes anyway, and Andrew forgets last night's worries as he pictures Steven's collusion of signature and skin. He wants it to be a contact, binding him irrevocably. Steven is claiming him, making Andrew his. Andrew wants to freeze this moment, preserve it like a snapshot, as if by capturing it he might somehow will a happy ending to their lives.

Steven pulls Andrew closer to him. His breath warms the base of Andrew's neck, brushes over the invisible word spelled out just below.

"That tickles," laughs Andrew.

"God, I love spooning with you." Steven rolls Andrew over, a mischievous look in his eyes. "But now I think it's time we *fork*."

Andrew laughs, but pushes Steven away. "Tempting," he says, "but I don't have the time." Duke is yipping wildly at the sound of their voices, and it is Andrew's job to walk him each morning before heading off to his job at the art museum. Already he'll have to forego ironing the new dress shirt Steven had him buy. And he'll have to really rush to squeeze in a shower.

Steven pouts, disappointed. "I should never have sent you off to the salt mines."

Andrew rises to start his day. The membership office *is* like a mine in a way, sequestered in the basement of the old museum, carved out a hill upon which the city's reservoir once stood. His office is surrounded by rocks and dirt and other cramped rooms, not a single window to let in light. "But you *did* send me off to the mines," Andrew says, "and so I want to do things right." He bends to kiss Steven's forehead before shuffling to go.

* * *

In his hurry to get to work, Andrew all but forgets Steven's invisible calligraphy. Yet at certain moments throughout his day he is overwhelmed to feel the faint impression of Steven's name still etched upon his skin. He convinces himself these moments signify Steven is thinking about him, broadcasting a telepathic touch to tickle Andrew's shoulder blades and spine. The idea makes Andrew laugh, which causes his hawkish supervisor to pounce on him with her eyes until he quiets again. Andrew considers her one strange fucked-up old bird. She talks to her mother on the phone all day, and despite her stiff astringent demeanor, keeps a desk cluttered with *tchotchkes* and a stupid sign that reads WHOEVER DIES WITH THE MOST TOYS WINS. Maybe she is crazy, Andrew thinks. Maybe he is too, both of them slowly being poisoned by fumes leaching from the abandoned waterworks alongside the museum.

Or maybe he's not mad at all, and Steven's spirit really is alighting behind him, slipping an invisible hand under Andrew's shirt to turn his back once more into a magic slate. Again and again Steven's ghostly fingers catch him off-guard: At the copy machine, Andrew shivers and screws up his collating. Pouring coffee, he drops his Styrofoam cup. On the phone with a member, he forgets what's he's saying, causing the caller to grow so frustrated she asks to speak to his boss. His boss reprimands him. Andrew takes a breather in the men's room, wishing desperately he had a joint. And yet he tells himself he

no longer wishes for escape. He wants to remain ensconced in a love he knows he doesn't deserve. If wearing a necktie and enduring a mind-numbing job is the price he has to pay, so be it.

* * *

That evening Andrew meets Steven on the parkway after work. At Logan Circle an enormous bronze fountain depicts three Indian figures—man, woman and girl—each symbolizing one of Philadelphia's rivers. Above their heads, water shoots in thundering arcs. The sun is slowly sliding behind the Franklin Institute across the street, but the day's muggy heat refuses to go with it.

Andrew loves biking past this fountain every day on the old tandem Schwinn he found and fixed up. A surprise for Steven, something they could both ride together. But Steven doesn't like the bike; it isn't hi-tech and new. Andrew tries not to think about that now as he sits on a cement bench drinking a soda, while beside him Steven discusses where to go for dinner. As Steven talks, Andrew stares at the enormous statues, how they lean back in the sturdy repose of giants. All through Logan Circle, spent office workers shuffle by, in rolled sleeves and loosened ties, or melting beneath make-up and limp frizzy hair-dos.

Andrew watches a pair of beleaguered overweight women attempt to marshal a flock of sweaty young children. At least half a dozen little black kids are in tow. One of the mothers sags down on the edge of the fountain and sits there as she helps her children one by one take off their shirts and shorts. She tucks the clothes into plastic shopping bags draped over the handle of a stroller. The other woman squats and begins untying her kids' sneakers. Soon all the children but the baby have been stripped down to their underwear. The mothers lift the smaller kids into the fountain while the bigger ones scamper over the short wall on their own. The kids whoop and splash. The two women soak their feet as they watch and laugh.

A few pedestrians shake their heads as they pass. But a tattooed bicycle messenger stops to watch, then suddenly lays his bike on the ground before jumping in as well, still dressed in his tight spandex outfit. Beside Andrew, Steven talks on, oblivious. In the fountain, the smaller children dig for make-a-wish pennies; an older one keeps slipping off the back of a bronze tortoise shooting water from its mouth. The biggest kid wades toward the main statues and the fierce geyser jets at the center of the fountain; his hands curl into fists as if he plans to beat the spray into submission. Not far from Andrew and Steven stand a pair of twins, teenage girls with dark hair, dressed in cutoffs and loose T-shirts. They eye up the water, glance at each other, then jump in fully clothed. The boys they were flirting with slowly peel off their shirts, revealing thin still-awkward torsos. They trust their sneakers at the fountain's edge as they head out to brave the plumes of water themselves. Andrew laughs at how they have to tug up their oversized jeans to keep the wet fabric from falling off their hips.

"What's so funny?" Steven asks, but Andrew ignores him.

This shouldn't be happening. Already it is October; the summer's heat should be gone. Surely this must be the last possible day for such fun.

Andrew stands, kicks off his shoes. Steven starts to ask what he's doing. But Andrew has already launched himself. He jumps atop the fountain's edge and bounds down in. The splash of impact soaks him all the way up to his chest. His new silk tie is ruined, but he doesn't care. Beside him, one of the children has finally managed to perch atop the slippery turtle. He sizes up Andrew with a toothy grin, reaches into the turtle's gurgling mouth. His small brown fingers curl to direct the spray. With a squeal, he slings watery lassos at Andrew, dousing him good from shoulder to head. The water is cool and smells slightly sweaty. Andrew laughs as he bends to scoop up armfuls of water, splashing right back at his giggling friend.

When he is out of breath, he stands up again, turns.

Steven stands there, beyond the lip of the fountain, arms folded, the look on his face cool and inscrutable. Andrew offers him a bashful smile. He turns his hands palm out in a gesture halfway between a shrug and an appeal for supplication--as if to ask, Who stands before you now? Happy Andrew? Crazy Andrew? You decide. You tell me who I'm to be.

A long moment passes between them. Andrew feels like he wants to cry, and takes comfort that if he starts to, the water from the fountain will make it impossible to tell. Slowly he stretches his arm out to Steven—but to reel him in or say goodbye?

And then Steven surprises Andrew. He jumps in the fountain as well. He doesn't even take off his goddamn shoes.

Andrew rushes to him and grabs him around the waist, lifting Steven up even though Steven is bigger and stronger and weighs slightly more. Steven squirms free and stoops to splash Andrew, while not far away the little boy tries to aim the turtle's spray at them. Their laughter rises and ricochets.

Andrew sets off for the fountain's raised center. Steven follows. The shrieks of the children recede as the water's pounding increases. Through wet chaos Andrew and Steven wade, their good clothes plastering to their bodies as they struggle toward the three massive jets at the heart of it all. Together they pierce the veil of the heavy downward spray, bracing their hands on the knees of a reclining Indian giantess, who remains oblivious behind her patina beauty. Following a couple of the children, Andrew and Steven squirm across her cool belly, and onto the limbs of the next statue, which, propped against an army of fish, looks more like a robust Neptune than the Indian chief he's supposed to be. Andrew scrambles up first, falls back against the god's knotted stomach, a tiny young Ganymede languishing against a colossal Olympian. Andrew reaches out to Steven, pulls him up--only to be caught off guard by the sudden way Steven embraces him. His lips crush against Andrew's own--a fierce kiss, here in public, where anyone might see! Impressionable children could be corrupted.irate citizens might pummel them with rocks, shoes, aluminum cans. But nothing happens.

And yet everything happens. Andrew opens his eyes to Steven's smiling face, his ears fill with Steven's laughter. Steven lets go and rises up; he straddle the lap of Neptune and he unleashes one of Whitman's triumphant, barbaric yawps, out over the rooftops of all the world.

How can Andrew *not* be in love?

* * *

At home the two lovebirds rinse quickly in the shower, then head to the bedroom. With the sun down, the evening has grown cooler--windows open, the newly repaired air conditioner atypically silent. The morning's rush has left the room a mess, so the two makes a fresh bed. Across the bare mattress Andrew tosses a fitted sheet, which wrinkles into random, topographic folds. Together they pull it smooth and tuck the corners, then snap a top sheet that parachutes down. Before the trapped air fully escapes, Steven pushes Andrew back, pounces down, claims Andrew as his. Steven's movements are practiced, full of intent. By now he knows Andrew's body as thoroughly as his own.

Cars honk below and a nippy breeze billows the gauzy window curtain, lifting it like a veil until the hem flutters against Andrew's shoulder. He lets himself sink into the touch and taste of familiar skin, Steven's breath warm, the laddered muscles of his stomach arching above as he lifts Andrew's legs. They are so caught up in the moment that they don't even reach for condoms or lube. Andrew experiences each shard of Steven as their bodies cut beautifully one into the other. A sound rises from the back of Steven's throat, language gone now. Steven's eyes focus above Andrew's head, glaze over then shut, as if seeing something in the distance too beautiful to bear.

Don't stop, Andrew wants to say. If he can lose himself in this, forever and completely, then there will be no room for old memories to ever again be a part of him. But it does end. It has to.

After, Steven holds him. Without prompting, he rubs Andrew's back, his fingers absently tracing intimate paths on Andrew's skin. He wants to trust such comfort. Can he? With each stroke Andrew presses closer to a border, a stranger entering unfamiliar territory. Andrew refuses to ask anymore how long this stopover will last or when his visa will expire. He simply listens to the traffic and his lover's breath, Andrew's skin as smooth as parchment paper beneath Steven's gentle cartographic line. Andrew closes his eyes, drifts outside himself. He imagines that if he were to look down he'd see his body spread out below, covered in a growing network of lines—roads and highways and interstates; canals and rivers and ocean routes—all leading beyond the rise of his shoulder blades, the ridge of his spine, the moist basin of his lower back freckled by archipelagos. With each brush of Steven's fingertips Andrew allows himself to be carried one step closer toward forgetfulness, one step closer toward some strange and distant country.

Part Four: Allison

Chapter 28: Lucky Hillbilly

I found the footlocker in the studio where Andrew had said to look, and immediately I recognized it as the one he had kept in his tree fort as a boy. It looked smaller than I remembered, but it was heavy still, and it took both hands and all my strength to drag it from its shelf in the back closet and down onto the floor. Stickers still covered the box's chipped paint surface, newer ones of rock bands, marijuana leaves, and ACT UP slogans. And peaking out from beneath those, the faded stickers I remembered: Ones of *Charlie's Angels* that Daddy had brought home to us in packs of trading cards, ones of cartoons like *Super Friends* or *Scooby-Doo*. There were lots of spoofy ones from the Wacky Packs we'd snuck behind Momma's back to buy, which depicted nasty things people could use in the bathroom: Blisterine mouthwash, Cover Ghoul makeup, Old Spit cologne. Or foods that seemed only slightly worse than what Momma might actually set out on our table, cereals like Cap'n Crud or Weakies, the "Breakfast of Chumps"; dinner dishes like Minute Lice and Kentucky Fried Fingers. For snack time in between, there were awful treats like Hostage Cupcakes and Bustedfinger candy bars, even whiskey-flavored Plastered Peanuts that Andrew and I both agreed our father might actually enjoy.

Looking at them produced a sense of nostalgia in me that made me think of the box as a time capsule of sorts.

I was eager to dig through it, but a lock had been added since last I'd seen it. I hunted for the ring of keys I'd found my first day in the apartment. One of the keys fit and I opened the trunk. It was full of many things: favorite sketches, old IDs, a couple more journals. A bag of marbles was in there too, as well as some of Andrew's oldest comics, bagged up now in plastic sleeves. I found a handful of old photographs of members of our family, and a page torn from a middle school yearbook with a picture of his old friend Jimmy Gilmore on it. I found all the letters and notes I had sent him in the years since he'd left home. But what caught my interest and held it was a stack of old letters I did not write at all.

They were tied together in a neat stack with a length of brown twine. I pulled apart the bow slowly, as if I were someone in a movie on the verge of a great discovery or working carefully to dismantle a bomb. One by one I examined the old envelopes and saw that on each of them there was no postage, just the word "Free" written where a stamp should be. All of them were addressed to the same place—our hold house—but not to anyone who had lived there since I was alive. They were addressed to my Great-Aunt Adalene, or sometimes to her husband, Great-Uncle Si, the McKennas who lived there before I was born, back when my father was just a boy and came there following the death of his parents.

I took the letters out of their envelopes and glanced through them. They were all from my father when he'd been away in the war. Some of the letters were on thin, light blue paper that bore the logo of the Red Cross, others on fancier stuff—Army stationary that bore a faint outline of Vietnam that he must have bought for himself at a PX somewhere. But most were on plain old lined or unlined paper, like the common stuff in my brother's plainest notebooks.

The playfulness I had felt when looking at the stickers on my brother's box was gone now. I laid the opened letters atop each other in a stack. My hands shook as I began to read through them.

III Corps

March 15, 1967

Dear Uncle Si,

Please say hi to Aunt Adalene and everybody. I'm sorry my last letter upset her, but I know you will explain how these things work to her. Speaking of which, things have been worse. For three days we pressed toward the Cambodian border near Parrot's Beak looking for VC. Found some one night.

Basically, all hell broke loose. Even after a round of green tracers had been volleyed at the VC, I still couldn't see who we were aiming for or what we were hitting. We had our guns on full rock and roll, but my M16 kept jamming, which nearly made me shit my pants. As you well know, you sure as hell don't want to get caught in a firefight with a rifle that won't work. I changed clips and said a silent prayer, that if the good Lord let her work this time, I'd promise to keep my gun cleaner than my ass from here on out.

Anyway, when I got my clip in and looked up, there were all these VCs swarming out of the ground like wasps from a hive, not forty feet away. The Lord must have been listening because this time my M16 fired pure and sweet, and I finally nailed some of their MF-ing asses. Between us and the other half of our platoon, the VC got caught in a V-shape spread of fire. Still, the Army likes to dot its I's and cross its T's, and just to ensure that any VC wounded didn't miraculously crawl to Cambodia, our radio man called in an air strike. We pulled back and pretty soon incoming screamed down from the sky as B-52s blew craters in the countryside until any surviving gooks had nowhere else to go but hell.

Our guys came out okay. Only three guys from the whole platoon were WIA by this point. Choppers dusted them off with no trouble.

Later we went back to see what a good mess of things we made. The air strike had unearthed a huge command center. With its mess hall and barracks it looked like Cu Chi only underground. Shit, I thought, how many others of these have I walked over or slept on at night? Everywhere I looked there was charred, smoking bodies, and a stench that made me have to breathe through my mouth--like raw meat mixed with mud. I saw a few shredded uniforms I didn't recognize, and a buddy of mine named Sal told me they were probably Chinese. As we were taking inventory of the situation, this little bloody hand popped

up from behind some weird twists of metal. A frightened face followed. He looked so scared I doubted he could pee straight. I thought this bloody kid somehow survived a whole fucking air strike and was finally surrendering, but he wasn't. He lobbed a grenade at me and Sal, and we started to hit the deck. But too late. Sal took most all of it in the front, probably saving my life. Not on purpose, but he was a good guy just the same. I let loose with my M16 into that kid and for the first time saw up close what I was supposed to be killing. Then I turned to Sal. I wanted to save him bad. He's an old-timer from Brooklyn and has treated me real decent these last few months. But there was no saving him. For a minute I couldn't even make out his face to know where to begin. And once that sunk in, I knew it was hopeless.

What a way to earn a CIB badge. For a while now I've known guys who go ape shit each time they let loose at the VC, everybody smiling and patting each other on the back when they get a kill, like it was a 10-point buck they're talking about and not a human being. Now I understand a little better.

Still, when I see one of those big grins smeared across some guy's face, I wonder how much fear is behind it.

It's surprising how easy it can be to kill a man.

Take care of everybody. Pray for me.

D.

P.S. Pease clean up my language when you read this to Aunt Adalene.

* * *

III Corps

April 17, 1967

Dear Aunt Adalene & Uncle Si,

Well, there's nothing to do but come out and say it. A few days ago I got a letter from Noreen breaking up with me. We've been going back and forth about a lot of things over the last couple months, and she finally told me the stress of waiting and worrying was too much for her. I don't know what, if anything, will happen with the two of us when I get back home, but for now all our plans are off. Aunt Adalene, Noreen said she would give you back the engagement ring next time she saw you in Murphy's.

Not much new here. Our company has been guarding the local rice harvest from the VC lately. Hot as blazes all day, which means we stay in base camp until nightfall when the combat leader sends out a couple ambush patrols. Old-timers say the rains will come soon, which I hope will mean relief.

The only action I saw this past month was when we were ordered to cordon off a village harboring a VC platoon. (Why is it the people we're here to help lie down with the dogs like that? These mixed loyalties are too damn complicated.) Anyway, we were airlifted to about twelve miles west of the village,

working our way in through the green, killing two dinks along the way. We netted several more as prisoners, along with a cache of weapons, which hurts the VC a lot since they don't have the weapons supply we do. I guess that's why they play the booby-trap game, cause they know they're no match for us in an honorable firefight. That's why they lay down mines and wire grenades, in hopes of letting bad luck do their work for them.

Don't worry, they can't get this old jackrabbit.

Love,

D.

P.S. Glad to hear Uncle Roy's feeling better. Tell him I said hello.

** * **

III Corps

April 21, 1967

Dear Aunt Adalene,

Growing up I used to feel sorry for myself losing Ma and Dad and Lonnie in the car wreck. When I started school, I hated all the other kids with their nice lives and perfect homes. The older I got, the harder time I had holding on to my memories of my family. Sometimes I had such a hard time holding on to my memories of them--what they looked like in my mind and not just in the snapshots you gave me. I hated myself for forgetting them, and hated them too for leaving me. But I had you and Uncle Si, and soon enough Uncle Roy and Aunt Genevieve's kids to play with, too. With cousins close by, it was hard to get too lonely. I felt lucky again to be part of a family.

But now I see the awful conditions these Vietnamese live in. Grass and mud homes, having to crouch down to eat their bowls of rice and God know's what else. When flies land on their faces, they don't even bother to brush them off. Each time we roll by in an armored personnel carrier, women rush out to beg stuff off us. Sad. These are women trying to take care of their kids, not the women some of the soldiers go to at night. Even though they look and talk strange and have habits not at all like us, I can sense their desperation and see the need in their eyes.

The other day I went with my platoon leader to an orphanage in town nearby, where I divvied up some Clark bars and gave them to the kids, most of them younger than Lacey. You should of seen these kids, all smiling, wanting to touch us. One of them grabbed hold of my dog tags when I picked him up and wouldn't let go until I uncurled his fingers. We left some books and medical supplies with the nun who runs the school there. It about broke my heart seeing those kids, knowing how much we take for granted back home, all the things we have, like toothpaste and soap. To know it's soldiers like me or the VC who make these kids orphans is a hell of a thought to bear.

Some nights such thought keeps me up, no matter how tired I feel. When I do sleep, I dream that the VC that keep coming up from holes in the ground aren't people at all, but ghosts. That's why there's so many. Even the dead are against us.

Anyway. I hear Kevin and Lacey are staying with you again while Uncle Roy's back in the hospital. Tonight when you tuck Lacey in, give her an extra hug and kiss from her Big Cousin Dave.

Love,

D.

* * *

III Corps

May 19, 1967

Dear Aunt Adalene & Uncle Si,

Last week it rained for five days straight. Every night I would collapse from exhaustion, wrapped in my poncho like a second skin. I am personally acquainted with every leech and mosquito in this place!

But now the rain's cleared and we've left the river, trudging through the mountains with heavy 70-pound packs on our backs. It's hard getting around with so much stuff--a web belt with ammo and grenades, a first-aid pouch, a canteen that always seems more empty than full. My pack is weighed down by rations and more ammo, my gun kit and rain gear, an extra ammo bandolier that matches the one I wear across my chest. I've had blisters on my feet so long I've started to name them.

Heard more fire than I have personally experienced this past week. Which is fine with me. Even now there's a few 81-mm mortars singing in the distance, which means we won't set up camp here but keep going til almost dark once everyone's chowed some C-rations and taken a pee. At least I'm not our point man, who might as well have a bull's-eye painted on his forehead.

In two days we go in, thank God, and us new guys have promised to buy the first round for the old-timers. The way everybody talks, you'd think we were spending a week's R & R in Tokyo, not a few days in base camp. A round of drinks is not a bad price for these guys' keeping my butt alive. Morale is pretty high as the light at the end of the tunnel finally comes in view (for now).

All my love,

D.

* * *

III Corps

June 2, 1967

Dear Aunt Adalene,

I apologize for not writing for a while, but our orders got switched and we didn't make it in to base camp for some down time til now.

Instead we've been trudging through the monsoons to the point where I think my wet feet are ready to rot off. Things are kind of slow, just the officers sitting around flapping their gums and everybody getting on each other's nerves. Rainy season feels a lot like being trapped in an elevator with a crowd full of people you can't stand. Worse, they smell, speak their minds too much and don't give a damn what you think about it. A lot of guys have picked up some nasty habits, smoking stuff they shouldn't. Don't worry, the worst I do to pass the time is knock back a little Jim Beam when I can get it.

But yes, we made it in and I finally bought my round of drinks for the old-timers. You should see how much hooch these fellas can put away! Uncle Si and Great-Uncle Edgar were never like this. With hot showers and hot food, the tension washed away. There are a lot of new guys shipped in from the deep South who refer to themselves as the Dixie Patriots. They heard my accent and took me for one of them, but when I told them I hailed from West Virginia, they kidded me about the Civil War and secession. But what do eighteen year-olds know? Anyway, my new pal Rusty from Georgia is hollering at me to go down to the bar at the PX, so I got to go. I promise not to drink too much. It sure is a good day to be alive.

Love ya lots,

D.

** * **

III Corps

June 10, 1967

Dear Uncle Si,

For the last few days we've been killing and capturing a lot of VCs, a fairly smooth operation even though several of our boys got hit. Here's how it works: We sweep in and flush Charlie toward ambush squads, penning him in until mortar rounds knock the fight out of him. We let hell fly, then go in and count the bodies.

One of the track units got in trouble for riding through a local village with dead dinks strapped up to send a message to any native sympathizers. They had mutilated the bodies the way the VC is said to mess with our dead. Even in my squad this one nut case from Wisconsin cut the balls off his first kill and wears them on a string around his neck.

This whole war is getting to me. Sometimes when we firestorm a village the people are too afraid to run, like panicked deer, and they just stay inside and burn. I am ready to come home.

Give my love to Aunt A. & my cousins. I am sorry to hear about Uncle Roy passing away, and will write Lacey and Kevin and Aunt Genevieve when I can. Will they all stay with you, or move back in to Roy's place? That house must feel lonely without him.

D.

* * *

III Corps

June 16, 1967

Dear Aunt Adalene,

Please don't apologize that some of the "small" things you write to me about seem trivial. I don't find them so. Instead they keep my feet planted on the ground. Whether it's Kevin's basketball scores or Lacey's swell report card grades, these little details take me out of this hell and back to the mountains and you, and that has truly become a gift to me.

I am always eager to see your letters when the guys tear into the red mail sack each week and I appreciate each and every one. Sometimes I read them over and over again, in the late afternoon after we've gotten situated in a new position and have our foxholes dug, before night falls and the patrols go out, when, for obvious reasons, we can't turn on lights. When I read about the so-called "small" events of your life, I'm no longer an infantryman in some strange country shooting at people I don't know. I am a human being again--going fishing up the Cheat with Uncle Si, or driving you to Murphy's to pick out new drapes. It helps me to know that you are all well and safe.

Sometimes, when you're in the middle of something so big, it's only the small things that make any sense.

Love,

D.

* * *

III Corps

June 19, 1967

Dear Aunt Adalene,

You concern over my physical and moral well-being is heartening. Don't worry, I've not forgotten everything you've taught me over here.

But sometimes it is hard. We're back in country again. Last night while on perimeter duty a friend of yours got hit by sniper fire. Didn't die, but the line medic says the bullet lodged against his spine. I

think I'd rather go home in a body bag than as a cripple. But don't worry! I'm coming through this alive and in one piece!

Aunt Adalene, please talk Kevin out of signing up like I did. If his number's called that's one thing. An American must serve his country. But from the tone of your recent letter it sounds more like a case of teenage rebellion than patriotism. Tell him I've seen too many good men who will never go home to their families, and if that were to happen to him, it'd break all our hearts. Tell him that with Roy gone he has a mother and little sister to think of. Please, Aunt Adalene, whatever you do, shake some sense into him.

Love,

D.

* * *

III Corps

July 6, 1967

Dear Aunt Adalene,

Sorry to hear about Uncle Si's stroke. I know there's nothing to say at times like these except I'm praying for you as you've been praying for me. I hope Uncle Si's up and running again soon. While I was shocked to hear that Aunt Genevieve had put her house up for sale, I'm glad she's reconsidering the move to North Carolina to take that job now that you need her help with Si. Things will get easier. They have to, right?

Two days ago, our CO celebrated Independence Day by having us burn out a village and moving the refugees through the rain to an already overcrowded camp I've passed before, the shelters made of old tin and scraps of wood. They reminded me of the hobo camps Uncle Si used to tell me about from his days working as a railroad lineman. Anyway, I'll spare you the details of the move, but you can bet it was nothing like the boxes of dishes and clothes Aunt Genevieve and Kevin must be packing away lately. I felt bad making these folks abandon their pigs and chickens and homes to start all over. And it's rough knowing sometimes the young girls have no choice but to head for Saigon to find work the only way they can, just to help their families get back on their feet.

But you have enough on your mind right now. I know you'll take good care of Uncle Si til he's better. I sure am looking forward to coming home and playing the war hero once this mess is all through. In the meantime, tell Kevin his job is to stay put and keep you all safe until I return.

All my love to everyone,

D.

* * *

III Corps

July 21, 1967

Dear Aunt Adalene,

I'm glad to be alive and able to write you. Yesterday I had the worst scare of my life, when I nearly got blown to smithereens by a mine. The rain had let up and we were heading down toward the Plain of Reeds to meet up with another unit so we could boost our body count in a joint ambush operation. Traveling through a supposedly secure area, we passed through a gate and walked out through a soggy field that would cut our day's trek by almost half. I was hot-dogging out in front when I put my foot down on something that didn't feel like mud and heard a double click, like the cock of a gun. Oh hell, I thought, a God damn mine. But the mine didn't go off like it was supposed to. I froze, glanced down, but the ground was covered with tea-colored water. Still, I could feel the metal beneath my foot. I signaled the others to halt and called back to the lieutenant that the field was hot. He told me to stand stock-still, that I was likely on some kind of pressure release device that would blow the moment I moved. Boy, that field sure cleared fast, the whole squad tracing their steps in reverse. I watched them back up to the gate, all those eyes on me, heads shaking like I was already gone. My heart sank low in my chest. I can't really say that my life flashed before my eyes, but I can say that some of the things I always thought I'd do suddenly seemed far away.

I waited. The lieutenant conferred with a few other fellows. A moment later our only guy with any engineer training, Kip from Kansas, slogged out to see if he could defuse the sucker I was on, or fool it by easing a stone onto the edge of the panel while I slowly stepped clear. He got close, and we could both read the fear in each other's eyes. He was white as a sheet as he squatted on the ground and sunk his fingers into the mud to search for the panel. His fingers found something and he looked up, kind a puzzled. Then another look crossed his face, bringing the color back with it. He stood up quick and pushed me. I screamed at him that he was going to get us both killed. He just screamed back, step off, step off. Then he shoved me harder and I fell back in the mud. No explosion. Kip reached down and scooped up something from the mud, held it for me to see.

A beer can. A God damn stupid beer can. Some dumb-ass GI walking by on the road must of thrown it in the field after polishing off some of Milwaukee's finest, and here I am dumb enough to think it's a mine. You can imagine the kind of ribbing that rose up when Kip called back with that piece of information. I just lay there. Kip shot me a look of complete contempt before he turned and headed on across the field. Not a one of the squad offered me a hand up from the mud as they swarmed after him, just

paused as they passed to mouth off what a dumb redneck I was. Naturally, the Lieutenant wasn't any kinder, chewing me out once I pulled myself up and fell into step beside him.

That's when we heard it. A mine going off up ahead, and Kip screaming so loud they must've heard him all the way back in Saigon. The field was hot after all. The guy taking point next to Kip had got his legs torn off. It would've been me if I had kept heading across. As our medic tried to save what was left of the man, the whole squad backed onto the road again. The lieutenant called in a dust off. Kip looked at me again, all upset and confused and covered with someone else's blood. But he wasn't mad any more. The way he looked at me, I could tell he didn't think of me as foolish any longer. I was lucky. Lucky Hillbilly. Stepping on a beer can to save his life.

Though I was sorry for what happened to the kid out in the field, I felt almost crazy good, like all the bad luck of this sorry field assignment had finally washed away.

But don't worry, Aunt Adalene. I won't trust in such luck too awful much. I haven't forgotten I'm in crazy Vietnam, where crazy rivers run out to sea only to turn back again once the tide changes. I understand what flows one way can flow another.

But I'm alive, by God. And I plan to stay that way.

Love,

D.

* * *

III Corps

August 1, 1967

Dear Aunt Adalene,

By the time you get this letter, I'll only have about four months to go in country. Hallelujah! Then hopefully back to the states for some easy work driving fat-assed colonels somewhere. Even KP would be a treat right now. I look forward to having a picnic with you and Aunt Genevieve and Lacey some day soon, maybe driving out and putting flowers on Uncle Roy's grave. Kevin, I guess will be off to boot camp by then. You'll have to pray for him like you've prayed for me. Maybe, if Uncle Si is better by then, he can go with us out on the picnic as well.

And yes, I promise you that once I leave this hell behind, I'll put the bottle away and keep the Sabbath holy once more. I look forward to being a civilized man again.

Love,

Lucky Hillbilly

* * *

The letters made me feel pulled in a thousand directions at once. It felt strange and sad to hear Daddy's voice again, for I thought the last echo of his speech had slipped away from me a long time ago. I was glad to hear it come floating back up to me, clearer and clearer with each page I turned, and though the sound made me want to cry, I was grateful that its memory had finally been rekindled.

Although I was related to them, I didn't know most of the people Daddy mentioned, and this produced another feeling in me, as if the life and history I owned might soon be claimed by someone else. We had grown up with no stories from my father's side of the family. Vaguely I recalled his younger cousin Kevin visiting once, in town from his home down near Myrtle Beach, South Carolina. But I hadn't even started school back then, and didn't want to listen to the two of them sitting on the porch drinking beers, talking about bad times during the war, or good old days when their shared aunt and uncle were still alive. Kevin had a metal claw where his left arm should be, and it scared me like something out of one of Andrew's movies.

Andrew. Daddy's handwriting looked so much like my brother's that a part of me wondered if such things could be hereditary. But mostly I felt furious at Andrew for never having shared these with me before. He had obviously had them for years. Why hadn't he shown me? Had he been afraid I might have slipped up and told Momma, who would no doubt have confiscated the letters and burned them to ash? Had he merely been selfish, wanting to keep them away from me the way he had so much else?

Reading through the letters had lit another fire, one inside me. It made my blood hot, and I needed a way to put it out. I went to the bookshelf in the living room and seized the rest of his notebooks, journals, sketchpads—everything—and carried them to the futon where I stacked them beside my bed. I scooted a milk crate close, for the day's light was already thinning, and I needed a low stand for the lamp I set there. I clicked it on with a sense of satisfaction, threw myself on the futon mattress and began to tear through Andrew's notebooks, feeling above all, a sudden insatiable thirst to have all his secrets pour through me like a lifetime turned to water.

Deep into the night I read. I forgot about eating dinner, forgot about my sore knee and the need to change its poorly made dressing, forgot about resetting the flashing numbers on Andrew's clock so I wouldn't be too tired from my bike ride to make it work on time come morning. I was too busy searching for Andrew. Not for wherever he might now be in the world, but for where and who he had been all the years I'd known him.

His books were more than simple entries about his days and routine concerns. In the ones he'd started back home, I found early entries describing his hopes and dreams, his feeling out of place at school, his humiliation and embarrassment the couple times Momma was asked to substitute for one of his classes. I found long passages about the feelings that rose up inside him but which he refused to outright name, and I could tell they had to do with the taboo of being gay and the sting of unrequited love.

As his adolescent imagination gave way to more adult concerns, I found a growing boldness in Andrew's description of a new and handsome friend, a friend with whom he planned to escape his old life and begin a new one, and I knew this had to do with Andrew's coming to Philadelphia. I read through a fair amount of bad love poetry, along with the gloomy low of being spurned and the soaring promise of a chance encounter. Turning pages, I kept my eye out for the unnamed *who*, and found myself wading past tucked away copies of college grade reports, old pay stubs, a few unpaid parking tickets. Glued into a drawing pad, I found the old newspaper clipping I'd sent Andrew about Jake Munroe, and saw that next to it lay my brother's failed attempts at sketching the face of the doomed boy, sketches he had obviously grown frustrated with, for they had been scratched and scribbled over so heavily as to have gouged ghostlike impressions onto the next page over. I found sketches and photographic references torn from magazines for all the Franks he'd painted outside the bar in the Amble-Through.

Andrew had given up on writing in composition books by now, and his notebooks began to consist almost exclusively of sketchbooks filled with heavier paper. No longer tethered to a guiding blue line, his cursive grew looser, becoming at times so severely unleashed that I began to suspect he was writing while drunk or stoned. These were next to page after page of sketches for paintings I wasn't sure he had ever gotten around to starting, let alone finishing. And they were accompanied by ideas for an art school application portfolio that he never seemed to quite get within spitting distance of completing. His frustration spilled over into diatribes on other subjects that pissed him off. And I found here my brother's rants against housemates and bosses and boyfriends, his journals becoming, for a time, all the secret *fuck-yous* he would have liked to say to the world but couldn't.

The pages of the most recent books became crammed with more lucid accounts, letters written to himself about the need for getting his life together, and glowing enumerations about his new boyfriend Steven's many charms. In earlier volumes, rubber-cemented onto some pages, I had found souvenir ticket stubs to the kinds of movies my brother had always loved, ones that featured monsters and madmen, or spaceships and superheroes, the kinds of characters that showed up in the comics and sci-fi novels he always became lost in as a kid. But now the mementos had become far more adult, and consisted of tickets to local plays, various museums, a few Broadway shows that had toured through town. There were even tickets to the orchestra and the Opera Company of Philadelphia—places where Andrew had to no doubt be dragged as he slowly transformed into a person less and less familiar to me. One entry after another began with such phrases as "Steven likes..." or "Steven thinks..." and I soon had my suspicions as to why their couplehood had eventually soured. Tucked in the back of a volume that appeared to be the last, I found a series of black-and-white photographs of Andrew and a man I presumed to be Steven; but unlike Aleta's suspicions none of the pictures of my brother were nude.

In one, Andrew appeared to have just woken. He lay tangled in sheets on the same futon where I now slept, his befuddled by morning sun. I was suddenly aware of how exhausted I was. What time was it?

The street below was totally quiet, but I too new to the city to judge if that meant it was midnight or three a.m. I considered checking the wristwatch in my purse, but I was too tired. Too tired to even remove the scratchy bandage on my knee. But though I was tired, I still didn't want to stop looking through my brother's things. I held Andrew's picture in my hands and closed my eyes, telling myself it would just be for a moment.

Chapter 29: The Trickery of Bees

The next morning, I awoke to find Andrew's photograph fallen atop my chest. The light streaming in the bedroom window appeared far brighter than it had the last couple mornings when I'd risen at an early hour. I panicked. What time was it? I hobbled to the living room—my knee having stiffened up in the night—to consult my watch. It was after ten. I was late for work. I was never late for work.

Even though the café didn't open until eleven a.m. on weekdays, just in time for the lunch crowd, Tracie had wanted me there early to help her set up tables. Instinctively I grabbed the phone thinking I would call her. And lo and behold, I could now hear a dial tone. Unfortunately, I had neglected to write down the number to the café, assuming it would be on the menu Tracie had told me to memorize--the menu I *hadn't* memorized. Naturally, it wasn't. I thought about looking for a phone book or calling information, but that would only make me later.

I hopped in the shower and quickly washed, and afterwards wrapped my oozing leg—slightly less stiff now thanks to the warm water—as best I could with a strip torn from one of Andrew's T-shirts. I threw on a shirt and pulled on my new jeans, hoping no blood would leak through. Without even a thought for breakfast, I grabbed my glasses and my keys and tore out the door.

More than Just Ice Cream was not far. As I turned the corner to it, I spotted Remy looking hung over as he arranged books in the glass window of Giovanni's Room bookstore. When he spied me he pointed at his wristwatch and drew his crazy eyebrows up in shocked surprise. I know, I know, I thought as I hurried by.

Tracie was not pleased. She reprimanded me for being late on only my second day, which I tried to blame on my bike accident from the day before. But my words were flustered, and she eyed me with suspicion. She had been forced to recruit Gerardo to help set the tables. As penalty, she stuck me back in the kitchen with two enormous stainless steel dishes, one full of apples and the other full of water. She handed me a paring knife and told me to peel.

If this was supposed to be a punishment, it wasn't. I didn't mind missing out on tips; sitting on my stool in the corner allowed me to catch my breath. And certainly I knew more than a thing or two about peeling apples for pies. Grandma Rose had seen to that. She had taught me to make almost as many kinds of pies as there were berries and fruits. When it came to apples, the ones we used were from the overgrown orchard behind our house that hadn't been tended to since Daddy was a boy. Most of the apples stayed on the ground to turn into mash, Even the best of the lot were riddled with wormholes Grandma and I had to work our knives around. But we were able to make do, and over the years I grew skilled enough to peel an apple in a single winding strand faster than the woman who had taught me. So it was nothing to me to peel and quarter those fat perfect apples sitting beside me now. I worked fast, and snuck a piece or two from

time to time into my mouth to quell my pangs of hunger. After a while, Gerardo came with more apples and took the finished ones away. I worked quiet and steadily, making sure not to get the job done too fast lest Tracie send me back out on the floor to stand on my aching knee.

After two, when the lunch crowd slowed, Tracie came in to check on me. Even though I had paced myself, she seemed surprised to find me nearly finished. She told me I could come back out on the floor; there were tables to clear while she updated the chalkboard with the evening specials. But first she wanted me to take my peels out to the trash.

The can beside me was packed tight, so I dragged it as best I could to the service alley Tracie pointed me towards, which lay between the café and the bookstore next door. The alley was narrow, not much wider than the dumpster itself, and fenced off from the street by a latched wooden door kept closed except when the garbage men came. The dumpster had been placed sideways so it would fit, which left just enough space for somebody to squeeze in and use it. In back, morning-glory vines snaked their way up a brick wall and over a loop of razor-wire. Because of the shade, the flowers had not yet fully closed. The sight might have been pretty if not for the bees.

They wove around the vines, touching down on the trumpet-shaped flowers. Though the bees were yellow, I wasn't sure if they were honeybees, and I wasn't about to get close enough to find out. In my rush that morning, I had forgotten my EpiPen. And with its dumpster full of melted ice cream and rotting fruit, the alley was a bee's paradise. I thought about telling Tracie to have someone else take out the trash. But I didn't want to make excuses for a second time in a day. And anyway, all I had to do was open the lids and drop the trash in. I wouldn't even come close to the bees over by the wall. I decided to go for it. With a deep breath I jerked open the dumpster's lid and lifted the trash.

Impact. The bag ripped on a box inside the overstuffed dumpster. Apple peels went everywhere. That in itself would have been okay—except there were more bees in the dumpster. They rose up fast. I yanked the lid back down as fast as I could, but it was too late. Bees stormed the air around me. I tried to wave them away like I did years before. I backed up, hit a step and fell on my bad knee. I fought past my fear to call for help, then sank back on the ground to endure the first dreaded sting.

* * *

In a flash, I am a girl again. The girl from the spring Lew Pingley and Daddy get the idea in their heads to domesticate a wild beehive, the one Andrew found in a fallen tree. Up our dirt road Lew's red truck has come, a silver ladder hanging from metal brackets above a dirty bed. Lew picks Daddy up and they drive through our yard, out back to the old orchard.

Andrew and I set out to spy on them. Take off my shoes and socks, he tells me, time now to move like Indians on our "stalking feet." We move along the camouflage of the woods' edge, pine needles and moss passing scratchy and soft beneath our toes. Soon we crouch among the orchard trees, the ground

damp there, the air still a bit sweet from last summer's fruit. Andrew and I hunker shoulder to shoulder, watching Daddy and Lew Pingley unload beekeeping equipment from the truck.

As they work, they do what they do best, take turns sipping from a bottle of whiskey and saying bad things about the women in their lives. Lew's voice is deep and dumb like a cartoon bear's. "I'm in deep shit. Melissa found I been making time with that waitress at Wimpy's. She came in last week and they got in a fistfight. Skinny little Janine must've studied some Bruce Lee movies, 'cause she chop-sueyed Melissa right in the face."

"No fuckin' way."

Lew takes an axe from the back of his truck. Daddy pulls out a canvas bag of what appears to be clothes.

"Cops had to come, and tear 'em apart. And now Janine's got a black eye and Melissa two less teeth." Lew sets a big wooden beehive on the ground.

"No teeth? That could be a good thing if she learns how to make use of it right."

"I don't know. On Melissa, the look's not very flattering. She's what ya call a two-bagger now. You gotta put two bags over her face when you screw her in case one of 'em breaks."

Daddy cracks up, as does Andrew beside me. I want to punch them both in the arm.

"At least you know why she's mad. Katie bitches at me left and right these days, and I have no damn idea what the hell I done wrong." Daddy hauls out Lew's chainsaw and fills it with gas from a can.

"I know what the hell you done wrong." Lew pulls his T-shirt over his head. "Made her goddamn chain too long."

Daddy laughs as Lew's belly flops free. "What?" asks Lew. "Them suits are hot. You'll see for yourself." The big canvas bag sets at his feet.

Daddy takes a beer from a cooler in the truck bed then strips his shirt off too. They stand there bare-chested, and I can see the difference. Daddy is as slim as a teenager and hairless like a boy. Lew is a bear, hairy and tall. They dress side by side, stepping into white suits that look meant to stop radiation. They down shots of whiskey and put on strange hoods.

Lew lights a funny-looking kettle called a "smoker"; Andrew whispers its name in my ear when I ask. We watch the two of them head to the tree, felled by lightning long ago. Lew puffs a gray trail from the nose of his smoker; Daddy pulls a cord and his chainsaw squeals. Lew draws cloudy passes over the hive as Daddy's saw bites into the wood. The bees' gilded bodies hover and swoop. The smoke calms the hive, but it can't calm them all.

Andrew dares a louder voice, talking against the noise. "All's they need is just the one in the box, and the others'll follow."

The men work hard to seize the queen. The box is ready and nearby, the axe, too, if they need it. Daddy raises his saw and its noise goes low. Lew lifts the section of the hive that contains the queen,

smoking her into submission. The men move slowly among the cloud of bees. Daddy's chainsaw quiets, and the world grows still. And I look down at my feet, bare and pale, stock-still. Between my toes, not even a blade of grass wavers.

Thereafter, summer days collect fast the way Daddy and Lew's honey does. With the hot weather Daddy works more, staying away day and night to build roads Andrew shows me on maps, a confusion of lines that twist like rivers. Andrew goes to the Y while I stay home.

Lew comes to check on their bees, eager, he says, for his taste of first honey. At first, Momma stands on the porch, hand around her big belly, and shoots Lew the old hairy eyeball when he parks his red truck on patch browned by Daddy's. "He's not here," she tells him.

I hide beneath the by the porch and watch as Lew inspects the white box, kept now far off at the edge of the yard, an off-limits area I'm not supposed to bother.

Snails have eaten through the low hanging leaves around me, and the sun shines through the ruined greenery to cast lacey shadows on my legs. I hope Lew can't see me; this summer he's coming around too much like he did the Thanksgiving before, when Momma and Daddy had a screaming match and Daddy stormed off to spend the holiday cousins in South Carolina.

"He's not here," Momma also said back then, when I hid in the same spot I hid in now.

"Christ, Katie. You look like shit. That the style now?" He stretched his arm along the doorjamb to lean in close.

"Fights and holidays don't make a good mix."

"David's a fool," he said. "He told me he thought you were in a car wreck."

"Why the hell'd he tell you I was in a car wreck?"

"Cause you act like you're paralyzed from the waist down."

"My parts work well enough if they're properly oiled and operated." Momma's belly was still small then.

"Tell you what, Katie. I've always been good with my hands."

Momma laughed a little. "Screw him," she said. "You want to come in for coffee?"

Lew must have had seconds, because he stayed a long time.

And so it's his coming again that makes me do it, makes me hurl the rock at his truck the day I get stung. I come not from the woods but from my hiding place. Momma's belly is big now and Lew shouldn't touch her, should never have touched her while Daddy's away. So I get a rock and throw it as hard as I can, trying to smash Lew's windshield. I hit the hive instead. The bees rise, their buzzing a preamble of hurts to come. My body accepts their stings, and I pray their pain will crowd everything out. That's when my throat closes, my eyes roll back, and I fall. Buck barks but I barely hear him. My eyes work to change the truck in the yard to Daddy's. But this time the trick doesn't work. The truck stays red with Lew's metal ladder on top. And the hands reaching to pick me up are big hands—much too big to be Daddy's. They are bear

paws. They pick me up high, so high I can finally look into the eyes to see who it is rescuing me, clearly now for the very first time. They are Lew Pingley's eyes. Lew Pingley's face. And I can tell by the shape of his mouth that he is shouting the word "Honey."

* * *

The face that found me by the dumpster in Philadelphia that day was Gerardo's, and I could see him clearly as he shooed the bees with a kitchen towel. I had been stung a couple times but had not passed out. My throat was not tight and nothing felt swollen. My ears worked, same as my eyes. Gerardo shouted in Spanish for help and bent down to help pull me up. A couple of the kitchen staff popped their heads out, and Gerard said something else, but all I understood was "Tracie." Gerardo snapped open the latch on the alley door and helped me hobble out to the sidewalk, where he sat me down on a bench in front of the café.

Tracie came out and I told her to go get Remy, that I'd been stung.

For a moment, Tracie looked at me, hands on her hips and an annoyed look on her face. She told Gerardo to go back to work.

"I'm allergic," I told her. "I don't have my medicine. Remy knows where it is." She walked to the bookstore window and pounded the glass with the flat of her hand. A moment later, Remy was on the sidewalk beside us, with Tracie explaining what had happened.

I kept waiting for my immune system to go haywire and an anaphylactic reaction to begin. But so far, all I had was a couple bumps on my forearms where the stingers had found their mark. That and a bloody knee again, leaking through my jeans.

Tracie asked if she should get a pair of tweezers. Remy told her no, that would only squeeze more venom in. He sat down beside me, and with his thumb and forefinger, grabbed the first stinger and yanked it out. He did it a second time, and then a third, telling me it was important to get them out as soon as possible. I told Remy where my medicine was, and he asked for my keys to the apartment. I fished them out as he scolded Tracie for not warning me better about the bees in the trash. She said something about common sense. My ears burned.

"Maybe I should call an ambulance," Tracie wondered aloud.

"No," I said, "I'm doing better than I thought. But I think I should go to the apartment and get my shot." I looked at Remy. "Can you help me there?"

"Sure." He ran off to tell his boss at the store what he was up to.

I glanced back at Tracie.

She threw her hands in the air. "Fine, go," she sighed.. A second later she added, "I'm sorry about the bees, all right?"

I had stood up, my back to her as I hobble in the direction of the bookstore. My eyes had begun to tear up--out of pain or embarrassment, I couldn't tell. "Okay," I told her, and I said that I was sorry. And then, Remy was by me again, helping me along.

* * *

At the apartment, Remy sat me down on the bed along with my purse and hurried to the bathroom to find something to clean the stung areas with, as well as something to fix up my knee.

I pulled off my jeans and took the injector from its case. I wondered if I really needed it this time. It had been about fifteen minutes and my reaction to the stings didn't seem to be much out of the ordinary. I itched some, but that was it. The tightness in my chest I didn't think was from the bees, but an effect from the truth their stings had shocked back into me. It wasn't Daddy who rescued me, but Lew. He's the one got Momma pregnant with my sister. Daddy left not because of Andrew and me, but because of all of them.

Just to be safe, I held the EpiPen like a dagger in my fist and pulled off its safety release. In one quick move I plunged the injector into my thigh. There was a click as the spring-loaded needle shot into my skin. I held it there for several seconds until the indicator on the device turned to red. Remy returned to the room just as I was lifting pen from my leg.

He let out a gasp at the sight. "Needles! I hate them. I once considered going to nursing school until I realized I'd probably faint every time I had to give a shot. Luckily, I'm better with bee stings and blood."

I pulled the bedsheet over my lap and massaged the injection site. Remy went to work on my wounds, dabbing the bumps left by the bee stings with some peroxide he'd found, then moving his cotton ball onto my knee. That *really* stung.

As he worked, I told him I was perplexed that my reaction hadn't been so bad. He said he'd stick around and keep an eye on me just in case; sometimes an allergic response can take a while. But he wondered if maybe I had grown out of it. "I have a cousin called Peanut who used to be allergic to peanuts-that's why we call him that. He lived in Georgia and was allergic to the whole state. But he grew out of it."

We laughed a little. Remy sat with me a long time in the warm apartment, even buying us food from the deli downstairs. After he was gone, I steeled myself and called home. I had to. Today was Elizabeth's birthday, and I hadn't had a chance to put her present in the mail.

It was she who answered again this time, thank god, and she was a little cross that I hadn't made it home for her big day.

"I'm sorry," I told her. "But I'm sending you a present."

"Andrew remembered. He sent me a T-shirt from Disneyworld."

"What?"

"He wrote me he might get a job at the Magic Kingdom. He might try to see if they'll let him play the prince."

"So he's in Orlando?"

"No, dummy. Disneyworld."

I knew better than to correct her.

“Didn’t he tell you?” she asked. “He says before he applies he wants to drive down through Florida first. See Key West. So when will I get my present and when are--”

Suddenly the sound of Momma’s voice took over. “Your sister is worried sick about you. Why aren’t you back here yet?”

“I don’t want to come back, Momma.”

“You *can’t* leave.”

“Momma, I think I already have.”

There was a long pause before Momma spoke again. “You are behaving just like your brother. And I’m sick and tired of it. I’m sick and tired of everyone treating me like a monster. You need to remember. *I’m* the one who nickel-and-dimed to keep clothes on your back. I’m the one who clipped coupons to put groceries on the table. Do you think that was easy? Your father didn’t do all that. You need to remember-- I’m the goddamn one who stayed.”

But I was remembering a lot of things. And as for her staying, I sometimes wished she hadn’t. But I didn’t say that right then. I let the anger swell inside me, a kind of bee sting all its own.

“I’m not asking for a medal,” Momma said. “But don’t I deserve some respect?”

I gritted my teeth. “It never ends, Momma. It never ends.”

“You didn’t even have the decency to get back here like I told you to. Back here in time for your little sister’s birthday.

I’d suddenly had enough. “And what did *you* do for her? What did *you* give her?”

“What do you mean? I don’t understand what you’re--”

“I mean, Momma, that all you’ve given any of us is heartache and lies. I mean that maybe you ought to sit her down, tell her for her birthday who her real father is.”

“I’m quite sure I don’t--”

“Tell her Daddy didn’t run away because of anything she or Andrew or I had done. He ran away because of what you and Lew Pingley--”

“What is Andrew telling you? Did he put you up to his?”

“Momma, this is all me. He isn’t even here.”

And that’s when I heard the click of Momma hanging up the phone.

Chapter 30: Crown of Thorns

The last time I laid eyes on Andrew had been the December before I arrived in Philadelphia, when he came home just before Christmas for a Grandma Rose's funeral. People kept bringing plates of food to the house--roast beef, baked beans, even deviled eggs. Ambrosia salad with miniature marshmallows that formed a gummy pale crust on top. I kept a list by the stove and wrote down who brought what, wrote their name on a piece of masking tape and stuck it to the bottom of each dish so I'd know who to return it to. That was how we did things in Seneca. While other families decorated Christmas trees or planned holiday feasts, I steeled myself for what was sure to come, readying our house with Great-Aunt Inez and her granddaughter Helena for the onslaught of seldom seen relatives who would soon track mud across our carpet following the funeral.

As I cataloged the food, my second-cousin, Helena, sat beside Great-Aunt Inez and worked intently on her last minute flower arrangement for my grandmother's casket. In the living room, Helena's daughters--the brood, my brother called them (five little girls from three different men)--squealed over Christmas TV specials alongside Elizabeth. Helena had recently been bitten by the "origami bug" as she called it, and sat at our table carefully folding paper flower after paper flower into perfect rosebud shapes: eleven yellow roses for Grandma Rose's combined total of children, nieces and nephews; sixteen peach roses for her grandchildren, grand-nephews and grand-nieces; and eight colors, undecided, for her great-grand-nephews and grand-nieces. How Helena kept up with the math was beyond me.

While I put away food donations, she shuffled through her pack of construction paper and asked for suggestions. "Quiz time, Allison," she announced to me. "What goes with peach and yellow?"

"Beats me," I told her.

Andrew, home from Philadelphia, waltzed into the kitchen to grab a Christmas cookie from a plate on the table.

Helena looked up at him. "What do you think, Andrew?" She spread her construction paper out like a fan. "I bet you've got a flair for this."

Helena had hinted to me that she had heard some rumors.

But Andrew didn't bat an eye. "The way those flowers look," he said, "I think you should invest in a box of matches."

"Get bent," said Helena.

Great-Aunt Inez shook her wobbly head and *tsk-tsked* quietly to herself. Her hammy thighs sat propped on two pushed-together chairs, and she did her best to look comfortable in her tight black dress. She sat down a stack of condolence cards she had been reading through to select a handful of Christmas

cookies herself. “You kids shouldn’t fight,” she said between bites. “Rose’s passing has been hard on everyone.” She looked up at me. “But most of all I think it’s been hard on your mother.”

As if on cue, Momma pattered into the kitchen, robe unbelted and slip showing. Andrew looked away, embarrassed. We all went icy silent. Momma hadn’t worn her bathrobe so many days in a row since our father had left us ten years before. But that day, with company running in and out of the house and the funeral that afternoon, I had persuaded her to make the gradual transition from sheer-worn flannel nightgown to slip and slippers, and I was crossing my fingers she would make it into the navy church dress I had laid out on her bed. Without so much as a “hello” she grabbed her cigarettes off the back of the stove and shuffled once more to her bedroom.

Helena raised her eyebrows in disapproval. Great-Aunt Inez shook her head. “Poor Katie!” she exclaimed, compassion clanging through her like a church bell, as if having a big heart justified having a big rear end and all the other parts to go along with it. If the body is a temple, then she hers was the Sistine Chapel. “It tears me to pieces to see her like this,” she said.

It’s not like the family didn’t see this coming. In the last few months, even skeptics like myself had grown convinced that Grandma Rose’s time was near. And despite the near complete blindness that she’d suffered the past year, I think my grandmother saw it clearest of all, thanks to a person-to-person call from the Grim Reaper himself. With no warning whatsoever, Beachum Mortuary Services had rung up last spring on Grandma Rose’s birthday, offering two-for-one burial plots. I had been reading the paper to Grandma when she answered the phone, so I saw her dead eyes go even deader at the spectral proposition. Me, I would have been outraged--an ailing woman, her mortality spelled out like tomorrow’s unfortunate headline--but Grandma Rose never saw it that way. With characteristic pragmatism, she had me write down the number to give to Momma once came back from picking up a sheet cake at the store. I could tell she had already decided to buy. She knew the Hand of Fate had shown its cards and now was the time to get her life in order. Reluctantly Momma purchased the burial plots, though God only knew what Grandma would do with the extra one, having been widowed by her husband when her children were small. Momma urged me to postpone any plans for college awhile, as she’d been doing time and again ever since I graduated the year before. She wanted me to help her out now that the “chips were down,” not to run off like “my no good brother.” A dutiful daughter, I acquiesced as always.

That summer Grandma Rose went from bad to worse. Here was a woman who had borne two children at home, who up until a few years ago had never been sick a day in her life. Yet the cancer we thought she’d beaten came back with a vengeance. Despite her cataract surgery, her eyes grew increasingly worse. She developed a phlegmy hack she had never before exhibited, despite fifty years of steady smoking. Her cancer spread “down there”, in the women’s area Grandma was too embarrassed to mention to Momma or me or a doctor, until it was too late.

In the hospital, Grandma sat propped on pillows amidst a network of needles and tubes. Without her wig, her hair looked thin and sparse, her scalp translucent. Veins bled through in blue and purple. . I thought it was a blessing she couldn't see herself. Eventually, the doctor gave her morphine for the pain. Delirium never came, although a certain stillness did, her destiny having been accepted the moment she picked up that phone. After a while, she refused to eat. Momma cursed and called her willful, while I couldn't help but think of all the recipes she'd taught me over the years, how I'd never get to make any of them for her ever again. In Grandma's final days, I sat beside her and read Christmas and Get Well cards to her. When the stack ran out, I shuffled them and began again. She told us how good we were, how kind-- words she had rarely uttered in her life. I wondered if she thought she needed to say those things so I wouldn't forget to love her.

* * *

In the kitchen, Andrew whirled past me to steal a slice of the ham I was cutting. I slapped his arm. "That's for after the funeral, mister." But he just gobbled it down, smacking his lips in satisfaction.

"You better hurry and get dressed," he told me.

"I am dressed."

"Oh," he said, taken aback. He twiddled the shoulder ruffle of my pink pastel dress. "Since when did a good old-fashioned mourning permit colors so... festive?"

My ears burned. His own clothes looked a little more grown-up than they did the last time he'd been home, and I wondered whose influence he'd fallen under. "It's all I got," I told him, waving the knife in my hand. This, I realized, was the kind of gesture Momma might make, so I laid the knife on the counter and stepped away.

Andrew smirked, standing there like some dandified angel of death in his black trousers and matching jacket, his gray shirt and Art Deco tie.

"You look fine, dear," said Great-Aunt Inez.

"Actually," piped up Helena, "that color's all wrong for you." Helena had worked the make-up counter at G. C. Murphy's back in high school until her first pregnancy began to show. She knew things. "With your red hair and ruddy skin, you got a fall complexion. That dress screams Easter Sunday. You'd do better in green, burgundy, or fooz-ya."

"Fuchsia," corrected Andrew.

Helena glared at him, then redirected her painted eyes my way. "You have good potential to be pretty," she continued. "You just need a complete make over."

"And boy do we mean complete," Andrew teased.

"Stop that!" cried Aunt Inez. "That's victim humor. The world is cruel enough without you adding to it." Sometimes she was harder to be around than Helena.

"Everyone lighten up," Andrew said.

Aunt Inez swooned from being back-talked that way. Andrew offered me a Christmas cookie to say he was sorry. But one look at Aunt Inez and the crumbs on her dress and I grabbed a celery stick instead, stuffed it in my mouth quick.

“It’s just sibling ribaldry,” Helena explained, folding a white rose.

“Rivalry,” I corrected. I knew a few things too.

Andrew looked at me and laughed so hard he coughed. Helena’s face flushed a ruddy red--a fall color, I wanted to tell her.

She turned, gave me a once over. “It certainly *would* take some work to get you looking like the belle of the ball. Maybe your brother can share some tips.”

“Enough!” exclaimed Aunt Inez. “My very own, very dear sister lies dead, and this is all you kids can do. I tell you, it’s downright--Andrew! Andrew McKenna, where are you going, young man? Your Aunt Inez is talking to you--”

But already my brother had disappeared out the kitchen door into the living room.

“Gee, I guess I hurt his feelings,” remarked Helena.

“Momma told him to keep an eye on Elizabeth,” I lied, covering the ham with cellophane.

“Poor, sensitive Andrew,” Helena mocked. I wished she would cut it out. One of her brood stumbled into the kitchen and she lifted the child onto her lap.

“That Andrew marches to a different drummer,” said Aunt Inez.

“A different orchestra,” laughed Helena, impressed with herself.

* * *

An hour before Grandma’s service was to begin, Momma forced Elizabeth and me to squeeze into the back seat of Andrew’s VW Bug and drive with her and my brother to the funeral home, declaring it was our duty to be there early to greet the extended family when they came. The old Purple Turtle was cold--floor rusted through, heater shot--and more than once Andrew complained about the bad job a South Philly mechanic did repairing his transmission. Slowly he navigated his car through town, streets still dark from recent rain. I wondered if Seneca looked changed to him. Momma held Helena’s origami bouquet in her lap, the flowers like decorations for the prom I never got asked to.

At the funeral home, Andrew pulled into the area reserved for family. We piled out and started up the flagstone path. The place was an old stately southern home, with showy bricks and marble columns, built by a U.S. Senator who lived in Seneca just before the Civil War. I followed Momma across the yard, where a strand of white Christmas lights, lit despite the daylight, outlined an old horse-drawn hearse Mr. Beachum used as an advertising prop. Alongside the hearse, a rustic sign emerged above a clump of azalea bushes--*Beachum Funeral Home* in a flourish of Colonial script. A large crucifix had been lashed atop the sign in honor of the season. Elizabeth let go of Andrew’s hand and ran across the soggy lawn, jumping to tag Christ’s toes. “His crown of thorns looks like it hurts,” she said. Momma told her to knock it off.

Inside, Andrew and I wandered into the viewing parlor while Momma cleaned Elizabeth's muddy shoes in the ladies room.

"Look," Andrew said as we neared the mahogany casket. "They didn't even get Grandma's make-up right. She's all waxy. Her hair's not even on straight." He reeked of cologne and peppermint Lifesavers—and behind that, something else. I wondered if he had been drinking.

"They just curled it different," I said.

"With a paint-by-numbers set and a rake."

"Andrew, you're supposed to be sad. Reverential."

"I am sad," he said. "I'm sad it's not her anymore. You know what they do? They pump chemicals in and sew the lips shut. It's barbaric. She deserves better. When I go, I want to be cremated, to burn out like a shooting star. Touch her."

"Andrew!"

It was official; he had been drinking. "Touch her and you'll see what I mean," he said.

"You touch her." I hated him for being so disrespectful.

Andrew sighed and raised his arm. An expensive-looking cufflink gleamed in the cold light. Who gave him that, I wondered. Gently he laid his hand against our grandmother's cheek. "So long, Grandma," he said quietly.

"What's going on?" Momma suddenly asked.

Andrew and I whirled to face her. Winter light streamed through a window to silhouette her figure. Her arms were filled with Helena's bouquet.

"Just saying goodbye," Andrew said. His usual sarcasm was gone from his voice.

Momma placed Helena's flowers next to the casket. "I guess there are some good memories after all," she said. She stood between us, and laced her arms through ours. She looked at Andrew, and then at me. "Your grandmother was a good woman," she said, then went on to remind us how her life hadn't been easy. Widowed at a young age with two children to raise, Grandma Rose had worked her fingers to the bone as a motel laundry woman. She had pinched pennies to send her kids to college, only to have her boy collapse and die in her arms. But what I thought of, as Momma talked, was how Momma's own life had worn away a similar groove—her man gone, nothing to look forward to except children to raise and work to do. Was that our family's hand-me-down curse, our men destined to desert us, while we stayed behind to deal with the mess?

Momma started to cry. I wished I had the strength to comfort her, but I didn't. It was Andrew who hugged her. Awkwardly to be sure, but at least he tried. Momma wiped her eyes with a tissue and stared down at the casket. "I guess Mr. Beachum did an all right job, making do with that old Sears portrait." She leaned forward to smooth the wrinkles from her mother's blouse, then turned, first to Andrew, then to me, kissing each of us lightly on the cheek.

* * *

While Momma recruited pallbearers from amongst the first arrivals, Andrew and I headed out to the back porch to check on Elizabeth, who was busy kicking the Coke machine there.

“It won’t give me my pop!” she cried.

“Did you put enough money in?” I asked, sitting down in a wicker love seat.

“Almost,” she said. Then, “Not really. But this always works with the machine at the Y.”

I dug into my handbag and forked over some money as Andrew leapt down the porch steps and headed to the Purple Turtle. Elizabeth dropped in the coins, pressed the button and kicked the machine at the very same time. Three cans of soda pop miraculously clattered out the bottom. Eyes wide, my ten-year-old sister declared it a Christmas miracle.

A light drizzle had begun to fall, adding a certain sprightliness to Andrew’s movements as he leaned into his car and grabbed a paper bag from under the passenger seat. He hurried back up the stairs to us. “What’s in the bag?” was the first thing out of my mouth.

Andrew reached in, pulled out a pint of Southern Comfort. “My social buffer,” he said. He sat down beside me and brought the bottle to his lips. Elizabeth raised her eyebrows, chugged some Coke, her fingers busy enlarging an area of peeling paint on the porch banister.

“You are dead if Momma sees you,” I said.

“Maybe Old Man Beachum will let her make good on that two-for-one deal.” He held the bottle out to me.

“No thanks.”

“You’ve got forty-eleven relatives coming out of the boondocks to pinch your cheeks and call you by the wrong name all afternoon. You need a social buffer.”

“It’s me they call the wrong name,” said Elizabeth. She held out her Coke. Andrew laughed and poured a thimbleful of whiskey into the can.

“Andrew!” I said.

“It’s a holiday,” he said. “And her first real funeral. Merry fucking Christmas.”

Elizabeth laughed and took a sip, then scrunched her face at the taste. She took a deep breath and tried again.

I considered a roomful of Helenas and Great-Aunt Inezes, and the longstanding curse on my family’s women. I grabbed the bottle out of Andrew’s hands and drank.

* * *

The spring before, after Grandma’s eyes went but before her cancer completely disabled her, Momma had me take my grandmother shopping at the stores down at the plaza.

“I don’t need anything,” Grandma Rose kept repeating, looking past me at display racks she couldn’t see. Her heavy black coat gave shape to her bones. Seventy-five degrees outside, daffodils wilting in the heat, but still she insisted on wearing the warmest thing in her closet.

Sticking out her hands, she groped for every bench or sitting ledge the strip mall had to offer and plunked herself down although the main purpose of this undertaking was to give her some exercise. When I spoke, she lifted her head and gazed past me, as if the angel of death was waving hello from just over my shoulder.

“Please, Grandma,” I begged. “You can’t keep stopping every six seconds. I know you’re tired. Let’s just pick out some books on tape and get out of here.”

“You find them. I’ll wait right here.”

“I don’t know what you like.”

“Anything will do.”

With each new phase of her illness, she had grown easier to please, and I found it exasperating. “Come with me,” I pleaded.

“I don’t want to run into anything.”

“I’ll take care of you,” I said as I tugged her hand. She stood, and I wrapped my arm around her. Her bones felt sharp and hard, masked by insufficient layers of flesh and wool; she walked hunched over as if carrying something precious tight against her chest.

* * *

The funeral went by pretty smoothly, frayed nerves soothed thanks to Andrew’s social buffer. In the front row, Momma wept quietly between Andrew and me, while Elizabeth fidgeted at my side, still sucking on a Lifesaver Andrew had given her. Reverend Helmsley called for a moment of silence, then sped through his eulogy--no time to waste, only three days left for Christmas shopping. He had barely known my grandmother, yet still he noted her life of hard work, her dedication to her grandchildren, so many things that sounded sweet but rang hollow coming from him. I wondered if Momma coached him or if that was just the usual canned spiel a preacher rolled out when an old woman died. Such cynicism reminded me of Andrew’s. Maybe that’s what you got when you tipped back a bottle.

I peeked over my shoulder, scanning the baldheads and blue rinses that filled the room. The motion made me woozy. A few rows back, Helena caught my gaze and held it briefly with a sour look. I fought an impulse to grab Momma’s cigarette lighter, run up to the casket, and show my cousin just what I thought of her origami flowers.

Instead, I turned to stare at the casket. Like Helena, Grandma Rose had a fetish for arrangement. The toys at her house had seen forty years of children’s hands with few parts lost or misplaced. Back when we were little we would play with them Sunday afternoons when a late breakfast would be waiting at Grandma Rose’s. Aunt Inez came, Helena came, even my father. Fresh biscuits would exhale steam as

Grandma Rose gathered us around her dining table with a wave of her hands. Everyone fell silent as a brief prayer was spoken, more real to me than anything the preacher said at church. Then the table burst into activity--plates passed, fat sausages doled out. Fried eggs flopped from the skillet, their golden yokes ready to burst. Biscuits melted pads of butter and soaked up spiced gravy, poured on thick enough to bring on a stroke.

Later I saw the food for what it was, a bribe to gather us, to establish a pattern while Grandma still could. By the time Elizabeth finished teething, such home-cooked meals were gone. The fresh biscuits, ready eggs and waiting bacon were replaced with store-bought cinnamon rolls and dry coffeecake. Grandma was getting old. Yet still my family would show up to page through the Sunday comics or her *National Enquirer*--children playing underfoot, poking bellies, yanking braids; Momma arguing with my great-aunts and great-uncles over small town gossip until someone swore "Jesus Christ" and walked outside to smoke a cigarette on the front porch alone.

* * *

In the funeral home, Elizabeth tugged at my sleeve and whispered a question about the service. "What's he mean, 'Salvation only comes through God's love?'"

I placed her hand back in her lap. "He means if you're good, you die and go to Heaven."

"What's he mean, 'You gotta unlock your heart and let Christ in?'"

"Be quiet," I whispered looking down at her.

"I wanna know." Her green eyes penetrated me. "When Jesus comes into my heart, will it hurt?"

But for that I had no answer.

Chapter 31: Cheat River

After Grandma Rose's funeral service, we went outside again. The drizzle had stopped. The sun broke through bleak clouds to color the mountains. But still the day's chill sent goosebumps down my spine. I watched Andrew and the other pallbearers load Grandma's casket into the hearse as the mourners filed somberly back to their cars. Idling engines raised an asthmatic chorus as the Beachum boys direct each driver to a place in the procession. Momma and Great-Aunt Inez graciously accepted Mr. Beachum's invitation to ride in his Cadillac.

We three kids piled into the Purple Turtle. Andrew clutched the steering wheel and goosed the motor, falling into line with all the funeral procession. His impression of sobriety appeared halfway decent, so I held my tongue and sufficed with ordering Elizabeth to sit down and fasten her seatbelt. I did the same.

"The way people deal with death seems so fake," Andrew said as we followed the cars that followed the hearse.

I wished he wouldn't start. All I wanted to do was watch the blur of road and sky.

"Doesn't it bother you?" he pressed. "All the hoopla and ritual, when there are living people on the streets starving and dying of AIDS."

"You sound like a crusader," I told him.

"Someone's got to be. I mean, all those pricey flower arrangements, all Helena's idiotic origami roses, which I personally wouldn't blow my nose on. You got to admit, it's an awful lot of time and money to shower on a corpse."

"Andrew!"

"How many of us gave Grandma flowers while she was alive? While she could fucking enjoy them? Just Momma and the stupid poinsettia she brought every Christmas, and the only reason she gave her that was because she was trying to poison that stray cat."

"That's not true and you know it."

We drove in silence for a few minutes, until Elizabeth--striving to imitate the funeral home's canned organ music--began humming the Rice-a-Roni jingle as mournfully as possible.

"Now I'll never know our family's past," I finally said aloud.

"What do you mean?" Andrew asked. Even Elizabeth leaned forward, having ignored my order to buckle-up.

I let it slide. "Our family's history, how it all fits. With Grandma gone and Momma so tight-lipped, I wonder if we'll ever learn anything."

"Like?"

“Like why Daddy left. Or even things further back than that. For instance, we’ll never know what Grandma’s husband was like, other than he was a coal miner and died in the mines. Once I asked her about that, about lots of stuff, but she didn’t say much, and when she did, I wasn’t never sure it was true.”

“Now I know what I should have brought you home for Christmas.”

I asked what it was, but he wouldn’t tell me.

“Maybe I’ll give them to you some other time. But anyway,” he said, “I don’t see your point.”

From the bottom of my lungs an enormous sigh rose. “You just don’t get it. If we can’t understand our past, how will we know where things went wrong? I’ll be damned if I fall into the same trap they all did.”

Andrew laughed. “What--will knowing help you ‘save’ us?”

“Hell, I can’t save us,” I leaned my head against the window. “I’m not even sure I can save myself.”

He laughed again. “You talk like everything’s already decided. Written in stone by Grandma’s ‘Hand of Fate.’” Andrew took a moment to clear his throat. “Momma and Daddy’s story is easy,” he said. “Once upon a time, a greaser boy--who looked like Elvis, only thinner and blond—came back from a war and met a young would-be schoolteacher. Wooed her with violets, even in winter. She got knocked up, they got married. Rah, rah, rah. Gained weight, got wrinkled, lost some hair. Fought with each other and pulled out more. She was a bitch so he ran off. Everybody lived dysfunctionally ever after.” He glanced at me. “The End.”

“Jesus, Andrew. You make it sound like they never got anything right.”

His hands gripped the steering wheel so hard his knuckles had turned white. “That’s the problem with fucking up.”

“Yeah? Well, how about you? What have you been up to in Philadelphia? Who gave you those fancy cufflinks?”

Andrew said nothing, just swallowed hard.

As the slow procession passed the fast food joint where I worked, Elizabeth thrust her blond head between us. “I don’t think you two should be talking.”

* * *

The fall I was twelve, Momma tried to stitch together the frayed pieces of her life. She had somehow survived the past year, with its double-upheaval of Daddy’s leaving and Elizabeth’s birth, and figured the time to get a grip on her future was now or never. So she left us three kids with Grandma Rose while she went away for a few weeks to take a condensed course toward her teaching degree. “I’ll have more pay after this,” she promised, packing my clothes in a Hefty bag. “You’ll like staying at Grandma’s.” That was the autumn Hardlee’s Fastfood came to Seneca, the first of the big chains to plant a stake in our one-horse town. The only other nationally known restaurants around us back then were the KFC and Burger King

over in Elkins. Even now I can still picture the manager's broad grin as he opened the door for us the day they first opened for business. If I'd have known then how many shifts I'd eventually rack up in that place, I wouldn't have been nearly as excited. But right then, I didn't know any better. The novelty of the outside world finally beating a path to Seneca came as a shocking surprise to me. I couldn't stop smiling.

"You folks sure came early," the manager said as he began to tape a poster of the company mascot to the door, the animated train engine Andrew and I knew from TV. He was right; the sun hadn't even fully come up yet.

"Are we the first?" I wanted to know, but Andrew shook his head, pointed to a burly man with a beard, a truck driver.

"He's the first."

Disappointment rose up in me quick and hard. Grandma said to hush and handed Elizabeth to me. I watched her touch the trucker's bare arm and explain to him that these were her grandkids, eager to be first. "Go right ahead," he said, and quick as that, Andrew and I were excited again. Andrew, newly fourteen, tried hard not to show it. Still, I could see his curiosity at the big light-up menu and the snappy way the teenage girl behind the counter filled our order--breakfast biscuits, hash browns, Cokes and a coffee. Together, Andrew and I handed the girl the money. But no sooner had we done so than the manager snatched the bill from her hand, asked us to sign our names, told us that next time we came in it would be hanging in a frame. "Writing on money is illegal," Andrew said, but he signed his name anyway.

The second day of Hardlee's existence, Andrew and I insisted on going back. "You must think I'm made of money," Grandma said, though finally she gave in and took us for lunch.

Andrew's jaw hit the floor when he saw the money wasn't on the wall yet-- "What a gyp!"

I kicked my foot against a big cutout display of their mascot, mad at the Hardlee's Chew-Chew for lying to me. The manager caught sight of us and gave me a wink. "By tomorrow," he said.

Grandma asked whether I wanted Orange or Coke; I said I wasn't thirsty, wasn't hungry, either.

"Quit your foolishness," she scolded.

I told her I'd be hungry by tomorrow.

She rolled her eyes, took a deep breath, and finally spoke. "You go ahead and get something to eat, and if you behave yourself maybe we'll come back tomorrow."

Later, unlike Momma, Grandma Rose found a quiet moment to sit down in her porch swing and let me rest my head in her lap. I can still feel her fingers stroking my hair.

"Why do you look so sad?" she asked.

I couldn't explain. Instead, I just looked up at her, past her thick glasses and dark eyes, and knew my sense of history would have to filter through that cracked mouth, slip past faded lipstick like smoke from one of her cigarettes.

I couldn't explain. Instead, I just looked past her thick glasses into her tired eyes and knew my sense of history would have to slip out on the sly, like cigarette smoke from one of her cigarettes. "Did you really have your babies at home instead of at the doctor's?" I suddenly asked.

"Of course. I've told you so, haven't I?"

But even then I knew there was no such thing as history, just memory's shuffling and sifting of events. A collage, perhaps? Something stitched together like the quilts Grandma used to sew, back before her fingers grew stiff from arthritis. Before Momma had left, I'd heard the two of them talking. Grandma had learned from the paper that Daddy'd been jailed again for brawling. They hushed up when they saw me near. "Tell me why my Daddy left," I finally begged. "Where's he now?"

"You ask too many questions," my grandmother said.

But I wanted to know. How could he have left before my sister came? Was Momma herself coming back? Why was Andrew so distant these days? Why did I always feel so trapped by these mountains? How come our family couldn't afford a vacation? I wanted to see the ocean.

Elizabeth, sitting beside us in her stroller, started to bawl, so Grandma pushed me upright to tuck a juice bottle between her lips. "I've never seen the ocean my whole life," she said, "and I've made do just fine without it. You can, too."

* * *

Heavenly Acres huddled flat next to the road, the land growing hilly only as it rolled back into the mountain ridge that led back to town. Andrew waited, signal blinking, as the long line of cars slowly turned in. Already the driveway inside the fenced perimeter was jammed with cars and pickups, so we pulled off on the highway's shoulder next to a fence and parked there. Andrew took a couple more swigs of bottled courage.

People died and their bodies joined each other here, down inside the cold comfort of the earth. A place was set for them. I was thinking that as we climbed from the Purple Turtle. Beneath the harsh sun, we tightened our coats around us as we made our way through a wooden gate and out to the graveside. Around us, dull gray headstones lay in uniform rows. A few leather-faced caretakers idled just beyond range of the gathering mourners; they hadn't gotten their lowering device positioned over the grave in time, so I watched as the Beachum boys placed my grandmother's casket on a piece of Astroturf rolled out along the open grave. A similar grass blanket covered a mound of heaped dirt.

We joined the squinting crowd as the preacher commenced the final eulogy. Andrew took his place beside Momma, wrapping his arm around her for the second time today. Elizabeth slipped her hand into mine and leaned against me. In the winter light, the casket shone.

Back after Grandma Rose's eyes altogether failed her, I sometimes stopped by after work to read her the paper. Her subscription to *The National Enquirer* had run out, but still she liked to know the local news. She forced me to eat a sandwich, insisted on making it herself. She could still get around her house,

she said. Fifty years and she knew it as well as the bats in her attic. She still wore her useless bifocals, still painted her lips red every morning though she never went out. And now she was to be put inside this empty rectangle, barely five miles from her home, the earth shut over her like a book cover closing.

Momma cried as leaned against Andrew. I was impressed at how good they were doing. Andrew told me outside the funeral home not to say anything, but it was a fact that Grandma had scrimped and saved, managing to set aside three thousand dollars for each of her grandchildren, grandnieces and grandnephews. Even second-cousin Helena. A long time ago, Grandma had told him about it. For Andrew it was to be money to pay student loans. Thirty miles was as far as I was supposed to get come the following fall, thirty miles to the college over in Elkins. Perhaps this lot of ground was fine for Grandma-- peaceful, roomy, with a vacant plot next door for buried secrets. Maybe she meant it when she said this town was enough for her. But to hell with college in Elkins. I had to get out of there before the land swallowed me as well.

And so, standing by her grave, I imagined a more dramatic ending for my grandmother: She falls backwards, arms out and wig gone, her hair full and flowing--a sea anemone riding an ethereal tide. She falls into shimmering blue; she sees the ocean.

* * *

Relatives began to wander off, but Momma and Andrew linger awhile by Grandma's casket. Seeing them arm-in-arm was an unfamiliar sight but a welcome one. I liked it--didn't I? I led Elizabeth by the hand and walked over.

When Momma started gesturing at the ground, Andrew let go of her and stepped away, furious.

"No way am I being buried here!" he yelled.

Momma looked at him, disappointed.

"I've barely moved away from home and you can't wait to get me six feet under!"

"Andrew, that's not what I had in mind," she said coldly. "When your grandmother bought two plots I thought it'd be a nice idea to buy a few more for the rest of us." She pointed at different places on the ground. "There's one for me, and one for Allison. One for Elizabeth and one for you. And I even got a couple extra for when you all get married one of these days."

"Christ, Momma, this isn't some eternal picnic you're planning. I should have a say in this."

"Well, what would you have me do for your final resting place? Build a shrine?"

Andrew shook his head, stared at the ground, exasperated. "If you really want to know, you can have me cremated."

"Cremated? Why on God's green earth do you want to be cremated? What would you have me do with your ashes?"

Andrew looked up, eyes gleaming, alcohol shorting out all safety fuses. "How about mixing me up in some really good Hawaiian hash? Let my friends smoke me down and knock themselves out."

“You’re crazy!” said Momma, throwing her hands in the air.

“I’m serious. I mean, what a way to go.”

Momma’s face turned stony. “You can’t be serious for one minute, can you?” Tears welled up, a dam breaking. “Not even today, when my mother is being put in the goddamn ground.”

Andrew stared at his wingtips, said nothing.

Momma turned and headed towards the string of cars in the distance. “Don’t trouble yourself driving me home,” she called over her shoulder. “Don’t trouble yourselves at all. I’ll see you ungrateful sonsabitches later.”

For several moments we stood in silence, gazing into Grandma’s open grave as if it were a crystal ball holding all out futures. But it didn’t tell us a blessed thing. Finally, Andrew put his arm around my shoulder. Elizabeth leaned against his side. Slowly she began another dirge-like rendition of Rice-a-Roni, the San Francisco treat.

A few seconds later, someone grabbed my shoulder and shoved me a side. I whirled to see Helena squaring off against my brother. She stabbed her finger into his chest.

“What’s the matter, Andrew?!” she screamed. “Can’t you show some compassion for once in your life?”

“Helena, just lay off,” Andrew said.

“What kind of son are you? What’d you do to make your mother cry?”

“None of your friggin’ beeswax,” Andrew told her. He flicked his wrist at her as if shooing a fly away.

“So typical,” Helena said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means, Andrew, that you couldn’t swish any harder if you had wings and a wand.”

“That does it,” he said, removing his jacket.

“Oh, I’m scared,” said Helena.

Andrew pushed Elizabeth and me back. “It’s catfight time,” he said.

“Bring it on, queerbait,” goaded Helena. I backed up a few feet, pulling Elizabeth with me. In the distance, the thick-necked Beachum boy Helena had been chatting up rose from his slouch against the hearse and began walking in our direction.

Andrew whirled his jacket in the air like a bullfighter’s cape. “You’re right,” he said to Helena. “I *am* a cocksucking homo. You know how you can tell? Firm jaw line!”

Helena was caught off guard by Andrew’s sudden confession, as sharp and surprising as a razor blade in a candy apple.

Andrew spun his jacket at Helena head, denting her lacquered blond hair-do.

“I knew it, I knew it!” Helena shrieked. Her eyes narrowed into slits. In the cold air, a faint cloud snorted from her nostrils. “You fucking faggot!”

Andrew snapped his overcoat in the air, taunting her. “And you’re a bitch who only wears panties to keep her ankles warm.”

Helena let out a bloodcurdling scream, then charged right at him. At the last second Andrew sidestepped, leaving Helena to claw at his empty coat. Andrew pivoted, let go--the only thing missing a triumphant “*Ole!*” Helena staggered, dizzy with momentum, on the edge of Grandma Rose’s grave. Her arms circled in the air as she struggled for balance. Even Andrew looked surprised. He started to reach out, then thought better of it as Helena toppled back into the hole.

A soft thud reached our ears. Elizabeth broke free and ran to the graveside. I followed. Side by side, we peered down next to Andrew to see Helena covered in mud. She shook her fist, cursed Andrew’s name. “Get me out, you faggot!” She tried to climb, but the walls were too slippery. All she got was a spray of dirt in her face. “Allison, please help me! I have kids! Andrew, I’m sorry!”

My brother grinned at me, turned back to Helena and cleared his throat like he was going to spit.

Helena reeled back, covered her hairdo with Andrew’s coat.

Somebody shouted behind us. Andrew, Elizabeth and I turned to see the Beachum brother flying towards us.

“Come on!” Andrew yelled. He grabbed Elizabeth by the hand and started to gallop across the graveyard. I burst into motion as well, leaping plastic flowers, dodging headstones, as the three of us all raced towards the highway and the parked car. . Andrew didn’t bother with the gate, just lifted Elizabeth over the fence, then hurled himself over. He turned back and extended a hand to me. His eyes glowed in a way I’d never seen before. My heart felt on the verge of exploding, but somehow with his help I made it over the fence. The three of us dove into the Purple Turtle. Andrew thundered the engine and we were off, like a rocket, like a shooting star.

Andrew whooped like a banshee and cranked up the volume of The Smiths tape in his cassette deck. In the backseat, Elizabeth popped the tab on another Coke.

“Unfuckingbelievable!” Andrew exclaimed, reaching once more for the whiskey bottle under his seat.

“Just keep your eyes on the road,” I told him.

He wedged the bottle between his legs and unscrewed the cap. “The look on that bitch’s face was priceless.” He took a slug of Southern Comfort as Elizabeth thrusts forward her Coke. He spilled a hit over her can and handed the bottle to me. I considered the uproar at home and figure what the hell. I downed a swig and felt the alcohol’s hard warmth radiate through me.

“What exactly’s a faggot?” asked Elizabeth, leaning over the front seat.

“Sit down!” I told her. I screwed the cap on the bottle and sat it between my seat and the door, out of Andrew’s reach.

The VW weaved only slightly as we took a back road to town. Somehow, despite the mess we’d left behind us, it felt right being beside my brother and sister. If Andrew didn’t want to go home, that was all right by me. Let someone else take the cellophane off the damn dishes.

* * *

Near Trickle Run, Andrew lurched onto a brush-covered logging road. The Purple Turtle cannonballed down the uneven trail, tall weeds disappearing like wheat before a thresher. I braced my hands against the dashboard and told Andrew he was crazy.

“Wee!” cried Elizabeth, jostling in the back seat, waving her spiked Coke.

Scrub oaks gave way to a small clearing. A steep drop dissected the meadow like an open wound. The swollen Cheat churned before us.

My heart thundered as Andrew revved the engine, speeding towards the riverbank like he was going to drive right in. He laughed, swerved, ground the car to a halt--mere inches from impact with a tree.

He leaned across me to grab his whiskey, then jumped out of the car, looking crazed. His right shirt cuff flapped in the wind, one of his nice cufflinks lost in his skirmish with Helena. I wondered if he had someone back in the city who loved him, someone he’d be spending Christmas with if he hadn’t been forced to come back home. Andrew glanced back at me, his eyes red like a dog’s when you try to take its picture. I wondered what else he might be on besides whiskey.

In the clearing, Andrew gestured at the river with his bottle, then stretched his arms wide to bear hug Mother Nature. “This! This! I love this!” he screamed, spinning like a human cyclone. Elizabeth squeezed out the door after him. Together they whirled like dervishes on the leafy brown grass. I thought of Momma and a pang of guilt rose up in me. I hauled myself out of the car and went to them to break it up.

“Stop it, you guys. It’s freezing out here. Momma’ll worry. She’ll want us home.”

Andrew shook free of me. “It’s not quite Christmas yet. She can’t have what she wants.”

“Yeah!” Elizabeth agreed.

“This is ridiculous,” I told them.

“Lighten up,” said Andrew. “Enjoy yourself.”

“It’s cold!”

“It’s not cold! It’s delicious. It’s a perfect day for a swim.”

“You’re crocked.”

Andrew and Elizabeth laughed at me as they clinked together whiskey bottle and Coke can. I watched each down a swig.

I grabbed the old quilt Andrew used to cover the VW’s torn backseat and spread it on the ground before the river. Below the steep embankment, the Cheat stretched wide to carve out a bend. Her quick dark

waters slowed to a gentle tug before the channel narrowed again. Downstream, I could see where the current increased as water frothed against high rocks. Elizabeth and I sat down. Andrew, still whirling, lost his balance and fell beside us.

“You drink too much,” I told him.

“It’s a gift,” he said, rolling up beside me, the bottle safe in his hands. He took another long draught.

“Dad drank a lot, too,” I remarked.

“Dad had gills,” Andrew said. “It’s the one thing he left me. He could handle it. He just couldn’t handle Momma.”

“Or us.”

“Don’t say that!” He sat up and drew his knees to his chest.

“Do you think we’ll ever get the chance to ask him why he did what he did? Sometimes I think he must be dead.”

“He’s not dead,” Andrew said. “He’s a comet. He just had to get away for awhile. He’ll circle back around.”

“It’s been ten years.”

Andrew leaned back to stare at the darkening sky. Already a few pinpoints of light shone through like moth holes in a piece of fabric.

“Look,” Andrew said. “There are stars up there we never see, but they still exist. It’s a matter of deduction--light, radiation, cosmic noise. They exist. They have to.”

“Deep,” Elizabeth remarked dreamily. She chuckled, leaned against Andrew and stared straight up, face pale in the falling light.

“You got to admit,” said Andrew, “Dad may not be here, but there’s a lot of noise in his absence.”

“That’s not proof,” I told him.

Andrew just smiled, nudged my hip with his whiskey bottle. “Remember how Dad used to set up that old telescope on the back porch, show us Venus, Mars--stuff like that?”

“I never could find Venus,” I whispered. “Whatever happened to that telescope?”

“Momma threw it on the pile when she burned his stuff.” Andrew chugged more booze and offered me the whiskey.

There was barely any left. I downed a swig, and a few more inches of the world melted away.

“She drug out the gasoline and whoosh!” said Andrew. “I can still feel those flames.” A sheen of sweat had broken out across his forehead. The whiskey? Remembering the fire? “I swear, Momma just leaned over and spit and the whole thing went up. She never even struck a match.”

“Bullshit.”

“I’m serious. She leaned over and spit like a dragon, and the whole thing burst into flames.” He finished the last of the whiskey. “Sometimes I think it’d be easier if her behavior was even worse--if she’d beat us till our teachers noticed, if she’d left us unfed. Instead she walks a thin line, making it that much harder to know whether to love or hate her.”

I leaned back to stare at the sky. “I still miss Daddy.”

“Me, too,” Elizabeth sighed.

“You never even knew him,” I said.

“So?” she countered.

I shook my head and turned back to Andrew. “What’s really eating you? It’s more than Momma. It’s more than Grandma dying or Daddy leaving.”

Andrew unclasped the remaining cufflink on his sleeve, cupped it in his palm, “You really want to know?” His voice lowered and his eyes burned into me the way Momma’s sometimes did. “I’ll tell you. I’m in love with someone I’m afraid I won’t be able to keep.”

For a moment I thought Andrew was going to cry. But then he laughed like a crazy man and leapt to his feet. He jerked his arm back and threw the remaining silver cufflink into Cheat River.

“I’m burning up!” he told me. “Maybe I’ll go for a swim.” He stretched, affected a silly accent. “Yes, I say, ‘tis a jolly good evening for a swim.” He kicked off his shoes.

“You’re ridiculous,” I told him, unimpressed.

He hurled the empty bottle at a tree, and I heard the web of noise its shattering made. “You’re no fun,” he said, then cracked his knuckles and begins to undo his tie. “A jolly good evening,” he continued. His fingers struggled with the knot. Flustered, he stretched the neck loop as wide as possible, pulled the tie over his head. It stuck at his hairline and he left it there like an Indian headband.

“That’s pretty,” I told him.

Elizabeth giggled as Andrew shrugged off his crumpled blazer, unfastened his trousers and let them drop to reveal striped boxers. He stood in the damp grass in his stocking feet, shirttail flapping in the breeze. He began to unbutton his gray oxford. Elizabeth spilled some Coke in the general vicinity of her mouth, then fell back on the quilt, howling with laughter

Andrew unfastened the last button of his shirt, flinching as a sharp gust of wind rose from the river. “Jesus!” he cried. He hugged his shirt around him.

“Thank *god* you’ve got some common sense after all,” I remarked.

Andrew froze.

The words were Momma’s--her idiom, her disapproving tone, spilling from some unwanted reservoir inside me.

In the dusky light, Andrew threw down his shirt and stepped towards the river. He thumbhooked his underwear, pushed his shorts below his pale buttocks and down his long legs. He kicked his boxers

defiantly backwards, and Elizabeth caught them like a wedding bouquet. In stunned silence we watched our brother: His smooth back, slim hips, the faint freckles that dusted his shoulders. He was beautiful, I thought, and worthy of love.

In one fluid gesture, his arms arced above his head and his hands joined as if in prayer. His legs buckled then kicked. His back arched as he dove into the river.

The crash of water shocked me to my feet. I rushed forth, leaned over the steep drop, searched the water for a sign of him. Only a ring of ripples betrayed his passing. A cold fist closed around my heart; Momma was finally right: One of her kids finally broke his fool neck on a rock. But then Andrew surfaced. He shook his hair and his limp necktie bandana.

“Cool,” said Elizabeth, watching beside me.

“*Fucking shit!*” Andrew yelled as he hightailed it to shore, arms and legs thrashing in a silver spray. I grabbed hold of exposed tree roots and half climbed, half slid down the muddy bank to meet him.

For a moment he floundered, and I worried he might succumb to the shock of the water. But finally he rose from the murky edge and fell against me, shivering. He seemed to glow an almost translucent blue; if I looked hard enough I might’ve been able to see through him to my hand. Instead I braced his back, real enough, and drew him to me. Together we struggled over rocks and sinking mud to drag ourselves up the riverbank. Our hands found roots to hoist us over the embankment. I helped Andrew to the quilt where he collapsed.

Like a baby, Andrew curled into a shivering crescent. I threw his shirt over him and barked at Elizabeth to gather his other clothes. I studied my brother’s ghostly face--hair plastered against skull, teeth chattering, eyes scrunched tight—thoughts locked inside him. I ran my thumb along his brow, brushing eyelashes long enough to curl around a finger. Please be okay, I thought. I looked down the curved slope of his back, past the hem of his shirt. In the fold of his legs, I saw the tip of his penis, his balls a pair of shriveled plums. I gathered the quilt tight around him.

“C’mon, Andrew!” I shouted. His eyes flashed open, blue and bewildered. I pulled him to me. “Get into the car.” He started to slump back towards the ground, but I wouldn’t let him. I twined my arm around his waist and hauled him to the Purple Turtle. Elizabeth opened the passenger door, threw Andrew’s clothes in the back seat. My brother took baby steps, as if learning to walk in alien gravity.

Chapter 32: The Last Drop

Friday evening after dinner I found myself dressed in a set of brand new clothes and heading to The Last Drop to meet Remy for a cup of coffee to mark my one-week anniversary of having arrived in Philadelphia. On the way, I took a detour uptown to buy something, so my path back to the coffee shop took me down Broad Street to Pine. The muralists I had met the day after I'd arrived had set up spotlights to work into the evening. I saw the two teenagers I'd met, Rufus and Rocco, and stopped to say hi.

"The mural looks great," I told them. I knew the young woman they had painted was supposed to be African-American, a girl from the projects about to make good with her life. The folds of her long gown fanned out, became frames, each depicting a moment in a future to come: In one, she clutched a diploma, in another she worked in a lab. Her face aged from one frame to the next, but her eyes always kept their regal sense of beauty, regardless of whether she was standing behind a podium, holding a baby, or rocking gray-haired in a chair. Across the breast of the central figure flowed a banner that said POSSIBILITY. I knew she was supposed to be a black girl from Philadelphia, but to me she seemed my an Indian princess, one who knew better than to wait on anyone anymore.

I couldn't believe how fast the workers had put it up, and said so. Rufus told me project was behind schedule; the dedication was supposed to be tomorrow night at six. "We'll finish it up," he reassured me. "Even if we have to work all night."

"You should come to the ceremony," Rocco said. "And bring donuts!"

I thanked him, but said no. "I've got a date," I explained. I had finally worked up the nerve to call that number on the potato.

"Shot *down*!" Rufus laughed, as he returned to painting.

I told them goodbye and headed off.

When I got to The Last Drop and walked through the newly fixed front door, I found Remy sitting with Tommy at a little mosaic-topped table, back by where Aleta stood working the counter. Tommy was bent over a newspaper. He held his head in his hands, and his brow was knit with lines as he soldiered through his dyslexia to make sense of what he was reading. I could tell he was excited about the article. Waif, Andrew's crazy, make-do sister in the big city, had just published a book.

"Says so right here in the *Weekly*," Tommy told me. "She's jumped on this whole Generation X bandwagon thing, has written something called *The Official Slacker's Guide to Slacking Through Life*." He pointed out the big black-and-white publicity photo of the former Miss Trouble, who now looked healthy and perfectly lit for the camera.

"Well I'll be a monkey's uncle," said Remy. "Did she write about me in that thing? If so, I expect a royalty check."

Aleta came over with a cup coffee just then, fixed for me the way she knew I liked it. “Is it a novel?” she asked.

Tommy snapped his newspaper closed. “Nah, more of a how-to book. As if any of us need *that*.”

Aleta rolled her eyes. “You’re tellin’ me the whole time she was sitting here flippin’ out on us she was also taking notes?”

“All I can say is I damn well better be in it,” said Remy. “The only thing worse than her publishing a book is if she publishes one and I’m not in it.”

I laughed out loud and Remy did, too.

Tommy tossed his paper onto the ledge beneath the open casement window and leaned towards us, propping his chin up with his hand. His mouth slid into a grin as he changed the subject. “*I* say he’s run off to join the *circus*.”

This was how it typically started, the new game they had invented for my benefit over our last couple evenings hanging out at The Last Drop. Not “Where’s Waldo?”, but rather, “What Happened to Andrew?” Since neither Andrew nor Steven was around to ask, players could imagine whatever possibilities they liked, scenarios that ran the gamut from the elaborate to the mundane.

Remy furrowed his eyebrows and took a turn. “I say Steven had an affair. Andrew simply bailed.”

Aleta called from the counter to take her shot. “Then I say Andrew found out, chopped Steven up, and buried him under the floorboards in his apartment.” She looked at me. “Tell us, Allison, has that place started to smell?”

Tommy’s eyes grew big in mock horror. “What if *Steven* chopped up *Andrew*?”

“Uh-uh,” said Remy. “Because Andrew sent me that postcard. His handwriting proves he’s at least alive.”

That was certainly a fact I was more than a little glad for.

But Tommy had slipped, breaking one of the game’s few rules: scenarios couldn’t dispute the few facts we knew.

“Well,” he backpedaled. “What if Steven made Andrew give up weed, and Andrew realized how absurd that is, so he, like, headed off to some secret pot farm to work in quality control....”

“I think he stole some paintings from the museum and is off fencing them for cash,” Aleta said.

“...I mean, God, what a dream job. The dude had better remember me at Christmastime....”

Remy turned to me and spoke. “Hey, Allison, you’re awfully quiet tonight. What do you think happened?”

I shrugged my shoulders and had to admit, “I just don’t know.”

Maybe our hearts were not fully in it that night. Rounds of the game never did last long, as real life swept back in to wash away such distractions--but this one was shorter than most. Remy might have egged me on further, but I could tell he was tired from the bookstore. And Tommy got up just then to leave. As he

did, a gust of wind blew in, rattling the pages of the paper he had left on the window ledge. I felt a sense of change in the air.

“This guy I hooked up with promised to help me with my new application,” he said by way of apology.

Remy groaned. “Don’t tell me you’re sending yet *another* video to *The Real World*.”

“Nah,” Tommy said, “I’ve given up on MTV. I don’t care what Waif writes in her book. At some point we’ve all got to grow up. This application is for restaurant school.” He beamed proudly.

“Well,” said Aleta, calling over from the bar, “I hope you take a course in washing dishes, ‘cause that’s what you really need.” But before she could berate him any further, a couple of new customers stole her attention away.

Tommy left and Remy picked up the paper, leaving me to play on in my mind alone. But I had given up any idea of actually tracking Andrew down; try as I might, I was no Nancy Drew. Instead, I knew that what I was really starting to uncover was the mystery of myself. And to figure that out, I would need to rework the past. But where to begin was always the tricky part.

Over the last few days I had finished reading all of Andrew’s journals, though I knew I would likely be going through them again in the weeks and months ahead. But for now I had moved on to reading the works of literature I had stacked so neatly on his shelf. They kept me company on the roof of his building mornings before work or late at night as I lay in bed listening to the hum of a newly purchased. It was time to educate myself. After all, Andrew had come to this city to go to college, and all I’d been through was the school of hard knocks. But his old apartment was my home now, and his old books would become my make-do college education for now. One day I knew I would read through them all. But I had started with the one about Scheherazade first, for the story of her life appealed to me. For one thousand and one nights, the ancient Sassanid Queen had spun her stories into her very survival, telling them to stave off her husband from taking her head. I appreciated how she kept herself safe and alive that way, conjuring tales of Aladdin and his magical lamp, Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves, Sinbad and his voyages to far-off places.

That was the book I had brought with me to the coffee shop that night—a week to the day since I had arrived in Philadelphia. But I didn’t feel like reading it right then. Instead I pulled from my bag a fountain pen and the brand new journal I had just bought from the fancy new bookstore up on Walnut Street. The journal had cost me a lot of money, but I liked the way its smooth brown leather cover warmed up my palm like another person’s hand. It gave me hope that the words I might put in it would be worth setting down. I sat in the coffee shop and uncapped my pen, and thought for a long time about the story I wanted to write.

A story for you, Andrew. And I wanted to tell it the way you once told stories to me, long ago when we huddled together in our family’s cold garage and you spun out Indian legends to make me feel

safe. But what I wanted to put on the blank pages was the story of you and me. And I knew, in a way, it was a story for Elizabeth too, since I'd have to make good on my promise some day and tell her the truth about our mother, her real father, the circumstances of her birth. For I was still a believer; even if it meant tearing open old wounds, I still believed truth counted and was worth seeking out.

For I was learning things. From the letters I had read, I had gleaned things about our father, and I understood better the frustration he must have felt having survived one minefield only to come home to another. And I was learning new things about our mother all the time. Not just the hardships she'd endured, of which she constantly reminded me, but about how, if we weren't careful, life could turn us so fragile we'd have no choice but to take refuge in pills and lies.

But most of all, I had finally learned things about you. What facts I still didn't know imagination would surely fill in. I wanted, in writing, to make sense of you, and in doing so, make sense of myself. So I pressed my pen to the page in the hope that the words would flow out in a hand sure and fair. But I hesitated--where to begin?

I thought, each person's life is like a strange, impossible river, full of twists and turns that loop back on themselves. They intersect and diverge time and again, as the river cheats and refuses to play by expected rules. I wondered to myself if you would see it that way, and hoped someday I might get the chance to ask.

The image that came to mind just then was one of you running alongside me to the safety of the woods, back when you were a boy and I a small girl. As my pen finally started to move across the page, I smiled, comforted a little, that each time I thought back to the past my memories always started with you.

Vita

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