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## Arkansans

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Arkansans

A Thesis

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

Masters of Fine Arts  
in  
Creative Writing

by

Jennifer Bulmansi

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## One of Those Nights

Halfway between Batesville and Jonesboro, surrounded by soybean fields, rising up into the air like a couple of stretched hourglasses, sit the dual chimneys of the Independence County power plant. That evening the coal-born smoke rose from the funnels against a pale ruby sky.

“J.T.,” Colton said, “you with me?” I looked over at Colton as he turned his head in my direction for a moment, then back to the road we were flying down in his pickup. His nostrils flared, and his lips screwed up tight. He’d been making that face since we were kids. It meant a fight.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’ve got your back, man. Always.” But I couldn’t shake the feeling of panic in my chest, that feeling of waking from a dream of falling down a flight of stairs. I knew I couldn’t stop Colton, unless maybe I told him what I really thought about Danielle. They’d been together these last three years of high school, but that didn’t seem to matter to her. She was no good.

I’d dropped hints. I told Colton about the party he missed while his family was up in

Branson for the weekend. “She was wearing that pair of zebra-print pants,” I said. He knew the ones. They stretched over her cherry-shaped behind and twiggy legs, leaving little doubt about the absence of panties. “And a see-through shirt.” Every detail of her lacy, black bra stood out beneath her white, transparent tank top.

What I couldn’t tell him was the way she’d backed me up against a wall. Some sophomore threw a kegger at his parents’ lake house on Bull Shoals while they were out of town. The air of the cabin vibrated with a mix of old, bump-and-grind-inducing gangster rap—Tupac, Notorious B.I.G., and Dr. Dre. People from high schools in all the surrounding towns were showing up, and I thought the walls might bust.

I could smell the cinnamon on Danielle’s breath from the bottle of Hot Damn she’d been drinking. “It’s not fair,” Danielle whined, pushing the tips of her fingers against my chest. “Guys get to walk around with their shirts off and it’s no big deal. Why can’t I walk around topless?” The way she zigzagged her fingers down my abdomen made my blood rush. I should have told her to go home, but instead, we danced.

The air from her nostrils tickled my neck as she inhaled and exhaled. “Your cologne smells good.” I had a buzz going, and it was difficult to block out thoughts of where things might lead if we left together, but then I spotted Kylee, my ex. Kylee had brought the guy she’d started dating days after we broke up. Some older guy she’d met on a college visit. Buzz killed and heart aching, I headed for the door.

But right before I left, Aaron Linwood, Jonesboro’s quarterback—our rival—showed up. It was almost funny the first thing Danielle said to him was, “My boyfriend’s gonna sack your sorry ass when we play you.” Aaron just smiled and asked if Colton was around. Aaron said he didn’t want any trouble. Aaron should have thought about that before he went skinny dipping

with Colton's girlfriend.

Now we sped down the two-lane highway with The Triplets—Kermit, Chris, and Conway—in the truck right behind us. They were fat, freckled farm boys with a talent for emptying the Mazzio's pizza buffet during off-campus lunches. Their size made them good backup. A vague plan was assembled earlier that afternoon in the Walmart parking lot: find Aaron's Jeep, slash its tires, and bust its lights and windshield. But Colton wasn't the ravage and retreat type. His mouth drew up in a smirk when he threw punches.

"That slimy piece of shit," Colton said. "And the whole damn state of Arkansas thinks he's some kind of golden boy." That's one of the things that concerned me most about this misadventure. Aaron was a big deal. He'd been getting visits from coaches all over the South Eastern Conference. He was a constant topic on the *Drive Time Sports* radio program. He'd unofficially committed to the Razorbacks.

Colton opened the console with his right hand, his left still on the steering wheel. "Pour me some of that Uncle Jim."

"Gotcha, man." I topped off our Route-44 Sonic cups, watched the Coke-stained ice shrink under the whisky's heat, and slugged. I turned up the volume on our pregame anthems, Limp Bizkit blared through the speakers. The lyrics and the liquor did their job, and before long, I wanted to break something.

I still don't understand how Danielle did it. How she wove a tale that involved her voluntarily removing all her clothes with some other guy and said it wasn't her fault, I'll never understand. The confrontation was public, in front of Danielle's locker, the inside of its door plastered with Abercrombie models who wore their pants so low they surely shaved every inch of their bodies. "We just kissed," she'd said, after claiming nothing happened, that the skinny

dipping was a fabrication. Only there were too many witnesses. Then, “I don’t remember. Maybe more. I was drunk.” Followed by the permission Colton needed. “He took advantage of me.”

Now we took the exit to Jonesboro, and I directed Colton because I’ve played golf tournaments at Sage Meadows, a course surrounded by the type of homes on the cover of my mother’s *Southern Living* magazine. Aaron’s house sat beside a fairway on the back nine. I’d played alongside Aaron in a tournament in junior high. “That’s my house,” Aaron said. “We just moved in last month.” He seemed really proud of it, but not in an obnoxious way.

“That’s it,” I said when I recognized the thick, square-shaped columns, porches, and sunroom to the side. There was a play fort in the back. Aaron had either a little brother or sister.

“Are you sure?” Colton asked.

“Yeah,” I said. “I’m sure. What? Want me to ring the doorbell first and ask if I’ve reached the Linwood’s residence? Or better yet, go ask the neighbors? ‘Excuse me, is that where Aaron Linwood lives? Thanks. I just want to make sure I vandalize the right car.’”

“Don’t be a douche.”

“Whatever, dude.” The whiskey had loosened me up. “This is a freaking stupid idea. I can’t believe we drove all the way out here just to screw with this guy.” It’s not just Aaron, I kept thinking, it’s the entire Jonesboro football team, the entire state following his game highlights when they air on the ten o’clock news. “This is stupid. His car’s not even here.”

“Then you can stay in the truck.” Colton pulled a baseball bat from behind his seat and hopped out of the cab. I was relieved the house was dark, thinking no one would be home. After signaling The Triplets to stay put, Colton strode up the driveway, turning his head a little from side to side. I imagine he was trying to look inconspicuous, but how can that be managed with a baseball bat in hand?



He looked through a garage window, and then he disappeared behind the other side of the house. Thinking Colton might actually try breaking in, triggering an alarm and getting all of us caught, I climbed out of the truck.

Then Colton came sprinting back around the corner, followed by what looked like a black wolf.

“Shit, man!” I hollered. “Run!” I was about to hop back in the truck, but Colton tripped, falling face down on the driveway pavement when the dog latched onto his ankle. I could hear the hem of his jeans ripping. I grabbed the baseball bat from where it fell in front of Colton and jabbed the animal’s side. It wouldn’t let go. Not knowing what else to do, I struck one clean blow to the dog’s head. “Shit!” The dog whined and rolled over on its side. A low growl came up from its belly like air seeping out of a balloon, but the blank eyes and limp tongue meant it was dead.

“Mutherfucker!” Colton heaved. “Let’s get out of here.” The Triplets hadn’t moved from the truck behind us, and as we climbed in the cab, they took off, probably to hit up the Chinese buffet in Jonesboro. Colton hit the gas. “Fuck, dude! You killed Fido!”

“What the hell was I supposed to do?” I shouldn’t have hit it so hard.

“Piece of shit tore my jeans,” Colton said.

The dead dog would be lying on the driveway when Aaron got home. “It was a German Shepard,” I said. “Those are nice dogs.” I wanted to pop Colton’s face with the butt of that baseball bat. “What’d you do? Go in the house or something?”

“There’s a fence in the back.”

“What the hell were you planning on doing back there?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “That’s what I was trying to figure out when the freaking dog

started chasing me.”

“Damn it. He’s gonna figure out it was us—you.” Me. He messed with something that belonged to Colton, and we’d messed with something that belonged to him.

By the time we passed the power plant, it was the only source of light in a ten-mile radius, still blowing coal ghosts into the air. It wasn’t late, but all the surrounding darkness and the long ride amped up my desire to crawl into a hole and sleep through whatever consequence might hunt me down.

We went to Colton’s house and tried to act as if nothing happened. Farrah, Colton’s mom, pretty-faced but plump in gray sweats, was stretched out in the middle of their red leather sectional. She was eating a bowl of brownie batter and flipping stations. “What’ve you boys been up to?” She looked up from the television, giving us a moment of her attention, smiling as if she were still Miss Arkansas 1980, but the Prozac prevented her from focusing on us or noticing Colton’s ripped jeans and scrapes.

Colton’s dad was out of town on business, so we openly helped ourselves to the beer in the fridge and then headed down to the basement, which had been fitted out as a game room with a big screen.

Colton’s younger sister, Skipper, a ninth grader at Batesville Junior High, was down there watching Shark Week. “I wish I had a fish tank,” she said. “A big one.” She waved her hand through the air. “Like an aquarium the size of this TV. Then I could have a pet shark, just a little one.”

“You’re a freak,” Colton said. “I gotta make a call.” He went back upstairs.

Skipper flipped her middle finger at Colton’s back as he ascended the steps. Instead of risking another boy, Colton’s mother opted for adopting a daughter. Though this plan backfired

to a certain extent. Skip refused to wear pink or anything that sparkled. Farrah finally gave up on putting Skipper in beauty pageants after Skipper demonstrated how to clean a fish during the talent portion of the Miss Ideal Bakery Pageant.

I noticed Skip had a jar sitting next to her. “What’s that, Squirt?”

Skip passed me the jar that I could see was filled with tadpoles. “I’m planning my revenge on Sarah Elizabeth Petree.”

“Uh-oh,” I said. “What’d she do? Kiss some boy you like? Tie your shoelaces together when you weren’t looking?”

“Neither,” Skip said. I was surprised to see her cheeks pink. “She was cheating on a Social Studies test, which is dumb anyway. But when she got caught, she said the cheat card that fell on the floor wasn’t hers, that it was mine. And she’s such a suck up, Mrs. Clevy believed her.”

“That bitch,” I said in a high pitch.

Skip started laughing her hysterical, little-girl laugh that I worried she’d lose soon now that she was fourteen.

Colton stood at the bottom of the basement steps. “Hey, J.T.,” he said, “Danielle’s about to come over. She and I have some stuff to sort out.”

“She’s trash,” Skip said under her breath.

“So,” I said to Colton.

“I think we need some time alone,” Colton said.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I asked, feeling heat at the base of my neck. “After everything you dragged me through tonight, I’m supposed to get out of here?”

“I don’t know, man. Can’t you just go home or something?”

“My car’s in the Walmart parking lot,” I reminded him, “and I already told my parents I was staying at your place tonight.”

“Tell them you changed your mind.”

“My car?” I asked.

Colton tossed me his truck keys. “Just bring it back tomorrow.”

As I passed by Colton, I couldn’t resist the urge to shove him with my shoulder.

“Danielle’s a slut.”

Colton grabbed me around the middle, and we fell to the floor. “Take it back!” He had my right arm pinned behind my back. “Take it back!”

“No freaking way!” My face burned against the carpet.

Skip yelled at Colton to let me go, and she must have jumped him because he sent her flying backwards where she slammed into the wall. He started apologizing to her and helped her up.

“I hate you,” she said.

I ran upstairs, and Skip followed. Farrah was passed out on the sectional.

We were outside, Skip and I. “Where are you going?” she asked.

“I don’t know.”

“Let me go with you,” she said, not asking.

I drove, and we stayed quiet until she asked, “Do guys actually like Danielle? She dresses so trashy and acts so fake. I can’t stand her.”

“Maybe,” I said. “It kind of depends on the guy.” I’d known Skip her entire life. I wasn’t about to tell her I thought Danielle was hot and send the wrong message. “You’re right. She’s trash. Never be like her.”

Sober but tired, I pulled into the Sonic. I ordered a Coke for me and an M&M Blast for Skipper.

“You’re not hurt, are you?” I asked.

“I’ve had worse on the soccer field,” she said. “I had worse when I was in the fourth grade and you were in the seventh. Do you remember how it snowed that year? We all went sledding, but you and Colton wouldn’t give me a turn. Then, when you finally did, and I came down the hill, you’d put a tire in the path. When I hit it, I went flying and landed on a holly bush.”

“I’m still really sorry about that. It was Colton’s idea.”

“But you’re the one who did it.”

It was true. There was a pattern I’d been dumb enough to ignore. I thought about Aaron’s dead dog and how it had probably been discovered by then.

“You know I have my learner’s permit,” Skip said, “but no one will take me to practice. So if you’re really feeling guilty –”

“No way,” I said.

“How come?” she asked. “It’s Colton’s truck.”

“Good point.” If she scratched it up or put a dent in the bumper, it’d still be less than the punishment he deserved. “Let me think about where to take you.” Legally, I wasn’t old enough to take her practicing, and she’d be likely to get us caught with her amateur driving skills. I thought about the resting acres spaced between the soybean fields. We could make it there in about forty minutes. What else were we going to do? I could’ve probably found a party, but there’s no way I’d take Skip.

I backtracked the same two-lane highway I’d been on earlier that evening and was glad to

be wasting Colton's gas. "How much driving experience do you have?" I asked.

"I've played a lot of *Mario Kart*," she said. "Colton says it's just like driving."

"Good thing we're using Colton's truck."

When the giant chimneys came into view, I slowed, looking for tire tracks easier to follow than arbitrarily creating a fresh set. I found a dirt path and followed it off the road, all the way to a distant tree line. On the other side, we were shielded from the road. An empty field stretched out before us. I killed the engine and handed Skipper the keys. "Step one. Start the car."

We traded spots. When she turned the key and the truck roared, she laughed like a mad scientist and said, "It's alive! It's alive!"

"You're insane." I directed her through the motions, and we jerked our way around the field, until she got a feel for accelerating and braking without giving her passenger whiplash.

"This is nothing like *Mario Kart*," she said.

After a while, I took the wheel again and cut up the field pulling donuts, making a mess of tracks in the moonlight. "I'm getting dizzy," she said, so I stopped. Then we sat talking.

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" she asked.

"I don't know." I said. "Maybe I'll become an engineer, like my dad."

"I think you seem like an engineer."

"What does that even mean?" Semi-delirious from the late hour, I found myself laughing hard. She was laughing too, but I doubt for the same reason. She was making me look at the future, something I tried to ignore but knew I couldn't.

After I caught my breath, she caught me off guard. "What did you mean earlier?" she asked. "What were you talking about when you asked Colton if he really expected you to leave

after everything he'd dragged you through tonight?"

I had that feeling in my gut again, the one right before you catch yourself or fall after you trip. There was no reason to explain how I felt, but I knew if I told anyone, she would be the one to tell. I told her everything. I told her how we'd planned to vandalize Aaron's car. I told her how I killed the dog.

She seemed older, more mature sitting there, listening. "You've had a long night," she said. Her eyelids drooped.

It was late. According to the clock on the dash it was after two in the morning, and I drifted off.

I was awoken by the light of dawn creeping up behind the chimneys of the power plant. My neck throbbed from sleeping upright with my head tilted back. Skipper was curled up on the bench seat beside me, her head just touching my thigh. Her lips were slightly parted, and she breathed steadily. I studied the angle of her jawline and the shape of her ear with her wheat-colored hair tucked behind it. That was the first time I noticed she was beautiful, not just pretty.

I had a vision of us, Skipper and me, in our twenties, dating. Then I thought about how Colton would hate it. It wouldn't matter. It'd be a bonus.

Skipper's eyelids fluttered open, and she sat up quickly. "I'm going to be in so much trouble."

"Don't worry about it," I said, despite the summersault my stomach performed. "You hungry, Squirt?"

"Yeah," she said, pressing her gurgling abdomen.

"I know a gas station up the road that serves biscuits and gravy. We'll have something to eat, and then we'll get you back home." I wasn't ready to let her go or face what might come,

knowing the consequences would catch up to me soon enough.

I pulled onto the two-lane. In the rearview mirror, I watched the smoke rise up to the clouds.



## Cinder Blocks

Spade in hand, I chop at the thick base of a stubborn, sapling-sized weed I should probably ignore. I have the wrong tool. Besides, nothing can make this place beautiful. But it's my job to make a house a home. That's what we decided.

My son, Jayden, says it reminds him of a Lego house, especially since I've painted it white. Nine-hundred square feet encased in blocks once gray, now white. It took Warren, my husband, three days to notice the change. He's dead to the world these days from working nights at the steel mill.

September's temperatures subside, but salty sweat still stings my eyes. Vision blurred from tears, I thwack the weed again and again, until the outer skin shreds. I twist it round and round, willing it to break. I've almost got it, but I hear Tessa crying inside. I peel off my damp gardening gloves and leave them at the door with my dirty, old clogs.

I lift Tessa from the playpen beside the door. It's pretty and new with pink and brown paisley designs. We sold the rest of the nursery furniture before we left our last house. I spent

months furnishing and decorating that place, getting everything ready before she was born. That was a home.

“Don’t wake Daddy.” I shush my rosy-cheeked baby. “I’m sorry you woke up alone.” The weight of her small body feels good in my arms. “You are a bundle of joy,” I whisper with my lips touching her soft, dark curls. We sit in the old wooden rocker and stare into each other’s eyes. Her irises are darkening. I think they’ll be brown like mine.

She roots around at my chest. “Okay,” I say. She’s just turned seven months, but nursing her is easier than fixing baby food. What’s more, I know it’s only a brief matter of time before this quiet period of ours will end. I swear it feels like yesterday Jayden was the baby in my arms. Now I probably couldn’t hold him if he let me. He’s developed a whole new set of emotions and personhood. I worry about these changes affecting him. Kids his age are old enough to be cruel, but he’s not the only one suffering. This town seems to be dying a slow death.

My eyes trail to the closed bedroom door which could use a coat of fresh paint. The man sleeping beyond it is the one whom I worry about most. I resist the urge to look in on him because the hinges squeak, and I’d hate to wake him.

Yesterday’s mail, nothing but bills—insurance, utilities, credit cards—and catalogues, is sitting on the coffee table. A cable promotional headlines the front of the weekly advertisement pages. I know Warren misses watching ESPN and other sports stations. When he’s awake during the day, he mopes like a zombie too tired and depressed to lend a hand. This would at least give him something to do. I run through the budget in my head. We paid off the Master Card in July. It’s possible we could spare thirty dollars a month for him to have some kind of entertainment. But that’s still thirty dollars a month we could put down on other debts. Or, maybe, Warren could find some other work and take a pay cut? That way he could sleep like a human being

instead of something nocturnal.

Tessa finishes nursing and begins to babble, thrilled with having discovered her own voice. But volume control is a concept she'll fail to grasp for months yet. "Let's go outside," I tell her.

I spread a blanket for us beneath the umbrella elm. She chews on a wooden alphabet block, trying to free the teeth encased beneath her gums. Leaning against the tree, I recreate the house lying before me. I clear away the tangled mess of weeds and ivy in the flowerbeds and insert red rose bushes and black mulch. Then I add black shutters and change the door from taupe to crimson. That would look much better, much homier—quaint, even.

Things could change soon. A new car dealership could open in place of the old one, and Warren could get a sales job again. If he does, I swear we'll do things differently. We won't live beyond our means. We'll save and buy everything with cash. We'll climb out of this hole and build something secure.

Tessa and I go back in after an hour or so because she's trying to escape the safety of the blanket, and I don't want her getting bit up by fire ants or centipedes. Tessa plays in her pen, while I scramble eggs with onions and left-over taco meat for Warren. I place the mix of breakfast and dinner, at this late lunch hour, on a tray.

The bedroom door creaks when I push it open, but Warren doesn't stir. He sleeps on his stomach with the right side of his pale face pressed into the pillow. He tans easily, but it's been too long since he's been in the sun. The shadows beneath his eyes refuse to disappear. Perhaps I should get some thicker curtains to block out the hazy light the mini-blinds can't seem to hinder.

I stroke his strong forearms where his pores have become beds for bits of metal that won't wash away. They look like dark, metallic freckles beginning where his work gloves stop.

He should wear a long-sleeved shirt to work, but he says it's too hot. The grinding machine he operates sends bits of steel dust into the air. I hope he keeps a mask over his mouth and nose.

My gentle attempt at waking him is failing, so I kiss his neck below the ear. He just turns his head the other way and shifts his body so his back faces me.

He was White River Ford's best salesman. They were going to make him a manager. Everything was falling into place — perfect husband, perfect house, perfect boy, perfect girl, perfect me. I leave the tray beside the bed.

In the kitchen, I put Tessa in her high chair and give her a tea towel to play with so I can fold the rest of the laundry. She babbles and squawks, but I don't try to quiet her. If Warren made some effort to get up just an hour or two earlier, he could hunt for a suitable job. There are plenty of towns between here and the next big city, a mere two hours away.

"What do you think?" I ask the baby. "Could Daddy find a decent job with proper hours? Maybe he could even watch you for a few hours during the day, so I could get some part-time work. Would you mind staying home with Dada?"

She finds the tag on the towel and picks at it. Warren and I have had this discussion. Tessa still needs me, and he's too tired. I'm tired.

I let the pots clatter as I get out a saucepan for making baby food. I'm cubing carrots when the hinges squeak.

I hear Warren set the tray on the table behind me. "This is cold."

"What do you want me to do about it?" I ask with my back to him.

"Do you have to use that bitchy tone?"

"Don't cuss me in front of the child."

"I'm not cussing you. I'm cussing your tone."

“That makes no sense.” I point at Tessa. “Would you want her husband saying, ‘Don’t take that bitch tone with me,’ to her?”

“Jesus, Tara. That’s not what I said.”

“Close enough,” I spit. You’d think a smaller space would make a man look bigger. But in our tiny kitchen, he looks shrunken, like when an insect gets trapped, dies, and shrivels up. His sharp green eyes have dimmed. Their spark has gone missing, and the high cheek bones that used to make him look like a movie star have turned him gaunt.

“I’m going to work,” he says, heading to the door.

“But you don’t have to be there for another two hours,” I holler.

“Overtime,” he mutters.

“But you’ll miss —” He slams the door. “Jayden coming home from school.” The old Ford, our only vehicle at the moment, coughs to life and barrels away.

I shovel down mouthfuls of the cold eggs while fixing Tessa’s carrots. She starts shrieking for attention. As soon as she’s in my arms, she’s rooting at my chest, and Jayden’s knocking at the door.

“Hey, honey. How was school?” I ask him.

“Fine.” He drops his backpack and heads to his room.

“Where are you going? You come talk to me.”

“Jeez. I’m just getting my DS.”

“Don’t you say ‘jeez’ to me like that.”

“Okay. Sorry, Mom,” he says without even looking up at me. Green eyes fixed on the game, his fingers are already busy pressing buttons.

I look over his shoulder and see he’s maneuvering blocks on the little screen. “That’s like

Tetris,” I say.

“Duh.”

“No, sir.” I grab his game. “You quit that attitude.”

“Hey! Give me that back!” Following me into the kitchen, he reaches for my up-stretched arm as I put the game on top of the refrigerator.

“I’ll just get it with a stool when you’re not looking.”

“Then you’ll be in real trouble. I’ll tell your father —”

“He don’t care!”

“It’s ‘he *doesn’t* care,’ not ‘he *don’t* care.’ And yes, he does care.”

“Then why is he never around?”

“He can’t be around because he has to work.” Tessa is fussing in my arms. “He does what he has to do to earn a living and provide for us, so we’ll have food to eat and clothes to wear and a place to sleep.”

“Well, he must be doing a bad job!” he hollers as the baby digs her sharp little nails into my neck.

I take a swat at Jayden before my brain starts working.

“You hit me,” he says, holding both his hands over the side of his face where my palm met his cheek.

“Oh, baby, let me see.” I try to pull his hand from his face. “I’m so sorry.”

He pushes me away and stomps off to his little closet of a room. Too exhausted to follow him as I should, I sit in the rocker with Tessa and take deep breaths, but the tears go torrential anyway. I don’t know how to make any of this right.

How do you make an eight-year-old forget? I know there are things I can’t forget.

Sometimes, you forget why something happened but clearly remember what happened. I remember the rose-pink phone with a cord, back when phones had cords, but I don't remember why Daddy yanked the phone out of the wall when Mama said she'd call the police. And I don't remember why Mama said she'd call the police. I remember the ripe, purple plums in the fruit bowl Mama kept on the wicker table. They left juicy smears on the kitchen wall and floor after they hit Mama's arms she had raised up in front of her face.

I had never heard my father so loud. And I never heard him that loud again. I don't remember why he was so mad, and I'm certain he hoped I'd forget. It was that same week he gave Mama a pearl necklace she still wears on Sundays. She wore it to his funeral, too. The day Mama got the necklace, there was a pink box on my bed with a note which read: *Because I love you*. The baby doll I had wanted for months and hadn't expected to get until Christmas was mine three months early. I sold it in a garage sale some years ago.

The baby in my arms deserves better. The boy in the bedroom deserves better.

During supper I don't bother telling Jayden I'm sorry, instead I say, "I know you miss your cartoons."

He seems to be listening carefully.

"Tomorrow we're going to get cable again."

"Really?" He's smiling ear to ear.

"Yes. Because I love you."

\* \* \*

The cable guy, whose name I've already forgotten, is programming the remote. He's about my

age, maybe a little younger or older. I wonder how much he makes an hour, but that's not the sort of thing you ask people. He doesn't strike me as the world's brightest individual, so it's hard to swallow Warren's employment conditions.

Warren left for work an hour ago, so this will be a surprise when he wakes up tomorrow. With the station stuck on channel twelve, an episode of *Jerry Springer* comes blazing into the living room. Two women are fighting it out: "bleep this" and "bleep that" is all it sounds like. I cover Tessa's ears. "I saw it on Facebook!" is the only complete sentence I catch. That's when he turns to me and says, "Facebook is a horrible thing."

"Oh. Yeah," I say, unsure of how to respond.

"Facebook ruined my marriage."

"I'm sorry." I pause a moment. "That's horrible." Then I retreat to the kitchen and start grinding coffee beans with nothing better to do while a strange man is in the next room.

"Are you making coffee?" he asks.

"Uh. Yeah. I can drink it all day."

"Oh, me too. Do you mind if I have a cup?"

"No. That's fine." Though I can't help but think about how expensive coffee has become lately. "I'll get you some."

"You're an angel."

He sips the coffee, and I wonder if the remote is done loading or doing whatever it's supposed to be doing. "My wife cheated on me," he says. "I found out because there were pictures on Facebook."

"Oh. That's truly terrible." And it is, but it's an odd thing to burden a stranger with.

"Let me show you how this remote works."



I'm sitting on the sofa, and he plops down too close to me. He smells of sweat and cigarette smoke and there's a filminess to his dirty-blond hair and facial stubble. I wonder if the remote demonstration is really necessary.

"You're a stay-at-home-mom, huh?" He glances around the room like a property surveyor.

"Yes. I am." I try to keep my face friendly. "So we're good to go here?" I point to the TV.

"Yes, ma'am."

I get up, and he follows. "Well," I say, "thank you very much." I'm reaching for the door.

"You're most welcome," he says. "Thank you for the coffee." He extends his hand, and I shake it, nodding and smiling him onward through the door.

I wash my hands in the kitchen. "What the hell is wrong with people," I say, letting the water flow and flow over my right hand, trying to understand what he meant by telling me about his wife and wishing Warren were home.

When Tessa's napping, I flip on the TV. I skim the channel guide looking for anything worth watching. The Home and Garden station catches my fancy. I watch with the volume turned down so low I can't make out what they're saying. An ugly old kitchen with lime green cabinets gets dismantled with a sledge hammer, and I imagine how good it must feel to tear something apart. Then the rebuilding begins. In an hour, something ugly is turned into a sleek, stainless-steel, chef-worthy kitchen.

But when it's over, my surroundings are still the same. I have work to do. Not grand cabinet-smashing work. I have mountains of laundry and mopping and cooking.

Jayden actually hugs me when he comes home, so pleased to have his cartoons back. He

stays fixated on the screen for the next couple of hours.

I'm cooking our supper, wishing I were back in my pretty kitchen with matching appliances and ample countertops. I had room to breathe in there, but here the steam from the pan suffocates me. My eyes sting from sweating onions and garlic. Tessa's grown tired of her chair, but I'm trying to butcher a whole chicken and can't hold her.

"Jayden," I say, "come entertain your sister."

Tessa's fussing louder. She's headed for an all-out meltdown, but I can't stop cutting now.

"Jayden!"

"Just a minute," he says. "This episode is almost over."

"Turn that thing off and get in here!"

Tessa is wailing, and Jayden can't calm her.

"Damnit, Jayden. Can't you just do what I ask when I ask it?" I feel like throwing something at him. And if I had something other than a knife in my hand, I might.

His down-turned lips shiver, and his sharp eyes glisten. "I hate this," he says. "I hate it here. I hate you. I hate Dad. I hate everything."

I start reaching for him, but my hands are covered in raw chicken. He retreats while I wash the slime away.

Jayden's muffled crying is all that remains once I've quieted Tessa. I must go to him. I'm still not sure how I plan to fix things when I open his door. He's lying on his bed, sobbing into his pillow, a miniature version of his father.

He flinches slightly when I touch my hand to his back, but then he relaxes.

"I'm sorry," I whisper, "about everything."

His eyes, ringed like a raccoon's but with red splotches, look so green. "It's okay, Mom." He sniffles. "I know it's not your fault."

But so much is my fault. I wanted too much too soon. Even this house falls into that category. "How would you like to spend the night at Gran's?" I ask. I haven't spoken to my mother in weeks, but I know she'll be happy to have her grandbabies to spoil.

"Yes. I mean, I'd like to." I can see his face registering cheap McDonald's Happy Meal toys, no bedtime, and a gallon of chocolate milk at his disposal.

"Okay. Pack a bag with clothes for the whole weekend, just in case. You know how Gran likes to keep you once she's got you."

"Sure, Mom."

My mother is more than happy about the proposal. She's been dying to help out, but I haven't wanted her help. I fold up Tessa's pretty playpen and pack plenty of baby clothes.

"I just need some me time," I say to Mother.

"Don't you worry about a thing, honey. I know how to take care of these sweet babies."

The children are packed up in her Buick, and they go rumbling down the road.

I sit staring at the dark television and think about smashing it, smashing my pathetic attempt at providing the good life.

My footsteps ring in this space empty of my children, empty of Warren. I open the front door and taste the crispness of the clear, September night. I'm reminded of bonfires and cold beer in the woods. I can almost feel the steady weight of Warren's arm over my shoulder and smell the musk of cologne and cigarettes. We were eighteen and immortal. In the glow of that fire I saw an even greater light inside him. His sparky green eyes sharpened as he smiled and whispered half-drunk in my ear. "I love you forever."

“Forever,” I echo. It seemed silly at the time, but now aching grips my chest, and I long for that distant moment and the warmth of a flame, an all-consuming blaze that erases everything ugly.

\* \* \*

Fire is efficient. It’s simple, a simple mistake, leaving the gas on. I leave a candle burning on the windowsill. From outside, it looks as beautiful as a promise, that little flame glowing in the dark.

I walk for hours. When I reach the steel mill, I pop open the rusty back of Warren’s truck and wait. I sit in the dark, listening to the sound of heavy machinery. The monotonous screeching slows until all turns quiet. On the breeze I catch the familiar scent of something aflame.

Gravel crunches beneath heavy feet. Doors open and close. Engines start up. Warren, not noticing me, opens the door of his truck. I hop down from the tailgate. When our eyes meet, he looks surprised. “Tara.” He begins to smile, then asks, “Where are the kids?”

“With my mother.”

“Right.”

“I needed a little space to think.”

He throws his head back and opens his mouth as if to laugh, but there is no chuckle. “Right,” he says, “because you’re the one that’s got it so hard.” He looks at the steel mill.

“I didn’t walk all the way here to pick a fight.”

“You walked here?”

“How else? I couldn’t stay in that house. All I wanted was to come see you.”

“Are you sure?” he asks. “Because I can’t imagine why.” I’ve never heard such trembling in his voice. “And I don’t blame you. But a man can only take so much. My job. My home.” He studies me a moment. “And now my family?”

“No,” I say. “You can’t lose family.” But I can’t help feeling like I’m speaking to a stranger who only looks like Warren. “We can’t go on this way. I’m here because changes have to be made.” I’m struggling to put my thoughts together. I don’t know what to say to this man. This isn’t the place. It’s too dark. “Can we drive back to the house?”

“Okay.” His voice is heavy with exhaustion and confusion.

The drive is quiet, until we near our neighborhood, where the sound of sirens begins to grow. The entrance to our street is blocked by police cars. Heavy smoke and flames like golden fingers reach up into the night sky. I push Warren through the driver’s side door and follow him out of the truck. Gripping each other’s hands, we make our way closer to the inferno. We stop across the street from our house. Blazing brightly, consumed by fire, it has become something beautiful.

Warren pulls me close. “My God,” he says. There is a spark in his green eyes.

Squeezing him tightly, I close my eyes and bathe in the warmth. “I love you.” I look up to see if he hears me. “I love you.” His sandy stubble gently grates my palms as I guide his face to mine. He finally sees me. “I love you,” I say, again.

Jaw unhinged, he looks from me to the fire to me.

I nod. “It’s going to be fine,” I say. “We can start over.”

He’s mouthing something I can’t quite understand, but I think of the woods so long ago and how he said he’d love me forever. He’s not supposed to be falling to his knees, hunching over, crying.

A crack draws my attention to the house. A small army of men works to contain the blaze. Fear flickers through me. I reach out for Warren, but he shoves me away.

The distance changes my perspective. His face is an eyeless shadow, and I'm afraid he won't be able to see.

## The Land of Opportunity

It was late afternoon, and a sack load of coins clanked like heavy hail as it spun through a counting machine, waiting to be rolled into little paper tubes a teller at the bank would later split open and count again. The counting room, the office, the warehouse—the whole of Little Rock Vending Company wore the scent of money that jingled. Marty Gomez sat in a gray rolling chair that filled a quarter of the floor space in the taupe-colored room while counting fives and singles. Above him hung an old photograph of him and Pop, each standing on either side of a sign that read, *Welcome to Arkansas*, and under that the retired state nickname: *The Land of Opportunity*.

Marty compared his figures to the receipts the soda and snack machines printed when his route guys restocked the merchandise and collected the profits. The numbers were a little off on the Benton/Bryant route. Marty had hired a new guy for that route after Drew, Marty's youngest son and occasional employee, said he was going back to school in Fayetteville to finish his degree at the University of Arkansas. Drew's absence was something of a relief.

"Cory," Marty called.

Cory—a slight, black, fifty-two-year-old who still had the wiry strength to haul a five-

hundred pound soda machine around on a dolly—stood in the doorway of the counting room.

“What’s up, Boss?”

“Could you go on the route tomorrow with the new guy?” Marty asked.

“Why? He stealing?” Cory tilted his head back and stuck his chin out the way he did when angry, when he might threaten a young blood with a beating if he didn’t get in line, though Marty had never seen Cory put a hand on anyone in the seventeen years he’d worked for him.

“Don’t get worked up about it,” Marty said. “Let’s just wait and see.” Marty had taken Cory on as an extra set of hands back when Little Rock Vending was a one-truck operation, when they stored the product in a rented garage, when Marty’s pop was still alive and keeping the books by hand at his kitchen table. Those were the days when Marty dreamed of building a business empire to share with his children, and maybe even his children’s children, a four generation company.

“Yeah. All right.” Cory lowered his chin. “By the way, that Jack Pruitt fella from Alliance Foods called to say he’s dropping off some papers for you tomorrow.” Cory lingered in the doorway; questions showed in his eyes.

Marty looked at his watch. “It’s a quarter till. Get out of here.”

Cory knuckle-knocked the door frame. “See you in the a.m., Boss.”

Marty finished counting and stored everything in the safe. He’d have to stop by the bank tomorrow, after checking on a machine taking money but not giving drinks at Shadow Lake Apartments in Sheridan. Shadow Lake was a pain-in-the-ass account. Tenants had broken the glass on the snack machine twice in the last three years; the soda machine had been tipped once on a Fourth of July weekend. He almost took the machines out, but when things were going well, it was a three-hundred-dollar-a-week account. Still, Marty didn’t care for the half-hour drive to



Sheridan. It was the kind of errand that made him wonder why, at the age of fifty-nine, he was still busting his ass when a guy like Jack Pruitt was offering to buy Little Rock Vending all at once—the accounts, the machines, the trucks, the warehouse.

On the way home, Marty picked up enchiladas from Mexico Chiquito's drive-through, a double-drive-through. Marty's invention. He'd come up with the idea when he first moved to Arkansas and opened a fast food chain, Hot Shot's Burgers and Fries. If it hadn't been for that recession in the early nineties, he'd have become a millionaire, and Suzanne, his wife, wouldn't be stuck working in an office, processing bankruptcy claims for Central Mortgage. Suzanne was eight years away from retirement, but if this Alliance Foods offer was good enough, it could mean early retirement in Miami, which was perfect for Marty, who loved scuba diving and spoke Spanish. Now that Ma and Pop were gone, no one in his family but him spoke Spanish.

Marty hadn't taught his children his first language for fear of confusing them the way he'd been confused. He'd arrived in Chicago as a seven-year-old boy with his mother. Marty's first memory of America was spotting his father, who'd traveled two months ahead of them, in the middle of a crowded airport wearing a gray fedora, suit, and trench coat, dressed for the occasion. Marty, *Martino*, ran toward his father, who knelt with his arms open, and when Martino reached his father he punched him in the gut. "*Te odio!*" Martino said, feeling embarrassed by his tears. At that moment, he did hate his father. He hated him for his two-month absence, for forcing him to move to a new country where they spoke a different language, and for taking him from his home in Ecuador. So often, growing up, he was confused with other Spanish-speakers. It bothered him as a boy to be confused with Cubans, Puerto Ricans, or Mexicans. But without the accent he'd shed in his youth, he looked like any other European-descended American. Now he treated his past like a merit badge he pulled out at his

convenience. He was the American Dream.

Marty turned onto his street. He was looking forward to the simple joy of eating a hearty meal and watching cable television in the comfort of a home he'd sweated and bled for. When his house came into view, so did Drew's Nissan Altima, with its dark-tinted windows and the dented bumper Drew could never quite explain.

Inside, Marty found Drew on the couch, slurping a can of Mountain Dew and eating a bag of Doritos; his legs stretched out with his feet on the coffee table, while a soccer game played out on the flat screen. "Dad," Drew said, jumping up, "you're home early. I thought Mom would be home first."

"Your mother's still at work," Marty said, looking at the significantly-taller, dirty-blonde, twenty-six-year-old version of himself dressed in an expensive polo and brightly colored sneakers. "What's going on? Why aren't you at school?"

"Yeah... about that..." Drew crossed his arms and pointed a finger in the air, looking in the same direction, as if an explanation hung from the ceiling. "I was really hoping Mom would be home first."

"Just tell me what happened. No bullshit."

"See," Drew said, "how am I supposed to talk to you when you come through the door and don't even say hello? Instead, it's all, 'No bullshit.'"

Marty wished he could be patient with Drew. But at the end of a work day that began at six in the morning, his youngest child—who'd been suspended from college his freshman year for substance "misuse," who'd been in and out of community college for the better part of a decade, and who swore to be back on the straight-and-narrow attending classes at a university three hours away—was testing his limits. "Drew," Marty said, "you either tell me what you did,

or I'm telling your mother to stop paying your phone bill."

"Chill out," Drew said. "You always assume it's me. You always assume *I* did something. That's why I answer Mom's calls and not yours."

"Tell me what you did." Marty moved forward. "Tell me now or get out. I won't let you upset your mother. You've given her enough grief. She has a heart condition for Christ's sake." Marty wanted to handle the situation before Suzanne got home. She babied Drew.

"Man," Drew said, "I don't need this." He sidestepped Marty and headed for the front door.

"Where are you going? Get back here and answer me." Marty followed Drew.

"You told me to leave," Drew said, "so I'm leaving." Without looking back, he got in his car and took off.

Of Marty's three children, Drew was the one who'd had it best. Drew was still in middle school when they were finally able to afford a house. Simon, the oldest, was a lawyer up in D.C. Isabel, the middle child, had become a veterinarian and married a classmate, and they owned a nice clinic in Georgia. Simon and Isabel were like Marty, hard workers, go getters. Drew, though, he must have inherited his deficiencies from Suzanne's gene pool. Her father was an alcoholic and three of her siblings had trouble with drinking and drugs. Weak character, that was the problem.

Marty tried calling Drew, but he didn't answer, so he sent him a text: *Leave ur mother alone*. He called Suzanne, but she didn't answer either, not her cell phone or her work line. "It's getting late," he said, leaving a message on her voicemail. "You should be coming home. I have dinner. Call me."

Marty sat in the front room with a hot pack against his lower back while feeling bloated

from the Tex-Mex. He looked at Miami dive spots on his iPad and checked the window, waiting to see Suzanne's headlights. Her blue Honda finally pulled into the driveway at seven-fifteen.

When Suzanne came through the front door, Marty stayed in his chair, arms folded.

"Why didn't you answer your phone?" he asked.

"I'm sorry," she said, the rims around her blue eyes swollen and red. "I was distracted... Drew called me." She swayed her head like a bobble head doll, something she did when she was about to cry. "I can't believe the way you talked to him."

Marty leapt from his seat. "There's nothing wrong with the way I talked to him. I've been nothing but generous with that kid, helping him with tuition. He wasn't supposed to be here. He's supposed to be at school."

"He's not at school because of you!"

"What? How could this be my fault?" Marty threw his hands up. "I can't wait to hear the explanation."

"Because of you he thinks therapy is a bunch of baloney, but the university won't let him take classes without it." At the hospital, Drew's freshman year, they had to pump his stomach. There were strict guidelines Drew had to follow if he were to return to the U of A. Marty had tried to block out that particular memory.

"That's still not *my* fault."

"It's your fault because you refuse to understand him. You're his father! It's your job to understand him!" Suzanne's fair cheeks flushed red.

"Sit down, honey," Marty said. "You're getting too worked up." He guided her to the sofa and held her hands. "Suzie, I'm trying, but it's hard to understand someone who does things like he does. Here he has every opportunity handed to him, and he just throws it away with

drinking and smoking drugs. Honestly, I'm tired. I'm just tired of it."

Suzanne's eyes filled with tears. "But he's not doing that anymore. You're not being fair."

"Fine," Marty said. "What do you want me to do?"

"Just let him work with you again, until he can get things sorted out at the school."

"Fine," Marty said, regret and enchiladas churning in his stomach. "Give him a call. Tell him to get his butt ready to go at six tomorrow."

\* \* \*

The next morning, with Drew riding shotgun, Marty drove to Shadow Lake Apartments on a highway surrounded by blasted rock face held back by a bit of retaining wall, where the bare roots of pine trees asserted themselves. Marty leaned left, right, then hunched over the steering wheel before sitting back into the supposed lumbar-support seat of his Ford pickup. He glanced at Drew. Despite how angry Drew could make him, Marty still had a soft spot for his youngest, whom he'd spent so much time with when he was a little boy, rollerblading or riding bikes on the river walk.

"Remember when we used to drive out to Sheridan to go fishing?" Marty asked.

"Yeah," Drew said, "I remember. We never caught anything good."

"But we still had a good time." The skin over Marty's knuckles stretched as he gripped the wheel. "I used to go fishing with your grandfather at Lake Michigan, and we hardly caught anything, but I still appreciated it. I appreciated the time I had with my father."

"I get it, Dad. You were a good son, and I'm a crappy son." Drew turned the dial on the

radio. “Let’s just listen to music.”

“I didn’t say you were a crappy son,” Marty said, turning off the radio. “I just don’t get why you can’t appreciate everything your mother and I do for you. You know I had a good job when I lived in Chicago, working for the CTA. But when your grandfather said we were moving to Arkansas, I said okay. When my father said jump, I asked how high. When—”

“I’m. Not. You.”

“You can say that again.”

“So get over it.”

At the apartment complex, they entered the redbrick management office that smelled faintly of kitty litter. A heavy woman whose curly, black hair was gray at the roots and who filled the entirety of her office chair sat at a large desk in the middle of the room linking paper clips.

“Good morning,” Marty said, putting on his business smile, pointing at the tag above his left breast pocket with Little Rock Vending Co. embroidered on it. “I hear we’ve got a problem with one of our machines.”

“Yeah,” the woman said, glancing at the father and son pair. “Soda machine’s taking money.” She pulled a stack of papers from a desk drawer and set it at the edge. “These are notes from all the people who got their money taken. The amounts are on there.”

The stack was thick. “Didn’t you put an out-of-order-note on the machine?”

“No,” she said, glaring at Marty.

“Guess you were a little too busy,” Drew said, pointing at the paperclips.

“Drew,” Marty said, handing him the machine keys, “go check the machine’s coin operator, and make sure it’s not jammed.”

Drew took the keys. “Whatever.”

Marty fueled his smile with thoughts of blue water and sandy beaches. “We’ll have it fixed up in a jiffy,” he said. “Can I get you a soda while I’m out there? A Coke or a Sprite on the house?”

A corner of the woman’s mouth drew up. “I’ll have a Diet Dr. Pepper. Thanks.”

“My pleasure,” Marty said and walked out with the stack of papers the woman handed him.

Around the side of the building, Drew had the machine open. “I figured out the problem,” Drew said, shaking his head. “The machine wasn’t plugged in.” He was counting the bills. “Now how much did they say we owed? Because there’s not a lot here.”

“I’ll sort it out with the woman inside,” Marty said.

“Not likely,” Drew said.

Marty reached into the machine and pulled out a can of Diet Dr. Pepper. “Some people are pains in the ass, but you’ve got to kill them with kindness.”

Drew pointed at the soda. “Who’s that for?”

“Who do you think?” Marty pointed at the office.

Drew reached for the can. “I’ll take care of this.”

Marty held the can a moment. “Fine,” he said, “but be polite. I don’t want to lose the account.”

“Trust me,” Drew said, and he started heading back to the building.

Marty was closing up the machine and out the corner of his eye he saw Drew rounding the building and shaking the soda can. “Drew!” He started running.

Drew kept going, through the office door and up to the desk. “Here,” he said to the

woman. "I've got a drink for you."

Before Marty could say anything he heard the click of the tab and then an angry hiss.

"Oh my God!" she screamed. "My eyes are burning!"

"Yikes," Drew said. "Sorry about that. Must be bad Karma."

Marty grabbed Drew by the back of the neck. "What the hell is wrong with you?"

"You did that on purpose!" the woman screamed.

"Hold on," Marty said to the woman. "Just hold on a minute. I can fix this. I'm so sorry."

"Like hell you can," the woman said. "I'm suing you!" she said as if she'd been waiting years for the opportunity to make that threat.

"No," Drew said, standing up. "You can't do that because I'm not even an official employee."

Marty took a fistful of Drew's shirt. "Get out of here. Go get in the truck."

"But—"

"Go now." Marty let go of Drew's shirt and took a deep breath. "Just wait in the truck."

Drew left.

"Please," Marty said to the woman. "There's something wrong with that kid. Please, just show us a little mercy."

The woman held her arms out and looked down at her shirt. "Do you see this?" she said. "This is assault. I'm suing your ass."

Marty tried reasoning with the woman. She had opened the can herself. But she knew people could sue for even lesser pranks. Marty asked her what proof she would have, and she pointed to a security camera in the corner of the room. She was going to sue. It probably wouldn't make it to court, he told himself, but he'd still have to pay lawyer fees and maybe



some kind of settlement. It could jeopardize Jack Pruitt's offer.

Marty went back to the truck. Drew was sitting in the passenger seat with his arms crossed. "So did you fix it?" he asked, cocking his head.

"No," Marty said, turning the ignition. "I don't think you realize how much trouble you just caused."

"What? Because some fat bitch got a little bit of what was coming to her?"

"Quit the foul mouthing, son." Marty's heart was pounding in his eardrums. "You don't get it. You don't get why I started this company."

"You didn't want to work for anyone else. You wanted to be your own boss. The American Dream. Blah, blah, blah."

"That's part of it, sure." Marty turned onto the highway. "But I did it because . . . When we lost the restaurants your grandfather was too old to get a decent job. I started this company and made him president because I didn't want to see the man I respected and loved end up as a greeter at Walmart. He was about my age when I started this company with a few gumball machines." Marty's throat tightened. "I did everything that he . . . but you don't at all. You don't care."

Drew sat with his arms crossed, sniffing. Regardless of whether or not Drew got things worked out with the university, Marty had no intention of letting Drew back near the business.

\* \* \*

Four months passed. Nothing came from the Diet Dr. Pepper incident because the security camera in the management office was maintained in a manner similar to the rest of the complex,

but they still lost the account.

Drew had moved back home, and after a few weeks, Suzanne talked Marty into giving him another chance. “It’s temporary,” she said, “and he’s our son. It’s our job to help him.” Marty didn’t feel obligated to take care of Drew, but he didn’t want to upset Suzanne. So Drew came back to work full time, running his old route after they let go of his replacement who Cory caught pocketing a few bucks. Drew was doing well, though. While his luck was holding, Marty decided to take Jack Pruitt’s offer, but he hadn’t told anyone yet.

He arranged to have a meeting with Pruitt at the warehouse, after hours, when all the trucks were back from running routes, so Pruitt could take a look at everything.

The meeting was going fine. Marty gave Pruitt a tour of the office, the counting room.

“That’s a picture of me and my father,” Marty said, “taken in 1979, when we first moved to Arkansas.”

“So I see,” Pruitt said, stooping down to get a closer look. He was tall man with a head of white hair. He looked about Marty’s age. “That sign’s got the old state motto—quite a tactic to get folks to move here, promising opportunity.”

“It worked on us,” Marty said.

Pruitt laughed and gave Marty a good natured slap on the back. “I was looking at your list of employees. You got a son working for you?”

“I do. Drew’s my youngest. He’s taking a break from school right now.”

“He never thought about taking on the family business?”

“I’m not sure he’s interested in vending for his long-term future.”

“That’s too bad,” Pruitt said. “Not for me, of course, but for the younger generation who don’t know a good thing when they see it.”

Marty agreed, but he didn't want to prolong the discussion. He showed Pruitt the rest of Little Rock Vending. They shook hands.

\* \* \*

When Marty got home, Drew was sitting at the kitchen table, sipping a beer. He was still in his uniform, grimy from work. He had a yellow notepad in front of him. "Dad," he said, "what took so long?"

"I had some things to do at the office." He turned to head up the stairs.

"Hold on a second," Drew said. "I wanted to show you this." He tapped the notepad.

Marty walked over and looked down. It was a list of businesses, some with checkmarks beside them.

"I've been calling around," Drew said, "and I got us some potential accounts. The ones with the checks said they'd meet with us."

Marty looked at Drew a moment. He didn't know what to say.

## Clinical Competency

The banshee shriek of Skipper's pager cuts through the cold dark of the on-call room, waking her with heart palpitations. It's a little after one in morning, and the emergency department is summoning her again. This is the third time tonight. She sits up on the dorm-style bed still smelling of lavender. She'd sprayed it earlier, trying to smother the stink of her fellow oral and maxillofacial surgery residents—all men, one in particular, whose bathing habits are suspect. As the blanket slides from her upper body, the meat-locker chill of the busted air conditioner stuck on full blast feels like needles all over her skin.

Just let her get through this night. If she can get through this night, she can get through this week, this month, and then the next seven months of this intern year. That'll prove she belongs in the program. Then she'll get the four year spot. She graduated at the top of her dental school class and performed well on her boards. This—proficiency in the field—is the last box that needs a check.

After pressing the call button on her iPhone, she switches on the lamp beside the bed and notices specks of blood on her green scrub pants. She forgot to change, but the last patient was

an infectious-disease-free child. The patient's skin spit open in a seven-centimeter horizontal gash half an inch below the hairline when he flew over his bike's handlebars. It was a clean laceration, straight down to the skull, and it closed beautifully with absorbable sutures. Skipper is looking forward to presenting that case in the morning conference; the stitches were so clean and even.

She knows her co-residents doubt her abilities. It must be their favorite topic of discussion when she's not around. Outside her department's resident office last week, stopping to return a text message from an attending about a patient's mandible fracture, she couldn't help overhearing their conversation.

"No way she matches here next year," someone said. It sounded like Garret, a second year resident. She held her breath and focused her ears, tuning in the words being exchanged.

"It took her like an hour to extract the molars on Peterson's patient." That was Wellington, a third year.

"At least she can suture." Skipper recognized Blake, one of the chiefs. She was relying on a good word from him when it came time for the program director to make his decision on whether or not to keep her.

"Yeah," Wellington said, "but girls are supposed to be good at sewing."

Their laughter nearly convinced Skipper that beyond the door sat a group of high school sophomores, not doctors.

With the back of her neck prickling like the mane of an angry wolf, she opened the door and they fell silent. Wide-eyed and chewing their lunch, Skipper was reminded of cows, stupid cows and the seemingly endless pastures surrounding her hometown of Batesville, Arkansas, that pit of limited aspiration where girls are still groomed for subordination. She climbed out only to

end up here, the bottom tier of the boys club.

Now, after a dozen rings, an emergency nurse answers.

“Jones with OMFS,” Skipper says.

“Hey, Doctor Jones,” the nurse says in the twang of an Appalachian accent. “We’ve got a woman down here with a big head cut. Doctor Chung’s requesting a consult.”

“A ‘head cut?’” Skipper asks, visualizing the CT scan that takes X-rays in “cuts” used to compile a three-dimensional image. Then Skipper realizes the nurse is talking about a soft-tissue laceration. She resists the urge to tell the nurse to use big-girl words. Picking fights with nurses is contraindicated. They love social networking, Facebooking and tweeting each other:

*#jerkdoctors, #nursesrock*. “Could you be a little more descriptive?” Skipper asks.

“Doctor Chung just said it was a big head cut.”

“Could you get Chung on the phone for me?”

After a few moments, the other end of the line fills with an eager voice. “This is Stephanie Chung.” It’s likely she’s just gone on her shift, a resident from another department doing her emergency rotation, eight hours on, eight hours off. It’s a challenge, but nothing like Skipper’s twenty-four hour shifts eight times a month. *#whoneedssleep*.

Skipper asks Doctor Chung about the patient’s condition.

“She’s got a big head cut.” This from an MD at a Level I trauma center. *#dumbdoctor, #thisiswhyigetnorespect, #medicalterminology*.

“Laceration,” Skipper says. “Could you give me more details about the laceration?”

“Uh. It’s pretty deep.”

“Does she have any fractures?”

“I don’t know.”

“Have you run any scans?”

“No. Not yet. She just came in. Drunk driving.”

“Then why are you asking for a consult now?” Skipper hurls her pager at the wall because it’s an indestructible demon that feasts on the despairing souls of young doctors who once believed helping others would be rewarding, fulfilling, maybe even glamorous. A co-resident claims he ran over his pager with his truck one morning; it remained unharmed.

“Well...” Chung pauses. “Do you want me to call you after the scans?”

“No.” *#deepbreath*. “I’m already awake.” Skipper tells Chung to hold off on the CT. Even if she has fractures, there’s no way Skipper could book a surgery tonight. She’ll sew her up, go back to bed, and let someone else deal with the potential need for plates and screws tomorrow.

Hot coffee beckons as Skipper passes the cafeteria, but any more caffeine and she might as well give up on sleep altogether. She breathes warm air onto her fingers because she forgot her heat pack in the on-call room. Her fingers and the tip of her nose tingle with numbness when she’s under stress and the weather turns cold, and it’s only November.

The stench of nostril-burning sterility is fresh beyond the double doors of the Emergency Department, where there are a few people stretched out in gurneys, but Skipper has no trouble distinguishing her patient from the rest. *#followtheblood*.

After glancing through the incomplete patient chart, she thrusts it out like a dagger to the resident whose identification badge labels her as Stephanie Chung, a member of the Obstetrics and Gynecology Department. *#iwouldntletyounearmyuterus*.

The patient is highly intoxicated and has multiple deep facial lacerations requiring sutures. An approximately ten centimeter vertical gash on the patient’s forehead is surrounded by

abrasions; there is frontal bone exposure, and tissues are avulsed throughout.

“I was going to try sewing it up,” Chung says, shrugging her shoulders.

“Good you didn’t,” Skipper says. Suturing an avulsion is like trying to sew together hunks of ground beef.

“There’s no need to be unprofessional,” Chung says.

Standing at the patient’s head, Skipper inserts the needle to make the first suture. “You know what else isn’t professional?” she asks Chung. “Sounding like an idiot. Describing this—” She points at the patient’s head. “—as a ‘big head cut’ and waking up the on-call resident when you haven’t run a single diagnostic test.” Skipper’s fingers are tingling, but not enough to get in the way of performing a cosmetic closure. “I’m the only woman in the Oral Surgery Department, so you should be grateful that it’s me calling you out instead of one of my male co-residents who’d be talking about your incompetency for the rest of your residency.”

“I’m still the one with the MD,” Chung says, “and you’re just a dentist.”

Plotches of rage cloud Skipper’s vision, rendering her momentarily blind; this is when she feels it: the prick of a needle piercing through the glove on her left hand. “Shit.”

“What?” Chung asks.

“Nothing,” Skipper says, searching for a reason to excuse herself before she has a panic attack. “I forgot there’s blood on my scrubs from the last patient. I have to change.” She strips off the sticky, red-stained gloves. “Get a blood panel on the patient while I’m gone.”

Skipper ducks into the nearest bathroom and runs her shaking hands beneath faucet water, then pats them dry. Squeezing her index finger, a red droplet forms on the tip and spreads in rivulets, tracing the lines of her fingerprint.

Skipper had stood by her friend Ashley in the bathroom of the free HIV and AIDs clinic



where they treated patients twice a month their last two years of dental school. This was a requirement. Ashley had punctured her finger on a double-sided anesthetic needle while treating a patient with hepatitis. Her blue-green eyes widened as she realized the potential consequences, not just the disease but the full disclosure she would be legally required to give her patients. Who wants to be treated by a dentist with HIV or hepatitis? After Ashley received her negative test results, they laughed. “Wouldn’t it suck to have to pay back a quarter of a million dollars in student-loan debt and not be able practice?” Ashley asked. Skipper promised herself she’d never screw up that way.

After changing her scrubs, Skipper returns to the patient who lies there in a drunken sleep, looking like someone spooned out flesh from her forehead. She knows how to fix it, but her hands won’t stop shaking.

Chung returns from wherever she was. “I sent the blood to the lab.”

“Okay.” Skipper will have to stick around after her shift to access the results.

“Listen,” Chung says, “I’m sorry about what I said. You were just being straight with me, and I get that you’re exhausted.”

That’s when Skipper does something she thought she’d never do. “Me, too,” Skipper says. “I could have been more tactful.” She holds her palms out in the direction of the patient, presenting a peace offering. “Why don’t you give it a try?” *#goodluckfrankenstein*. “I have some cancer patients to check on, so I’ll come back later to see how you’re doing.” But there are no cancer patients tonight.

Skipper returns to the on-call room, an icy Alcatraz. She wants to run, to get up and leave, but if she does, that kills any chance of staying in this program.

Skipper scrolls through the contacts on her phone. Only there’s no one she can call at this

hour, no one she would even want to call. She's not sure why she still keeps her mother's number programmed. She can imagine that Botox-filled face trying to frown into a told-you-so expression. The day Skipper received her dental school acceptance letter, her mother patted her on the back. "At least there'll be some single men." Skipper hadn't embraced the small-town, pageant-queen life her mother had planned for her, maybe because Skipper didn't share her mother's glitter-tainted blood. She'd been adopted so her mother wouldn't have to risk having another boy after Skipper's older brother Colton was born. Skipper hasn't spoken with him since her acceptance to dental school. Skipper's grandfather, her mother's father, was a dentist.

They'd played in his office, Skipper no older than eight and Colton probably eleven. Colton's friend J.T. sat in the patient chair while Colton examined his teeth with a dental mirror. "Oh man," Colton said, "I'm going to have to bring out the drill on this one." He mimed his way through the procedure. Skipper asked for a turn. "Okay," Colton said. "Get in the seat."

"No," she said, "I want to be the dentist."

"Don't be stupid," Colton said. "Girls can't be dentists."

Skipper growled through her teeth and charged Colton, but he was bigger than her. He blocked her, and she fell to the ground. Anger fueled her tears. Her grandfather scooped her up. When he asked her what was wrong and she told him, he said, "Darling, you don't want to be a dentist. It's not a good job for a lady. But you know, you'd sure be a pretty hygienist." But he was always complaining about his hygienists. "Women in the workplace," he used to say, shaking his head. It was the apparent contradictions that made Skipper begin to doubt every suggestion made by the people who were supposed to be looking out for her best interest. Now, though, no one is looking out for her.

Skipper's finger is pulsing. A dry, brownish-red clot, the size of a ballpoint-pen tip

covers the tiny wound that could potentially cause so much damage. She takes a picture of the injury with her phone and puts it in the patient file folder, a digital slideshow of blood and gore. Dictation note: Twenty-five-year-old female. Patient presents with a puncture wound to the left-hand index finger obtained while performing a standard clinical procedure resulting in potential life-threatening illness. Blood-panel testing indicated in ultimately determining course of treatment.

Her hands are still shaking as she begins a dangerous activity, counting the hours she has left to work this week, this month, and this year. Each one-hundred hour work week is like a brick. It's a wall.

Skipper's pager screams louder than ever, retaliating for being thrown earlier. She silences it, turns it off. She buries herself beneath the blanket. She just needs a few minutes. That's all she needs.

\* \* \*

Skipper is startled awake by nothing except the cold and her internal clock that interrupts her sleep at five-fifteen.

Her heart pounds so hard her fingers aren't even numb as she jogs through the hospital corridors to the Emergency Department. She needs to assess the damage. If the emergency staff couldn't get a hold of her last night, there's a chance they paged the second-call resident, Blake. If he had to leave the comfort of his home to take care of what Skipper couldn't...

But as she passes through the double doors, her primary interest isn't finding out if there were new patients in the past four hours. She logs into a computer at an empty bay and accesses

the patient files. There she is. The frontal laceration from last night. The toxicity screen is positive for narcotics, and Skipper feels her stomach drop. Squeezing her eyes shut she wills the test results to become what she wants them to be before she looks. Negative, negative, negative...

Yes. The patient is negative for hepatitis and HIV. Relief radiates through her like the rays of the sun. But behind her some calls, “Jones.”

Blake is standing there in blood-splattered scrubs. “What the hell?”

Skipper wants to say she’s sorry, that she had a bad night. But he’s had as many bad nights as she has times five, and she can see in his eyes there is no excuse. So when her pager starts beeping, she’s grateful. “I’ve got this,” she says. “I promise I won’t screw up again.” And even though she’s post-call and should be going back to her apartment, she won’t be leaving the hospital today because she hasn’t proven anything.

Not yet, anyway. At least she hopes not.

## Bauxite Blue

Inside, Daddy and I shared the same table. I ate a bowl of Cheerios and scanned advertisements while he drank coffee and read sections A, B, C, and so on. We were like two strangers in a waiting room, though what we were waiting for, I never knew. I glanced at his face that had yet again grown thinner, longer in the night.

He rose and rinsed his empty mug in the sink and set it in the dish drainer. With one foot out the door he said, “Bye, Fay.”

“Bye, Daddy,” I said.

\* \* \*

Outside, the summer was a dripping-wet sauna where flesh plumped like a pack of Ballpark Franks on a grill. I crunched down the stone-chipped road in flip-flops to my neighbor Lori’s house to babysit her sons, Marshall and Cody. I was saving paychecks for a car, something cheap so I wouldn’t have to ride the school bus come fall and could get a tip-paying job. I wanted to go

to college and needed money.

I sank into Lori's sofa and watched fuzzy television, mostly *Saved by the Bell* reruns, until about eight o'clock. That's when the little men rolled out of bed, sporting swim trunks and buzz cuts, feet slapping the floor tiles.

The Cocoa Puffs had changed the milk in their bowls to a shade of light brown when Marshall asked if we could do an experiment.

"What kind of experiment?" I asked.

"Frying an egg on the driveway." It was three weeks into summer, and Marshall, a small, wiry nine-year-old, had turned from porcelain fair to tawny.

"Wouldn't you rather just play in the sprinklers?" That's what they did each day in the grassy patch behind their house, where I let the faucet run, filling the air with the scent of tap water and earthy, wet crabgrass.

"But we always play sprinklers," Cody said. He was six and only a few inches shorter than Marshall, but Cody looked much younger than his older brother because of his round, cherub cheeks that grew pink as petunias in the heat. I took care to grease them up with sunscreen, like my mother had done for me. She died four years ago when I was twelve. Cancer.

"Please," Marshall begged, "just one egg?"

I told them yes, and they clung to me in gratitude. Their affection always seemed like a photograph of a happy moment from long ago, something forgotten until accidentally pulled from a box in the closet.

While waiting for the sun to make the driveway sizzle, I swirled together Ajax and water in an empty Cool Whip container and twisted and bent a hanger into a couple of loops. "Now we make bubbles."

Under the cloudless, blue sky we made shiny spheres that held together for just a moment, glimmering and perfect. After the last bubble disintegrated, it was time for bologna sandwiches.

Cody sat on my lap as he ate. "Can we do the egg now?" he asked.

"After you finish lunch."

He fingered the turquoise beads of my bracelet. "This is pretty," he said.

"Thank you," I said. "My mother gave it to me."

I had sat on my mother's lap, when I was about Cody's age, examining the bright blue beads on her wrist, craving all the details of the daytrip she and Daddy had taken.

"What did you do there?" I'd asked. "Why couldn't I go?"

"Sometimes mommies and daddies need time alone." She combed my hair back with her fingers, as she always did when I sat on her lap. "That's all. We didn't do much. Mostly, we walked around." She knew I wanted to picture it, though. "There was this one sunflower that rose way up into the sky beside an old wooden fencepost, and we followed a dirt path to high mounds of earth, covered in grass. Toltec Indians used those mounds for ceremonies."

"What kind of ceremonies?"

"Prayer ceremonies. Burial ceremonies."

The boys finished eating.

Marshall threw open the refrigerator door. "Okay, eggy!" He stood with his legs apart, hands on his hips, like a sheriff in a cowboy flick. "It's time to meet your maker!"

"A chicken?" Cody said.

I took an egg from the carton. "You boys are a hoot."

"Eggy! Eggy! Eggy!" the boys chanted in a drum-beat rhythm.

We stepped into the heat, and the boys argued over who would crack the egg.

“You can’t both crack it,” I said. “I’ll crack it because you shouldn’t be handling raw eggs. You might get salmonella poisoning.”

“Eggs are poison?” Cody asked.

“No, dummy,” Marshall said.

Cody growled through his baby teeth and pinched Marshall’s bare side.

“Hey now, you two quit that business, or we’re not doing the egg.” Both had glistening eyes and red faces brought on by the stubborn heat. “Apologize.” I told them. “Marshall, if you know about salmonella, why not try explaining it to Cody, instead of calling him names?”

Marshall heaved a sigh. “It just means you can’t eat raw eggs or you could get sick, right?”

“Right,” I said. “Cody, eggs are okay if they’re cooked.”

Cody pursed his lips to the side and raised an eyebrow. “Does that mean we can eat this one after it’s fried?”

“We better not,” I said as I saw Marshall shaking his head and opening his mouth to remark. “Don’t,” I told him.

I cracked the egg, and we watched the transparent rim begin to turn opaque. That’s when the stillness was interrupted by the distant tinkling, jewelry-box-sound of music.

“Ice-cream truck!” they shouted.

“I’m not sure it’ll come down this road, boys. It never has before.”

“But it sounds so close,” Marshall said. “Maybe we can track it down?”

Their sweaty faces were so hopeful and sad at the same time, longing for relief from monotony.



“All right,” I said, “but don’t get too excited.”

I ran inside to grab a few dollars from my change purse, the music intensifying. Back outside, the boys were hopping up and down and waving with both arms as though they were a couple of castaways who’d spotted a rescue boat. Yes. They’d been spotted. A van with a PA system mounted on the roof was coming our way.

When I saw the young face behind the wheel, I was surprised. It didn’t seem like a youthful occupation. He pulled up beside us. “Y’all want some ice cream?” He was wearing a pair of aviators that suited his square jaw and broad face. The ice cream van didn’t suit him at all.

“Sure,” I said, scanning the picture menu plastered on the sliding door.

Cody pointed to the red, white, and blue pop. “I want that one.”

“Okay,” Aviators said. “One Turbo Rocket.”

Marshall, impressed by the name, wanted the same.

“All right,” Aviators said, “two rockets. What about you?”

“Nothing for me,” I said.

“What do you mean?” he asked. “It’s like a thousand degrees outside. You’re not one of those girls who doesn’t eat, are you?” He fixed his smile on me, and I felt the spotlight of his confidence. He seemed a little older than me, but not much.

I began to explain. “No. It’s not that —”

“Eggs have salmonella,” Cody said.

“That’s right,” Aviators replied. “They can.”

“I’ll have a Creamsicle,” I said. To say I was saving money and couldn’t spare a buck for a Popsicle, especially after buying two for the boys, would have sounded untrue.

“That’s more like it.” Aviators disappeared a moment and returned to the window with the pops. His fingers felt cool when I gave him the money. “You here every day?” he asked me.

“Yeah. I’m the nanny.” Nanny seemed more mature than babysitter.

He drove off into the mirage. It was supposed to be hot all week.

\* \* \*

At home, I sat across from Daddy and twirled my fork in noodles smothered in red Ragu. “How was your day?” I asked.

“Huh?” He looked surprised to find someone sitting across from him.

“How was your day?” I repeated.

“Fine.” He was always a man of few words, even before my mother died, but it was less noticeable then. She wasn’t a chatterbox, but she always knew what to say, how to make him laugh and talk.

“That’s good. My day was pretty good.”

He didn’t ask me why.

After dinner, I cleared the plates, stacking them beside the sink the way I’d seen my mother stack them thousands of times. Meanwhile, Daddy went to set out his clothes for tomorrow, his ritual before watching the evening news, followed by sleep.

I imagined that buried alongside my mother’s remains was an alternate life, like a seed planted too far from the sun, too deep to feel rain. My father was buried there too. People from church used to bring casseroles, check in on us, but after about a year, no one wanted to visit a quiet man and his quiet daughter.

\* \* \*

As I washed the lunch dishes, I listened for the music I'd grown accustomed to after a week of creamy, orange pops.

"Why do you wear makeup now?" Marshall asked me, smirking.

"No reason." I nearly dropped a sudsy plate. "Sometimes I like to wear makeup."

"I think you look beautiful," Cody said. "Don't you think Fay looks beautiful?"

"Whatever," Marshall said. He was too old not to feel insecure about complimenting the opposite sex. He was reprieved from further embarrassment, as was I, when the hallmark of mobile ice cream rang through the air.

The boys rushed outside, and I followed after dabbing on lip gloss. They were unsheathing their Turbo Rockets by the time I reached them. Patrick—he'd introduced himself—held a Creamsicle out the window.

"For my best customer," he said.

"Thanks." I never knew what else to say to him, how to begin a real conversation. I'd rehearsed more in my mind, but the sight of him gave me stage fright.

"You look pretty today."

"Thanks." My mouth failed to engage further.

Then Cody screamed, and Marshall yelled, "Wasp!" They ran around the yard pursued by the angry, stinging thing.

"Drop your Popsicles!" I yelled.

Marshall did as he was told, but Cody held on to his prized possession and swung at the

creature. Patrick hopped out of his van with a flyswatter in hand, but he was too late. Stung on the arm, Cody cried fat tears while his rocket became a purple puddle on the pavement.

I scooped up the injured child. Hot, sticky wetness trickled down my shirt as he pressed his cheek to my chest, hyperventilating from the shock of pain. Marshall was patting his little brother on the back saying, “It’s okay, buddy. It’s okay.”

I felt Patrick’s hand on my shoulder. “Can I help?” he asked. “Do you need any Tylenol or ice?”

“Yes.” I recorded the moment like a home video. His hand on my shoulder. “Thank you.”

\* \* \*

It was still light outside as summer rain fell in a sheet, making the world sparkle. I spooned Hamburger Helper onto our dinner plates, mine and Daddy’s. I welcomed the quiet, the absence of discussion. The dead, whether buried or walking amongst us, take no notice of the weather, changing seasons, or a bud maturing into a flower.

There were buttercups growing in the empty lot across the street. After dinner, I rinsed dust off a vase that had been tucked away in a kitchen cabinet. I decided to keep it on the table, filled with fresh flowers.

\* \* \*

That moment of miniature crisis made Patrick more than just the bearer of Popsicles. He’d linger a while after doling out frozen goodies with a flyswatter at the ready. “Just in case,” he’d say.

We'd sit in lawn chairs in front of the house. He told me he was eighteen and had just graduated from Pine Bluff High. I was in school at White Chapel High.

"Are you going to college in the fall?" I asked.

"Maybe. I was planning on going to UALR," he said, "but I've been talking to an Army recruiter. I've decided I'm going to join."

"Really?" I'm not sure why I was so surprised. It's not like I really knew him. "You want to be a soldier?"

"Something wrong with that?"

"No. Nothing's wrong with it. It's just that, aren't you afraid of combat? Dying?"

"Sure I'm scared when you put it that way. But I don't think it would be so bad, dying for something that matters. Besides, I'm not planning on dying."

The boys were having a sword fight with their Popsicle sticks. "I wish we could go swimming," Marshall said.

"Sorry, buddy. I wish I could take you, but I don't have a car. I don't even know how to drive."

"I could give you a ride," Patrick offered. "I know a place we could go swimming. Ever heard of a blue hole?"

"What's that?" Cody asked.

"I'll show you," Patrick said, "if it's okay with your nanny."

"Sure," I said. I probably would have done anything at that point to spend more time with Patrick, especially after learning his plans, even though he hadn't asked for my number or invited me on a date. I couldn't determine his level of interest in me, if he was interested in me at all.

\* \* \*

I wondered if it mattered, telling Daddy my plans for the day. Wasn't it customary for a girl to tell her parents she was getting in a car with a boy?

I'd told Marshall and Cody's mother a friend was giving us a ride to go swimming. She hadn't objected, just told us to be careful.

"Daddy—" I began, but then I stopped, not seeing the point.

He looked up for a moment.

"Have a nice day," I said.

"You, too." And he went back to his paper.

\* \* \*

The boys were double buckled in the middle seat of the van.

"It's kind of a long drive," Patrick said, "but we have plenty of cold snacks."

"You're not going to get in trouble for driving us in a work vehicle, are you?" I asked.

"No," he said. "The guy I drive this for is a jerk anyway."

"Rule breaker," I chided.

"Wow," he said. "Was that a joke? I'm in complete shock. Quick, Marshall, you're going to have to drive."

"Really?" Marshall asked. "Awesome!"

"But he's too little to drive!" Cody said.

“Don’t worry.” I ran my hand over Cody’s downy-soft head. “Patrick’s only teasing.”

We’d been on the road about a half hour, and I knew we were somewhere around Benton. Patrick took a side road where the pavement turned to gravel right beside a lonely Exxon station. “We’re almost there,” he said. “It’s not exactly open to the public. But it’s the coolest water you’ll find this time of year.”

When the water came into view, I understood why it was called a blue hole. It was the same shade as my mother’s turquoise bracelet. “Is that safe to swim in?”

“Of course,” he said, “I’ve been coming here for years.”

“What is it?” Marshall asked. “Why is it that color?”

“It’s an old bauxite quarry,” Patrick explained.

We unloaded from the van and arranged towels beneath a large pine near the edge. There wasn’t a beach, just rust-red earth that sloped into the water. Patrick dove in, and when he emerged, I expected him to be dyed like an Easter egg. “See,” he said, “it’s perfectly safe.”

Marshall insisted he could swim just fine, but I made him wear floaties. “There’s no telling how deep this water is,” I told him.

The water was cooler than I’d expected. “Because of the bauxite,” Patrick explained.

While the boys bobbed beside the wall, I swam out to where Patrick floated on his back, barrel chest resting above the water. He seemed to be a solid block of muscle, heavily built with thick arms and legs, and I wondered at how he floated with such ease.

We were treading water close to one another. I was beginning to tire, having not swum since my mother was alive, but I didn’t want to turn back and ruin the moment. Then beneath the shimmering water I felt his hand reach out, grabbing my waist, pulling me in. He kissed me quickly, softly. I was glad, but suddenly, the urge to cry overwhelmed me.

“What’s wrong?” he asked staring at me with those icy marbles he kept hidden behind shades.

“Nothing. I’m sorry.” My face began to warm with salty wetness. “This is embarrassing. I have something in my eye. I’m sorry.”

I began swimming back to where the boys were pretending to be sharks, but Patrick easily overtook me. “Hold on,” he said, treading in front of me, blocking my path. “Did I do something wrong? Was I not supposed to kiss you?”

“No,” I said, “It’s what I wanted.” How could I explain? “My mother died . . . four years ago.” The words felt heavy in my chest, like something unacknowledged. It was a shock to realize that I’d kissed a boy and she would never know and no one else would ever care.

“Come here,” Patrick said, leading me to the edge. “You need to catch your breath.” He pushed me out of the water and sat me on a large rock behind thick bushes and a patch of yellow wild flowers. The boys were completely out of view, on the other side of the hole. Patrick squatted in front of me, rubbed my back, and wiped tears from my face.

My skin studded with goose bumps, so I pulled him to me, felt his warm, damp skin against mine. He kissed me again, thrusting his tongue deep inside my mouth. I sucked on it, like a Popsicle. It was a curious sensation.

He slid me down to the red earth, and the ground was as hard beneath me as he was heavy on top of me, but I didn’t mind. I didn’t want his lips to leave mine. He cupped my breast, my stomach fluttered, but I didn’t say anything.

Then I became aware of a firmness pressed between my legs. I didn’t fully realize what I was feeling. His fingers went down the front of my bikini bottoms. “Wait,” I said, “the boys.”

“They can’t see anything.” He didn’t stop, probing and pulling.



Then he pushed himself inside me. I cried out as if I'd burned myself. "Patrick, it hurts." I whispered, afraid of the boys hearing me, finding me. I struggled against him, but he was like a boulder.

"It's okay," he said, crushing me with his chest, his breath heavy in my ear. "It won't hurt next time. I'm almost done."

But I didn't want a next time. I wanted him to stop. "No. Stop it!" But it was too late. He squeezed my shoulder, his eyes shut tight, groaning through his open mouth.

I could feel him pulsing inside me even after he pulled out. It felt like I was bleeding. The red earth was wet all around me.

He was inhaling deeply, as if he'd just finished running. "You should probably get in the water," he said, "since I wasn't wearing a condom. I didn't mean to come inside you. Sorry."

"That wasn't . . ." I couldn't bring myself to say the word sex.

He put his arm around me. "I figured this was your first time. It's okay to cry. Most girls do. After a few times, it won't hurt. It'll feel really good. I promise." He kissed me on the temple.

I couldn't look at him. I pulled away, got up, and lowered myself into the water.

"Fay!" Cody yelled across the water, making my heart leap. "I'm hungry!"

Patrick's shadow fell over me as he stood by the edge. "Fay wants to swim for bit," he called out to the boys. "I'll get lunch ready." He bent down to me. "Just try to wash yourself out the best you can. It should be fine."

I did as he said, not knowing what else to do. They were eating sandwiches when I finally got to shore. "It's time to leave," I said. The boys whined and pleaded. "No!" I screamed, "We're going. We need to go home right now."

“Calm down,” Patrick said. “Everything’s fine.”

“Everything’s not fine.” I still couldn’t look him in the eye. “You shouldn’t have done that.”

“Fay,” Cody said, “you’re mean!”

“Shut your mouth!” I said. I looked in Patrick’s direction, at his feet. “Look what you’ve done.”

Marshal stood up. “Patrick didn’t do anything. You’re the one that’s yelling for no reason.”

Cody was crying, but I couldn’t reach out to him or apologize. I felt cold, frozen by whatever was in that blue hole.

I walked back to the van, shivering in silence.

Patrick stopped in front of the boys’ house to let us out, his foot on the brake. I don’t know if he even glanced in my direction as he drove away. He didn’t come back the next day, or the day after, or ever.

\* \* \*

Daddy drank his coffee in silence, scanning the newspaper.

I couldn’t eat, but he didn’t seem to notice. He ignored the dishes piled in the sink. He said nothing about the brown, shriveled petals littering the center of the kitchen table or the hazy, yellowed water in the vase I couldn’t bring myself to touch.

## Boy Adrift

Drew yanked the price tag off the tent he had picked up that morning at the Walmart Supercenter in Fayetteville. He and Kelly, his girlfriend, were camping at Devil's Den. Kelly's friend from work, Ashley, and her husband, Jeremy, had invited them. Drew had moved into Kelly's house a few months previous, when it was still summer. Now that the temperatures had cooled slightly, the idea of sleeping in a tent seemed tolerable. When Kelly had presented the camping invitation to Drew, she had used catchphrases like "free spirit" and "primitive side," which Drew took as exciting innuendoes.

Images of skinny dipping, sleeping naked, and smoking pot around a campfire danced in Drew's head like a trio of sugarplum fairies. Drew thought the wooded hills and valleys of northeastern Arkansas were a tight backdrop for a weekend of debauchery, which was just enough motivation to get him off the couch and away from FIFA Soccer 12 and the Xbox 360 for a weekend. What's more, the recent months of cohabitation had grown monotonous. It was her house and her rules, even in bed, especially in bed. Monotony.

At the campsite, Drew had hoped for a more secluded spot, but the girls wanted to be

within walking distance of a toilet. It seemed, however, that no one else would be camping nearby, so it was no big deal. Not that Drew really cared about privacy, but tent neighbors could be inconvenient if there were little kids or old people. The parents of young children and the elderly were always the first to make complaints about noise, drunkenness, or behavior frowned on by buzz killers with too much power.

“We’re going to check out the trails,” Kelly said to Drew, “while you guys set up camp.”

“All right. Now you girls be safe,” he said, putting his hands on his hips like his mom would do. “And do some gathering while you’re at it,” he grunted.

Kelly rolled her eyes, but Ashley laughed and said, “Oh! You are too funny!”

Drew compared the girls’ figures as they walked away. Kelly’s legs were longer, but Ashley’s were more toned with the popping swell of a firm calf muscle, and she had larger breasts. He thought for a minute about the pot he had picked up earlier that week, his reward for an entire year of abstinence. The question was, could he tempt his fellow campers to partake?

He had met Kelly around the time he quit getting high. It had come up in discussion that she had never tried anything, not even pot, and she was unaware that he ever had either. “I’m what you call a straight arrow,” he had told her. But if he could talk her into it, then anything could happen. He thought about Ashley’s tits again. They seemed perkier than Kelly’s, firm beneath that white halter top.

“Want a hand with your tent?” Jeremy offered.

“Yeah. Thanks, man,” Drew said. “It’s been awhile since I’ve used one of these. I mean — shit. I haven’t been camping since like — I don’t know — junior high.”

Jeremy took the tent parts from their carrying case and started snapping rods into place. “Ashley and I just started camping a couple years ago when we moved down here. Camping’s

not really something we had much opportunity for in Pittsburgh. But here it's like a given."

"For sure, man. Arkansas's beautiful. 'The Natural State' and all that."

"You're from here, right?"

"Yeah. The central part of the state. Little Rock. But I came up here to go to school."

"Doing a graduate program?"

"Nah. Still finishing up undergrad. Doing a double science major, biology and chemistry." Drew shrugged. "Honestly, I should have been done by now. I did my first semester up here at U of A, but I *kinda* had a little too much fun, so I went back home for a while, took some classes at UALR, and worked part time. I didn't know what I wanted to study, you know? I started as a business major. But then I broke my hand and had to see an orthopedist. Then it just hit me. I knew I wanted to go to medical school. So I kept going to school part time and started working for Dr. Chadwick at the Central Arkansas Orthopedic Clinic."

"That's how you met Kelly?" Jeremy asked, running the rods through the tent.

"Yeah. She was still working in Little Rock, obviously, and finishing her nursing degree. So we worked together for like eight months. Then she said she was moving up to Fayetteville, and I decided that I needed to quit fooling around with only going to school part time, so I transferred back up here."

Drew liked to make it sound easy, despite the hurdles. The university had stipulated he would have to pass a drug test and see a psychologist before reenrolling. That was their policy.

He vaguely recalled bright fluorescents passing over him, then voices, maybe, then waking up in the middle of the night and realizing that he was in a hospital room but, thankfully, still in his own clothes. He pulled the IV out and the wires off and walked out the front doors of the emergency clinic. He couldn't remember where he had been when he blacked out, but he

didn't care as long as nothing came back to bite him in the ass. A day later, however, and to his dismay, his inbox had emails from university officials. Meetings followed. Then, in a formal letter, he was asked not to return the following semester. Not only was he failing the majority of his classes, but *the University of Arkansas takes alcohol and drug abuse very seriously*. He had been carted off on a gurney from his own dorm room after his roommate had discovered him face down in a pool of vomit. *Drug abuse*, he thought. He hadn't even tried cocaine until after he got sent home. He blamed the U of A for the depression that caused him to go down that dark alley, the one his parents yanked him out of when they started taking him to support groups.

"Tent's ready," Jeremy said.

"Thanks, man. So you're in sales, right?" Drew felt a surge of superiority when he asked. Sure he hadn't finished school yet, but he wasn't just going to be a salesman. People were going to respect him because of two little letters: M.D.

"Yep." Jeremy said, taking a lighter and some cotton balls from a plastic bag. "I'm a regional sales rep for Rubbermaid." He squatted over a preformed fire pit left by a previous camper. "Have you ever seen this? It's a great trick. You soak cotton balls in Vaseline to make a fire starter."

"How's that supposed to work?" Drew asked, crossing his arms.

"The cotton is like a wick, and the Vaseline is like wax, so it burns long enough to get the fire going."

"I'll remember that little trick." Drew thought about the pot. "Speaking of burning, you ever smoke?"

"Like what? Cigarettes?"

"No. I'm talking about something a little more medicinal. You know what I mean?"

“Oh! No, man.”

Drew was more frustrated than disappointed with this response.

“Not since I was in high school,” Jeremy added.

Opportunity after all, Drew thought. “Yeah, me either, man. But I have this friend who just like gave me some. I was like, ‘Dude, I don’t do that. I’m trying to get into medical school.’ But then I thought that since we were camping and all, it might not be such a bad idea. Kelly said she wanted to let loose this weekend. Could be fun.” Drew watched Jeremy’s face, searching for the wavering expression of someone who might cave to peer pressure.

“I really don’t want to do something that could piss my wife off.”

“All right, man. No pressure. But she could be chill about it?”

“Yeah. We’ll see about that. They’ve got to take periodic drug tests at work, I think.”

Drew didn’t want to push too hard too fast. He saw the large cooler full of Miller Highlife Jeremy had brought and knew he was dealing with someone who, at the very least, wasn’t a total douche. Drew remained confident in his party-starting abilities.

At their return, the girls announced they had found some nice trails.

“Would you guys rather see the waterfall or the covered bridge?” Ashley asked.

“Is there a place to swim?” Drew asked.

“There’s a pond under the waterfall, but it’s not very deep,” Kelly said.

“But we could still wade in it,” Ashley added.

“*Ding, ding, ding!* We have a winner,” Drew said, successfully catching a grin from Ashley. Nice teeth, he thought.

The couples each went to their cars for hiking supplies. Drew saw Jeremy loading his cargo pockets with beer. Game on. He put a fifth of vodka in his own backpack.

“I certainly hope you put some water bottles in there too,” Kelly said, arms crossed, head cocked.

“Don’t you worry, baby,” he said. “I’ll keep you hydrated.”

She stared.

“Come on, baby,” he said, putting his arms around her. “What’s the matter, K-Y Jelly?”

“*Shh!* Would you not call me that in public?”

“What! Nobody heard. Come on, what’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” She sighed. “I don’t know. I’m just not in a good mood.”

“I can tell.” He held her an arm’s length away and lowered his face to her eyelevel. “Is this about somebody’s big three-*O* coming up?”

“Maybe. But you don’t have to be silly about it. Not everything has to be a joke.”

“I don’t think everything’s a joke.”

Jeremy and Ashley walked up to them. “You two ready?” Jeremy asked.

They walked without speaking for a while, listening only to the sounds of birds chirping and the crunch of trail gravel beneath their feet.

Last week, Kelly had said, “I can’t believe I’m about to turn thirty. I always used to think that by the time I was thirty I’d be married with two kids.”

“Don’t worry,” Drew had said. “There’s still plenty of time for that later on. Besides, you don’t want to marry just anyone. That’s why you’re with me, right? And don’t you think it would be a good idea for me to start medical school before we start thinking about the *M*-word?”

Marriage was a commitment he felt was at least a decade away.

“That seems like such a long time to wait,” she said.

“I only have three semesters left to go of undergrad,” he assured her. “Don’t worry.”



But that was just before he decided to double major, hoping that would help compensate for his less than impressive grade point average. Now he would be in school an additional two semesters. With two and a half years left in his undergraduate career, he decided to put off taking the MCAT. When Kelly objected he had said, “How can I expect you to be supportive while I’m in medical school, if you can’t even deal with what I have to do to get in?” She had been quiet about it after that.

At the sound of rushing water, Drew quickened his pace. He threw Kelly over his shoulder and started running for the pool beneath the cascade. “Put me down!” she squealed with delight. He knew how to fix her mood. Attention is to females as catnip is to felines. He glanced in Ashley’s direction to see if she was watching.

Drew cradled Kelly in his arms and spun around and around in the shallows of the pond until he plopped down on his ass. He continued to hold her and tickle her until she yelled, “If you don’t stop, I’m going to pee on you!” Her cheeks pinked above an uncontrollable smile. Sweet success.

Jeremy distributed a round of beers. When the Highlife was gone, Drew opened the vodka and threw the cap into the woods. “Now we have to finish it,” he said. “How ‘bout a game of Never Have I Ever to make it go faster?”

It looked like Jeremy was about to object, but Ashley said, “I guess we could play a few rounds. But just a few. Otherwise, we’ll be too drunk to make it back to camp.” She laughed. “Though Kelly can be our DG—designated guide.”

Kelly frowned. Drew wished she’d lighten up.

“Why don’t you do the honors.” Drew passed the bottle to Ashley with a wink.

“Okay... Never have I ever — forgotten my own phone number!” She took a drink.

Everyone laughed, but none of the others drank. “Guess I’m the only one,” she said.

“I’ll go,” Jeremy said. “Never have I ever gotten kicked out of a bar.” He took a pull. The bottle went around. Drew drank, but neither of the girls did.

Kelly took the bottle. “Never have I ever given out a fake phone number.” Everyone drank.

Drew took his turn. “Never have I ever gone skinny dipping.” Everyone drank, again. Drew kept the bottle. “Never have I ever cheated on a significant other.” No one made any admissions here. “Okay then, never have I ever been high.” Drew took a sip, then he handed the bottle to Jeremy, who drank, as did Ashley. Kelly didn’t. “Seriously?” Drew asked her. “Not even once, like in high school even?”

“Seriously,” she said. “We’ve talked about this before, and I thought you said you’d never done any drugs.”

“Pot’s not really a drug.”

“It’s illegal.”

“Not in California,” he said, imitating a surfer dude. Ashley let out a howl and even Jeremy chortled. “You know what,” Drew continued, “I think you should try it.” He pulled a small Ziploc bag and a pipe from his backpack.

Kelly’s expression suddenly reminded him of the look his mother gave him on rare occasions, like the time he got caught cheating on a test in the fifth grade and had to have a conference with the principal, or like the time in junior high he got caught shoplifting with his friends in a swanky department store, or when he got sent home from college.

Kelly started marching back up the path. Drew followed her until they were alone. Kelly was not his mother. She would ultimately give him what he wanted. He was sure of it.

“What the hell?” she said. “Are you trying to embarrass me? You’re like a fucking teenager!”

“No. I’m like a college student trying to have a little fun with his girlfriend. Why do you have to be so pissy?” He watched her lips press into a thin line and regretted the question. He could swear she was about to breathe fire.

“Why am I pissy? My live-in boyfriend who’s about to turn twenty-five and still has two and a half years of college to finish wants to know why I’m pissy? This is the same guy I met a year ago who said he’d never done drugs and had me convinced that he had his life together. This is the same guy that lives with me free of charge and spends his extra time playing video games and drinking too much. I mean, you don’t even have a fucking part-time job!”

Drew held his hands up. “Whoa, whoa, whoa. Let’s just calm down a minute. Now, we’ve talked about some of this before.”

“I’m done talking.”

“Baby, that hurts. I let you finish your piece, let me say mine.” He took her silence as consent to continue. “I’m working my ass off in school, and I’m doing it for you. Do you think that double majoring is an easy thing? Because if you do, you’re mistaken, sorely mistaken. And about the pot, you’re the one who said you wanted to get in touch with your wild side or whatever. I was only thinking of you. And I didn’t go out of my way to get it. A guy I know from high school offered it to me for, like, helping him study.”

“Sure. Do you think I’m an idiot?”

“No. I think you’re really smart. I respect you. That’s why I’m with you.”

“You liar.”

“I’m not lying! How can I make you see that I’m not lying? Listen. Just listen. I’ll get rid

of the pot when we get back to camp, okay?”

Her face was like a stone.

“I promise,” he said, “I’ll get rid of it.”

“You better.”

So much for a good time in Devil’s Den.

\* \* \*

Drew was on his best behavior for the next few days.

He decided the best course of action was to come clean with Kelly about his past. It had occurred to him that if she were to dump him, he wouldn’t have a place to stay in Fayetteville. His parents had made it clear they disapproved of his going back to the U of A when he could go to school in Little Rock, so they refused to give him money for living expenses. His only option would be to move back in with his parents.

Now, they’d have a talk. He thought it out ahead of time, the darkened room, tears in his eyes. Maybe make-up sex after?

He buried his face in his hands. “You know my life is chaotic. I’ve brought some of that on myself, but so much of it is because of this pressure I feel. A pressure to succeed. A pressure to live up to my family’s expectations. I mean, my brother is an attorney in D.C., and my sister is a veterinarian. I don’t want to be the one that screws up. I don’t want to be the joke at family reunions.

“And I promise you that I won’t be. I love you, and I want you to be proud of me, proud to have me in your life. And I know now more than ever that I need you because you challenge

me to be a better person.” He pressed her hand to his chest. “Everything in here is for you. Can we work this out? Will you give me a chance to show you I’m serious about us and the future I want to build?”

“One last chance,” she said.

So Drew spent less time on the couch and made a point to study at the house in plain view with an impressive display of organic chemistry books spread out on the kitchen table. He started offering to do her laundry when he was doing his own. He even started cooking dinner a few nights a week. What fun it could be playing the role of Mr. Perfect. She’d get off her shift at the hospital and come home to a plate of pasta and a glass of red wine. And even when she was tired he could expect the possibility of sex because he was “just too wonderful.”

One night, some of his old high school friends came up to Fayetteville for a bachelor party. “I’ll only drink beer,” he said. “No drama. I promise. But I bet we’ll be out pretty late, so I’ll stay on Matt’s couch tonight. I don’t want to wake you up,” he said, kissing her on the head.

So all he drank was beer. He was sure of it. He was sure that all he had that night was beer. He was sure because it was the last thing he remembered drinking. He was sure of it when he woke up on the couch in Kelly’s living room. He was sure of it when he said, “Where’s my car?” after looking through the front window and not seeing it.

He was even sure of it when she said, “It’s in the backyard. You parked it there after managing to lose a side-view mirror and denting the passenger-side doors.”

“Shit. I don’t know what happened last night. I mean, I only drank beer. I swear.”

“What did you hit? A pole? A car? A human being?”

“I don’t know. I mean, I guess I could have sideswiped someone, or someone must have sideswiped me.”

“Probably the former.”

He studied her stony expression. He couldn’t detect the slightest look of sympathy or concern for him. It was a frighteningly stoic look.

He willed some tears. He really did feel like crying. “Kelly, come here.” He reached for her, but she stepped back. “I promise I’ll never do this again. I swear, baby. Just tell me, please tell me that we can move on from this.”

“Do you even care?”

“What do you mean? Of course I care. I let you down. I let myself down. I fucked up my car.”

“No. I mean do you care about the fact that you could have killed someone last night? Has checking the news for reports of a hit and run even occurred to you?”

“Hell! I just woke up. But I think if I had hit someone, I would remember.”

“No you wouldn’t. Because you don’t remember.”

His heart dropped like a rock to his stomach. He searched her face. Was she telling the truth or was she punishing him with a mind game? Surely he hadn’t actually hit someone. He probably hit a mailbox or something. He opened his mouth to speak, but she raised her hand to stop him.

He knew he’d be moving out soon. And if he had hit something, he hoped she wouldn’t tell anyone—that he could get out of it. It’s the least she could do for him, a guy with no place to go.

## Unfortunate Circumstances

Looking through the window facing the Cushman Knoll Cemetery, Laurie watches the sunrise. She's bothered less by living across the road from it when morning comes spilling over the hilltop, the dew glistening green, the headstones warming in the light. A large white oak frames the left side of her view. The tree is inhabited by a red-breasted robin, and she has a baby—a little gray thing. It's a lone survivor. Laurie watches it daily, waiting for it to take flight.

One of the mangy strays the man from two trailers down feeds is prowling around the base of the tree. Laurie runs outside, and the cat takes off, as if Laurie were a pit bull. If she were, she'd break its neck.

Back inside, Laurie gathers her homework assignments, wishing someone could check her work. Last year, she aced Geometry, but Trigonometry's made her bite her nails down to the pink.

Mama comes out of her room in a gray, Marlboro haze. "We got any coffee left, sugar pie?" her voice cracks.

“Sorry, Mama,” Laurie says.

Mama shakes her head and takes a long drag. “Don’t suppose we got no doughnuts neither.”

“No, Mama. But I’ll walk up to the gas station after school and get some things.”

Smiling her jack-o-lantern grin, Mama says, “That’s my good girl.”

“Mama,” Laurie says, “you should take better care of your teeth, or else the dentist is gonna have to pull what’s left of them.” When the last toothache became unbearable, Mama self-medicated with moonshine she’d gotten from Kermit Wilson, the only bootlegger in Independence, a dry county on a thinning Bible belt. Laurie called 911 because Mama was struggling to breathe. At the hospital, the doctors stuck a tube down her throat to keep an airway open.

Mama shakes her head. “Ain’t nothing I can do about it, baby girl. When you have a baby, like I did you, it steals the calcium. Your granny was in dentures by forty. It’s hereditary,” she says. “You’ll be in the same boat I expect.”

Laurie’s uncertain if the heat surging to the back of her neck is caused by anger at Mama’s ignorance or fear that she’s right. “The other day,” she says, “some doctors and nurses came to talk to us at school. And they said that as long as you take care of yourself, what happened to your mama or daddy doesn’t really matter for lots of things.” Laurie can tell Mama’s not listening anymore by the way she’s staring off, but Laurie keeps talking. “They also said that the community college is getting this nursing program. It should be running soon.” Laurie pauses. “I think maybe I’d like to go. I mean, if my grades are good enough.” But her grades worry her less than the cost of tuition. Mama makes minimum wage at the chicken factory, plucking wings on the conveyor line.



“Honey,” Mama says, “you can do anything.” Laurie bets that’s what Granny used to say to Mama. “Just stay away from them boys.” This advice is from the woman who bore her daughter at the age of sixteen. “Well, baby, I best get on. Don’t be late for the school bus.”

\* \* \*

Laurie hopes the bus hurries up and gets here because Kermit Wilson is coming up the road on his bright orange riding mower. He had it custom painted with racing stripes when he lost his license from driving drunk about two months back. He goes everywhere on that noisy thing. She suspects it’s put a kink in his business dealings, but he’s lucky they didn’t get him for distilling and distributing.

“Hey there, Laurie.” He takes a swig from a brown paper bag which appears and disappears like a magic trick. “How’s your mama?”

She wants to say Mama’s none of his business, but the fat, red-nosed lawnmower jockey strikes her as the type who might run a girl down with the blades on, so she says, “Fine.”

“Waiting for the bus?” His dry mouth smacks, grating her nerves.

“What’s it look like?”

“I got no need for the attitude, girl.” He bobs his head like a pissy chicken. “I come out here friendly. I’m a friend of your mama’s, and you treat me like that?”

Laurie sees the bus coming and says, “Sorry. My ride’s here.”

Wilson throws a hand up like a traffic guard. “Hold up a second, girl. I got a proposition that could help you out. I know.” He bobs his head. “I know money ain’t too good.” He takes her silence as the curiosity it is. “I know there’d be plenty interested.” He runs his hand over his

head like a used car salesman. “But I’m coming to you first. You see,” he says, lowering his voice as if others were listening in, “business ain’t been too good now that I’ve lost my transportation. I can’t get to town in under an hour on this machine. I need some other means of delivery, and I got some customers in that high school of yours.”

She thinks a moment. “I don’t need trouble.” This isn’t just a dry county, it’s Baptist too. If she gets caught selling Satan’s juice, she’ll be branded forever.

“Just think about it.”

She says nothing as she boards the bus.

\* \* \*

Laurie sits beside Sheppard Fuller in first period because their seats are in alphabetical order. His daddy is a surgeon at the hospital. Sheppard calls himself a redneck, but his new pickup truck and fancy clothes that don’t come from Walmart say otherwise.

“Laurie, you know that Jason Aldean song?” Sheppard starts singing and drumming his fingers on the desk. “*You can find me in the back of a jacked up tailgate—*”

“Yes, I know it.” She likes it when she knows what he’s talking about. It feels like she’s always saying no when he mentions something he saw on MTV or YouTube.

“Man, it gets me pumped! *She’s a rockin’ them holey jeans!* You coming to Painter’s Bluff Friday night?”

“I don’t know.” Laurie’s never been invited before. That’s where the rich kids hang out. The bluff isn’t far from the one gated community in this town, overlooking the White River, far enough away to make all the metal-roofed strip malls below look quaint. That was the first time

she thought Batesville looked pretty, the one time she was in one of those houses. She recalls Wilson's proposition and says, "Maybe." She knows Sheppard and some of his friends buy party supplies from Wilson when they can't get a keg from the next county.

"I'll be there," he says as if his attendance should be motivation enough. The way his lips curl remind her of the Ken doll she got for her seventh birthday. Ken and Barbie lived happily together until their lives ended in a tragic fire. A neighbor at the time was cooking meth, and his chemistry was a little off. "If you need a ride, I can pick you up in the Mud Hog?" That's what Sheppard calls his truck.

"That's all right." She doesn't want him to see where she lives. "I'll meet you there, if I can go." But she has no genuine intention of going. She knows which crowd will be there, the cheerleaders and football players. When she's not invisible to them, she's something to step on. Sheppard's new, so he hasn't figured it out yet, but it won't be long before someone points out to him that he shouldn't talk to white trash.

The morning announcements begin on the loud speaker. Laurie listens to the same old list. Then, "For anyone interested in medical professions, please see the guidance counselor for information on an after-school internship at White River Medical Center." Laurie keeps her eyes pinned to the faux wood grain of her desk, focusing on the circular knot as if she were staring into space. She'll go see the counselor at lunchtime, instead of when most people go during study hall.

At lunchtime, Laurie waits outside the guidance office. Caroline Burroughs is strutting up the hallway in her orange and black cheerleading uniform. Laurie looks at the ground, so when Caroline says, "Hey," Laurie doesn't know it's directed at her. But Caroline's feet have stopped in front of Laurie. "I said *hey*."

Laurie looks up. “Hey. Sorry. I was just thinking and not paying attention.”

“Apparently.” Caroline raises her drawn eyebrows and purses her lips. “So are you like waiting to see the counselor.”

“Yeah.”

“Do you mind if I cut? I’m really busy and I need to see her about that internship thing.”

“No.” Laurie’s stomach twists. “That’s fine, I mean.”

“Good.” Caroline looks at her watch. She puts her hands on her hips and taps her foot.

“So,” she says, “I saw you were talking to Sheppard this morning.”

“No.” Laurie’s caught off guard. “I mean, yes.” She worries her cheeks have turned pink.

“That’s funny,” Caroline says. Caroline and Sheppard used to date, so even though she has a new boyfriend, she keeps tabs on him, like a dog rechecking its marked territory. “You know, though, he and some of the other football players have a competition going this year to see who can get the most lays. So that makes sense why he’d bother talking to you.”

Laurie feels pressure building up beneath her eyes like a pipe that’s about to leak and overflow. She wants to ask Caroline why she has to be so cruel, but she’s afraid to open her mouth.

Caroline smiles and looks at her watch. “This is taking too long.” She struts off.

In the office, Laurie sits across the desk from Ms. Smith, the new counselor. If it weren’t for the sleek haircut and business suit, she’d probably get mistaken for a student. She’s decorated her office with inspirational posters. She holds out a tissue box and says, “Let me know when you’re ready to talk about it.”

Laurie’s struggling to keep her voice steady. “No. I’m sorry. I’m not here because I’m crying.” She takes a deep breath. “I’m here about the internship.”

“Oh.” Ms. Smith’s lips turn down in disappointment. Laurie can’t blame her for hoping for something more interesting, like a crisis pregnancy or substance abuse issue. Batesville can’t be that exciting for her.

“The morning announcement said to come to guidance for more information.”

“Right.” Ms. Smith slaps a thick pack of papers down on her desk and passes a few stapled sheets to Laurie. “There’s an application you have to fill out. There are only two spots available. And it’s going to be pretty competitive.”

“How do the applicants get picked? Who decides?” People like Sheppard and Caroline have parents who work at the hospital.

“The principal and a couple members of hospital staff will.”

Of course.

“The applicants are supposed to remain anonymous until selected.”

Then maybe she has a shot.

“If your grades are good and you don’t have any disciplinary infractions, you have a chance. Character matters.”

\* \* \*

Laurie knows character isn’t real, not the type they’re looking for. They care about the appearance of character. Even Caroline volunteers. Laurie doesn’t party, get drunk, or sleep around. But it doesn’t matter.

Mama’s car is parked outside the trailer. She’s home early. Inside, she’s sitting in front of the television with a full ashtray beside her.

“Hey, Mama,” Laurie says, setting down a sack of groceries as if it were a sleeping baby.

“Leave work early?”

“Yep.” Mama lights a cigarette.

“Why?”

“There’s no smoking at the plant anymore.”

“What does that mean?”

“Means, I quit.”

Laurie’s heart begins to pound in her ears. “Can you unquit?”

“Not with the way I quit.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, they put a no smoking sign up in the break room, but there ain’t no sign on the factory floor.” Mama shrugs, but her fingers tremble as she lifts the cigarette to her lips. “The manager didn’t like it too much, especially since the health inspector was in.”

Laurie rummages in her mind for something to keep her afloat. “What about unemployment benefits?”

“Benefits?” Mama laughs. “I’ll see about food stamps after my last paycheck comes. I was sick of that place anyway. Who the hell needs a job?”

Laurie stares out the window, tracing the headstones. She hears loud chirps and zones in on the oak and its tiny occupant no one else seems to care about.

\* \* \*

In the moonlight, Laurie passes by the stone-speckled knoll that holds Mama's future, a path Laurie fears because she can't see beyond it, though she wants so badly to see a different road, some other possibility, a different set of footsteps to follow in.

No cars pass her as she walks along the shoulder. Who would want to come out this way with nothing but trailers and tombstones adding to the scenery?

Laurie steps onto a creaking porch, and before she can knock Wilson opens the door.

"Finally get wise?" he asks.

"Yeah." She needs money, more than minimum wage and made faster than by the hour. The trailer is a step up for her and Mama, and she has no desire to go backwards. She wants an address, something she can put down on paper, even if it's in a trailer park.

\* \* \*

The stink of the chicken factory hits Laurie as she drives through town in Wilson's truck. She nearly rear-ends a car at a red light on her way to Painter's Bluff because she's watching a patrol car out the corner of her eye. She makes it to the bluff without her nerves sabotaging the plan.

Sheppard doesn't seem surprised to see her, but he is surprised that she's delivering Wilson's moonshine and asking for payment. She feels her cheeks flush and is grateful for the darkness.

"I better get going," she says.

"You might as well stick around and hang out for a while," he says. He opens a bottle of moonshine, pours some into a large Styrofoam cup, and swirls it with a straw. As he passes the

bottle on, she sees others, including Caroline, staring in her direction. “Let’s take a seat,” Sheppard says.

They sit on a felled oak near the edge of the bluff. Laurie doesn’t like to drink because it makes her sick, but when he offers, she takes a sip. Sheppard alternates between talking about his truck and singing along to whatever music is playing. Maybe he’s just trying to add her to his scoreboard, but she doesn’t care if that’s the only reason he’s being nice to her, sitting here with her. She wants to know what it feels like to be one of them, to not be full of worry over what might happen if she makes a mistake.

Up here, away from the smell of dying chickens and the sight of gravestones, she can see herself getting off her shift at the hospital and driving home with a doctor husband in a fancy car to her big house on the bluff. Or better still, perhaps, she could leave this place altogether. She could fly away forever and not have to remember or be remembered in this way. She could start over as a nurse in a new town.

“Shit,” Sheppard says as soon as the blue lights start flashing.

There are only a couple of cops, but everyone stands around like deer waiting to get run over. “Line up and have your licenses ready,” one says.

“Why?” Caroline asks.

“You’re getting MIPs.”

“Well, I don’t have my license,” she says.

“Then we’ll have to take you to jail,” the officer says.

“What?” Caroline looks around. “That’s so unfair. I wasn’t even drinking.” The flashing lights shine on her eyes, making them glow like a mountain lion’s. She points at Laurie. “That piece of trailer trash over there brought it and sold it to us!”



Some of the others confirm what Caroline said, as they hope to get out of their tickets, thinking someone else's greater offense will distract the cops. Laurie has no concern whether they get fined or not. She's going to jail.

The handcuffs are cold and heavy on her small wrists, and the word infraction keeps circling her mind like a buzzard on an updraft. She knows they'll expect her to give up Wilson and she will. They may even clear her name of all charges, but it won't make a difference in a town this size. Everyone will know her now, long enough for it to matter.

\* \* \*

The cops drop Laurie off at dawn. She drags her feet through the gravelly dirt of the park until she reaches her trailer, but she stops at the door. She watches the sun come up, the light spilling over the headstones across the road.

Looking up into the oak tree, she notices the nest is empty, and for a moment, she's at peace. But when she looks down, she sees a mess of feathers and blood.

She squats over the dead baby, examining it. It looks crushed and cut, as if it were run over by something with a blade.

Laurie takes a rusty spade and buries the fledgling in the rocky, reddish dirt.

She almost envies that kind of security, that state of nothingness where there is no worry.

## Tombstone Sunny-Side Up

In the liquor story, running her fingers along the bottles in the aisle simply marked *Italy*, Kateri feels like a kid in a candy shop. The difficulty is making a decision between the jumbo bag of candy corn and the more expensive—but significantly smaller—box of Swedish chocolates. Regrettably, the child realizes she’s a nickel short for the finer sweets, so Kateri grabs a five-liter box of Franzia Cabernet.

After an evening spent serving sport coats and cardigans and smiling like a pageant contestant, Kateri relaxes her jaw and refuses to smile at the polite, hat-tipping Texans. Instead of meeting their glances, she pretends she’s texting.

“The usual?” the mullet at the register asks while scanning her ID for what must be the hundredth time.

“It’s not for me,” she responds as she charades her way through a fake text. She could answer her mother’s messages, but she lacks the motivation.

The Cab Sauv rides shotgun in her silver Civic. She hits the gas, trying to conjure just enough breeze to blow the day away. The Cranberries play on the nineties radio station. “*Zah-ahm-bie, zah-ahm-bie*,” she sings along, breathing in the muggy East Texas air that lingers like a plague. It envelops the endless row of apartment complexes, each containing hundreds of units, housing thousands of twenty and thirty-something-year-olds. She used to idolize these apartment dwellers back when she was a wide-eyed undergraduate in an all-girl dorm, an Arkansan who picked the nearest big city as the launching point for her adult life.

She longs for a nicotine fix and the sight of that gray genie rolling out the window, but she’s promised herself she’ll only smoke when she goes out. Her bad habit has a happy origin, so she can’t kick it altogether. It traveled home with her from Rome only to leave burn marks on her car’s upholstery and make her father lecture and mother cry. “Let me make a few dumb mistakes while I’m still young,” she said.

Her Honda takes its place among other innocuous compacts and sedans beneath the long aluminum carport. Then the Franz and she ascend the metal steps in the echoing stairwell.

Cracking open the door, she gets a whiff of burnt-on, oven grease. Toby’s already preheating the oven. Good man.

Through the door and beyond the saggy, gray second-hand couch, her eyes graze the dusty volumes on the tall, laminate bookshelf. Plato, Homer, Milton, Tolstoy, and an assortment of other classics sit stationed in view. They serve as both a reminder and a conversation piece for the occasional social gathering at *chez* Kateri. Someday, she’ll pick them up again. She’ll summer in Italy and sip the fermented fruit of Tuscan vines and read and contemplate. A small gap where one paperback is slanting into another and a break in the dust lets her know someone’s missing from the shelf.

She discovers Toby standing in the kitchen with Sophocles. The playwright's stone face stares out from the cover with the smug look of an immortal. Toby's dark eyes scan the pages as his lips form inaudible words. Then he puts the book down and draws her in. "*Ciao, bella.*"

"*Amore mio.*" Running her fingers through his wavy, chestnut hair, she feels the intravenous-like release of endorphins. His lean, well-built body is her sanctuary. "What's this for?" She points to Sophocles.

"I'm auditioning for *Antigone*," he explains. "Not Sophocles', though. Dallas Actor's Lab is doing a production of Jean Anouilh's adaptation."

"Like in college," she says, conscious her statement sounds overtly reminiscent. She only graduated four—maybe five—years ago. "That show was fun in a depressing, Greek tragedy kind of way," she remarks while moving to the bedroom, where she strips off her white blouse and black pants. In *Antigone*, her costume was a crumpled, blood-spattered version of her current uniform. The director wanted a war-torn look. Creon's secretary spoke three lines. No. It was four lines: Yes, sir. No, sir. Five o'clock, sir. It was only three. "Are you auditioning for Creon?" she asks as she slips on Toby's broken-in, Spirit in the Sky T-shirt.

In the kitchen, she watches him beautify the boxed wine by decanting it. "Haemon," he answers, "I think would be more appropriate for me."

"Of course," she says. This isn't college. They can cast Creon with someone old enough to be Haemon's father. A memory of Toby caked in old-age makeup tickles her. She tosses the Tombstone pizza wrappers in the garbage. "How long have the pizzas been in?"

"Long enough." Toby inhales deeply with his nose in the air like an English Pointer.

"Do you want eggs?" She takes the Styrofoam carton from the fridge.

Toby softly bites her shoulder. "I'll pass."

She pulls out the pizzas and cracks a couple eggs on one before returning it to the oven, while Toby sets a tray with plates and napkins.

She bends forward and presses her palms to the kitchen floor, trying to relieve some of the tension in her back caused by hours on her feet. “Are we watching *The Tudors*?”

He presses his lips to her hand. “Of course, m’lady,” he says. Not long ago, he played Henry VIII at Shakespeare in the Park.

They settle in front of the television with their dinner and click on the next episode on Netflix.

“Poor Catherine,” she sighs. “And those wicked, wicked, dirty Boleyns.”

“Drama!” he calls, as if invoking a muse. “It’s the sort of thing that’s only good when experienced vicariously.” Toby’s still in character.

She laughs. “The Franz is amplifying your inner carnie.”

He holds out his glass. “Then give me more, chambermaid.”

While fulfilling his request, she recalls the first time she saw him. He was a junior performing in *Henry V* for freshman orientation week. Seated with a covey of other fresh, wide-eyed coeds in the dark auditorium, she could have sworn he looked right at her. But he hadn’t, she realized, after gushing about his performance during the cast meet-and-greet that followed. It wasn’t until a year and half later, after she returned from her semester in Rome, that he noticed her.

Somewhere between condensed medieval politics and the graphic deflowering of yet another lady-in-waiting, Kateri drifts off. Fingers drum on her arm. “I’m not asleep,” she says.

“Yes you are,” Toby says.

Thomas Moore is saying something about Augustine of Hippo. “Henry could have been like Augustine,” she says, “if he’d have stopped screwing when he had the chance.”

She opens her eyes just enough to see that the television is black. Her head is in the crook of Toby’s arm. She wants to go to bed. “Carry me,” she says.

She feels her body being transferred by a pair of strong arms, like she’s a child again. It makes her giggle.

“What?” Toby whispers.

“Nothing.”

“You’re drunk.”

“Only a little.”

\* \* \*

Kateri is home from work and making dinner. The bright yolks break and spill over the cheese and pepperonis as she runs the blade of her pizza cutter across the diameter. The jingling of keys at the front door announces Toby’s arrival. When he kisses her, she breathes in the musk of cologne and tobacco mingling with post-rehearsal bourbon.

“How was it?” she asks.

“Excellent.” His hands come together in one ear-popping clap. “Elena has a real feel for Antigone. Our on-stage chemistry feels really organic. Though Creon’s secretary is extremely amateurish.” He tugs the hem of Kateri’s T-shirt. “I wish you had auditioned.”

“I’m no actress.” Besides, an occasional gig only pays occasionally, whereas rent is due every month.

They cozy into their dents on the couch and fire up Netflix. They're halfway through the second season of *The Tudors*. Their goal is to finish the series by *Antigone's* preview night, but work and rehearsal keep interfering.

The previous episode recaps conclude just as Kateri's phone vibrates and her mother's face beams before her in the dimly lit room.

"Don't answer," Toby says.

"I have to. I've already silenced two of her calls today, and she pays the bill." She taps the face on her phone.

He pleads with his pained, melodramatic eyes and lightly grasps at her arm as she heads to the kitchen. "It'll throw us off schedule."

Kateri answers the phone with apologies and explanations.

"I understand," her mother says. She always understands, and yet she doesn't. In grade school she used to send Kateri napkin notes; now she sends texts. Bible verses or bits of folksy wisdom, whether heard from a postman or a priest, arrive in group messages. Mobile devices act like little electronic umbilical cords connecting Kateri and her four siblings to their mother.

Kateri tries making her way through the neutral ground. How is the garden? Has Sparky's skin infection cleared up? Is Dad coaching church-league soccer this fall? But Toby's decided to plow ahead without her. The sound of groaning and heavy breathing interrupts her conversation like a blow horn. "Could you hold on a sec, Mom?" She holds the phone against her chest like she would a child whose ears she's muffling from obscenities.

"Turn it off," Kateri hisses. "She's going to think we're watching porn." She can see it now: her little silver slot of a mailbox overflowing with holy cards and Mass offerings; the squat, pig-nosed mailman knocking at her door, shaking his head and throwing a sack of saints at her.

Toby rolls his eyes before he clicks the pause button. Henry is mid-coitus with a nameless woman. Kateri leaves the room and drains her wine glass before resuming her conversation with her mother.

“Sorry about that,” Kateri says. “We were watching this history show when you called . . . um . . .”

“Well, I won’t keep you, but I did have a reason to call other than just wanting to hear your voice. I miss you.” Mother, you are a paradox: a sniper and martyr rolled into one.

“I miss you too.” Kateri is no actress, but at times like these she wishes she were. “So what was the reason for calling?”

“Do you remember Salina Martinez? Dr. Martinez’s daughter?”

“Of course,” Kateri says. Salina’s topaz eyes and perfect pout swim into her mind. Kateri saw Salina at a concert last year, but they hadn’t spoken. She still looked great. Salina could have been a model, which partially accounted for her negative popularity among other girls in high school. Kateri and Salina made brief eye contact, then Salina walked in the opposite direction. Though they had attended the same parochial schools Kindergarten through twelfth grade, they never associated with one another.

“She died yesterday.”

“What?”

“She was on her way to work and wrecked her car on the highway.”

No order dictates the questions running through Kateri’s mind and erupting from her mouth. Her head floats like a balloon, as if she’s chased antihistamines with her wine. How does someone in her twenties simply wreck her car and die? Cars are safe. Tragedy only strikes nameless strangers.



Kateri's mother explains there was no double collision. "Her boyfriend was with her. He died too. They were on their way to work, and she ran into a retaining wall on the highway. I wasn't sure if you had heard about it on Facebook or whatever."

"No. I hadn't. I haven't been on there in a while."

"Okay. Well, I just thought you might want to say some prayers for the family."

"Right," Kateri says. "Of course."

Their conversation ends, leaving Kateri in silence. *Died*. The word sounds unsuitable in this context. Salina Martinez died. Kateri scans the pictures of friends held in place by magnets on the refrigerator, but Salina wouldn't be there.

"Kat," Toby calls from the couch.

She sits beside him as he lounges in his ignorance. And even when she tells him, his reaction will be like anyone's reaction to the death of a stranger.

"What's up?" he asks.

"A classmate of mine died," she says, though the words feel false. "A girl I went to . . . always went to school with before college."

"I'm sorry." Toby squeezes her arm. "Was she a friend?"

"No," she says. "Not at all."

Kateri looks at the television still displaying the copulatory scene. The image has gone from embarrassing to irreverent. She jumps to her feet.

"Kat, are you okay?"

"I'm fine." Her mind suggests walking or running, but the alcohol in her blood stream votes for a sedentary response. Though drinking more seems disrespectful. "You can watch this if you want, but I can't right now."

She retreats to the bedroom and begins to close the door, but then she leaves it halfway open, as she did for months after her grandmother's death some fifteen years ago. Her grandmother died suddenly one night. If Kateri's door was open, she'd have a better chance of escaping the dark, hooded figure that could appear at any moment.

On the bed, Kateri sits hunched over her laptop and logs on to Facebook. She clicks on the first mutual friend Salina and she would share and pursues Salina's prolife.

In a matter of seconds, Salina's glowing smile radiates light into the darkened room. "How can you be dead?" Kateri scrolls through Salina's pictures and profile information seeking clues that might answer a riddle that doesn't need solving. Other than graduating from college, she hadn't accomplished anything of note. Acids in Kateri's stomach churn until they sear her esophagus. She should stop eating so much frozen pizza.

Toby knocks on the door.

Her spine aches with stiffness. "I just want to sleep." She reaches out to him. "Hold me."

During the night, Toby, contoured behind her, breathes steadily in his slumber. But she's tracing the mini blind's shadow on the wall.

When they were freshmen in high school, Kateri stood in a line of girls, all in plaid skirts and wearing monogrammed L.L. Bean book packs. Salina was just ahead of her and confiding in another girl. "Frank had just zipped his pants up when my mom knocked on the door," she said. "After he left, she asked if our relationship was becoming intimate. I was like, 'Eww. Do you mean sex? I'm offended you think I would even consider that.' Then she apologized for saying anything." Salina laughed. "She's so naïve."

Kateri must have been staring. Salina looked her in the eye, completely unabashed, and said, "What?"

For the next four years, their lives played out within the same hemisphere: honors classes, school functions, church functions, but Kateri can't recall exchanging a single word.

\* \* \*

"I don't want to be late," Kateri hollers at Toby above the thrum of his shower water. Her hair is refusing to twist into a tidy bun; it hasn't been this long in years. After a semester in Rome, she returned to the second half of her sophomore year with a pixie haircut and a pretense of worldliness. Sitting outside the drama department building, sucking her way through half a pack of cigarettes and waxing prosaic about the Renaissance, Toby and she connected for the first time.

Toby steps out of the shower. "It doesn't take me long to get ready," he says, drying himself with a towel. "I don't care so much about my appearance that I spend hours fiddling with my hair and lipstick."

"I do *not* spend hours on my appearance." She stabs the air in front of him with her hairbrush.

"I'm joking." He holds his hands up. "I'm the one that's performing tonight, and instead of preparing, I'm letting you drag me out to dinner with some high school friend of yours who probably has nothing in common with us."

"Fine." She hasn't seen Marie in years. "You can skip the dinner, and I'll see you at the theater."

"No. I'm going."

"Why?"

“Because you’ll throw a fit later if I don’t.”

When they arrive at the restaurant, Marie and her boyfriend are already seated and munching on fried calamari. Kateri and Marie make the appropriate, adolescent squeals of reunion before recalling their surroundings and politely introducing their significant others.

Marie and her boyfriend, Braden, are finishing medical school. They’re in Dallas because they’re hoping to Couples Match at the same residency program. That’s when Kateri notices the ring on Marie’s left hand.

“You’re engaged?” she asks, widening her eyes and opening her mouth to communicate more emotion than she really feels because it’s been so long since she’s so much as had a phone conversation with Marie. “Why didn’t you say something?”

Marie and Braden, fingers intertwined, rest their hands on the linen table cloth. “We haven’t really made a public announcement yet.”

“Congratulations,” Kateri says, trying to connect this woman, soon to be doctor, in front of her with the teenage girl who used to get drunk on Mike’s Hard Lemonade. Their senior year of high school Marie was dumped by a guy named Ben and went on a binge. Three drinks, if Kateri recalls correctly. Kateri was plucking Marie’s eyebrows, at her slurred request, when Marie vomited on Kateri’s lap.

“So what are your plans?” Marie asks. “Are you still thinking about graduate school? You majored in art history, right? Do you still want to be a curator?”

“Wow. It really has been a while since we talked.” Kateri takes a long sip of water. “Honestly, I’m not really sure what I want to do. I majored in history.” Kateri amends the record. “I should probably consider graduate school or just try getting my teaching certificate or something.” These possibilities have occurred to her before, but she thinks of teaching as a last

resort. She's always assumed something grand would spark her interest, that she has all the time in the world.

"That would be so amazing," Marie says. "Teaching is so noble."

A chill passes through Kateri. Marie must feel sorry for her, otherwise she wouldn't sugarcoat—*Amazing, noble*.

Kateri slides her arm over Toby's shoulders. "I've chosen an unconventional way of life. When you're with an actor, the path to success isn't a paved road. And it's not even so much about success as it is about making a positive difference. For instance, in *Antigone*—the play tonight—the playwright wrote it as a political statement against Nazi tyranny."

"Exactly," Toby says, and he begins to rant, but Kateri doesn't care. Toby's on autopilot evangelizing the gospel of Western Tradition and prophesying the end of civilization as they know it. "When the liberal arts cease to be considered useful directives, we'll be a race of zombies following the gods of science. The question will be 'Can we do it?' not 'Should we do it?'"

"Do what?" Braden asks.

"I don't know." Toby shrugs his shoulders. "Clone dinosaurs."

Toby's sense of comedic timing helps break the tension Kateri feels building. She's finding it difficult, though, to smile through the rest of dinner.

They arrive at the theater an hour before curtain goes up; Toby believes there's plenty of time to introduce Kateri to the cast. He guides her through the dim hallway leading backstage.

As they enter the green room, Kateri's struck by déjà vu at the sight of the girl in front of her. She's seeing a ghost. It's not just the stage makeup: a face painted pale, lips and eyes lined purple-blue; the girl's a dead ringer for Salina.

“Elena,” Toby calls to the apparition, “this is my girlfriend Kateri. Kateri, this is Elena, or Antigone.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Elena extends her hand, but Kateri can’t stop gawking.

“You’ll have to forgive the stage makeup,” Elena says.

Kateri raises her hand to Elena’s and clears her throat. “Excuse me. It’s a pleasure.”

Elena looks at Toby. “You need to hurry up.”

Toby kisses Kateri’s temple before heading off for makeup.

Back through the dark hallway and into the auditorium, Kateri searches for Marie and Braden.

“Marie,” Kateri says, “did you ever hear anything about Salina Martinez?”

“Oh! That was so sad.”

“Do you know anything about it?”

“She wrecked. That’s about it. I heard she and her boyfriend weren’t wearing seatbelts. They were thrown from the car.” An image of Salina bloodied and with contorted limbs, lying on the side of road, flashes in her mind. Marie says she saw Salina a couple months before the accident. “She was waitressing at Amy’s Café.” Marie sighs. “She told me she was applying to medical school. Crazy, isn’t it?”

“It’s depressing.”

They kill time until opening curtain by talking about old friends. This one got married. That one had a kid. Another is already divorced.

The auditorium dims to black. Then a hazy, gray-morning light fills the stage. That’s when Kateri begins to recall the scenes. Antigone, despite a death threat, gives her dead, traitor

brother a burial. She dies, then Haemon dies. Why did the Greeks have to be so obsessed with death, young death?

Toby's stage entrance makes Kateri queasy. He's caked in the ghostly makeup and kissing Antigone. It's like watching two corpses exchange vows of undying love.

She asks Marie to give Toby a message for her after the play. "I don't feel well," Kateri whispers. "I need to go home." She runs to escape the cold, dark theater, but outside, the sun has already disappeared.

In the car, Kateri tugs on her buckled seatbelt before putting the car into drive. She stops at the first neon liquor store sign she sees on her way home to buy a box of wine. At home, car parked and stairs ascended, she feels the weight of meaningless repetition. Tearing into the box of Franzia, she cuts her finger and bleeds red like wine, but it tastes nothing like wine. She needs to drink until she's drunk.

Toby will come home, and they'll go to bed and celebrate as they do after every play, and she'll feel alive. She drains her glass, then another.

She must have drifted off because Toby is standing by the front door as if he's just walked in. "Kateri," he says, his eyes resting on the half-empty bag of wine. He's shaking his head at her, and that makes her want to laugh. "What's the deal?" he asks. "You couldn't even stay for the entire show? Here I am worried about you, when you're just sitting here drinking."

He's so offended. She can't stop laughing. "I'm dead," she says.

"You're drunk."

"Is that supposed to be an insult?" She tries to stand, but she needs help. "Come on." She reaches out. "Carry me to bed. It's our tradition."

"No. We're not going to bed."

“Why?” she asks, as she considers hurling her wine glass at him. “Are you angry I didn’t stick around for your damn show, some meaningless play that no one gives a shit about?”

Shaking his head, he reaches for the front door.

Heart pounding, she sends the wine glass flying through the air. It smashes against the wall.

“Damn it, Kateri.” He points at the shattered mess. “What in God’s name was that for?”

“Please don’t leave,” she cries.

“I don’t know what’s possessed you, but you need to go to bed and sleep it off.”

“I can’t,” she pleads. “I can’t be alone. I need you.”

His fingers touch the door handle.

“I’m sorry,” she says. “I didn’t mean what I said about the play. I thought it was wonderful. I’m having some problems.”

Slowly, he makes his way beside her. “I know you didn’t mean it,” he says. “You always go a little crazy when you see me kiss someone onstage.”

You idiot, she wants to say, but that would only prompt his exit. She runs her fingers through his hair and initiates a wordless dialogue that can only conclude with an angry cry of satisfaction.

In the morning, the sun illuminates their bedroom.

“I’m sorry about last night,” she says, looking into Toby’s dark eyes, so full of life and youth. If only they could stay like this forever.

“Apology accepted.” He kisses her fingertips. “How ‘bout some eggs?” he asks.

“That sounds lovely.” She stretches out on the bed. He’s in the kitchen now, whistling.



She feels fine—perfectly content—tracing the lines of light coming in through the blinds.  
She's not about to die. Not today. Not tomorrow. But after breakfast she'll go to the bookshelf.  
She can see it, the dust flying off.

## Vita

Jennifer Bulmanski is a native Arkansan. She earned a B.A. in Politics at the University of Dallas in 2007. She is married to her college sweetheart. They have four children. She is scheduled to move back home to The Natural State in 2017 and has no plans of living anywhere else.