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All The Colors Of Rain

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All The Colors Of Rain
Stories

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Whittled Bone

Six months after Lane cut her hair and climbed out the bathroom window, Russell filled a fruit jar with dead wasps. He used tweezers to pick them up by their wings the night before, careful not to crumble their dry bodies as he lifted them from window sills and heat grates. It was early morning. His wife, Reesa, was still sleeping in Lane's bedroom with the bathroom light on. Russell stood at the kitchen counter, turning the pages in Lane's journal. He crossed through the entry dated April fourteenth.

> *walked an empty house. no carpet no chairs. dead paper wasps in cupped hands. spiders spinning webs the color of blood.*

He had found the dream journal the day after she disappeared, taped to the underside of a dresser drawer. For six months, Russell busied himself bringing her dreams into the waking

world. He gathered them and hid them in a dilapidated barn loft on the backside of his neighbor's property.

Russell left out the kitchen door holding the jar of wasps in one hand and a spray can of red paint in the other. He crossed the yard, stepped on a low line of barbed wire and ducked his way through a fence on his way to the neighbor's barn. The woods were quiet except for the sound of waking birds and the dead leaves cracking beneath his feet. The tree limbs were bare, and Russell followed a deer trail from memory rather than sight.

The wooden rungs of the barn ladder were worn smooth from so many years of use. Russell wondered how long it had been abandoned. He climbed slow, careful not to drop the jar of wasps or dislodge the spray can in his back pocket. He imagined the sound of cattle breathing in the cold air, their nostrils exhaling clouds of wet smoke. He pictured them jostling for food, crowded bodies huddling around the salt licks, winter mud thick on the ground. Russell pulled himself up into the loft and dusted his hand on the seat of his pants. Old bridles hung from rusted nails. Opaque Mason jars lined the rafters and beams. When Russell first found them, some had been filled with bolts as thick as thumbs, and others, with missing lids, brimmed with leaked-in rain water. But Russell had cleaned them out and now used them to house the things his daughter had seen as she slept. In the middle of the loft, woven between two exposed beams, a spider web caught the light from the open loft door. Russell took the spray can from his back pocket and leaned in close enough that his breath disturbed the silk fibers.

When he stepped back and set the spray can on the ground, the smell of paint was thick in the air. In the budding light of morning, the spider web glowed red in the center of the barn. Russell picked out each wasp and placed it carefully on the web. They hung there, suspended,

and when a slow wind blew, they shuddered for an instant, as if something in the blood web had shaken them awake.

"Lane," Russell said aloud.

He stayed in the barn loft until the sun glimpsed above a far hill. He closed her journal and climbed down the ladder. Frost still clung to the grass as he walked home alongside the cracked asphalt road. Log trucks passed without slowing down. When Russell heard them rumble at his back, he stepped farther into the roadside ditch.

Russell walked through the back door and into the kitchen. Reesa was at the sink staring out the window. She didn't turn around when he came into the room.

"Morning," he said.

She blew into her coffee.

He stopped and looked over her shoulder. Outside, a peacock pecked a stack of pane glass that was leaning against an outbuilding wall.

"Wish a coyote would get them," Russell said. "About tired of those birds. Shitting on the roof, standing at the windows looking in at me when I wake up."

"He thinks that's another bird in there," Reesa said. "Trying to peck it to death, his own reflection."

She turned and walked out of the kitchen, not looking up at Russell. He stayed watching the peacock peck the loose panes of glass. Reesa came back in carrying a duffle bag full of clothes.

"The light in her bathroom is burnt out," she said.

Russell turned and faced her. She had her eyes closed.

"And her pillows have forgotten her smell," she said.

Russell knew she was leaving.

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For months they had prayed. They'd gone to church and taken communion. They accepted prayers. They stood holding candles amongst friends and neighbors. They walked the woods around their house with police, holding flashlights and looking for scraps of their daughter's clothes. For months they had told each other it would be okay, that Lane would come home and things would ease back to normal.

Then the police stopped coming by in the evenings. Cooked dinners were no longer left on the doorstep. The green ribbons that everyone in town had tied to their car antennas began to fray at the ends and come loose in the wind. Reesa started picking them out of rain gutters. She kept them in a shoe box in the trunk of her car.

At night, Reesa washed the dirty ribbons in Lane's sink. Russell would hear the pipes come to life in the walls as he flipped the pages of Lane's journal alone in his bedroom. Lane wrote of turtles active beneath frozen ponds. She dreamed that their house had a pulse and needed the windows to stay cracked so that it could breathe, even in winter. Russell sat atop a still-made bed for hours with cold air coming through the open windows and rustling the curtains, reading page after page of things Lane saw when she slept.

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Russell sat at the kitchen table, turning the pages of the journal and looking at all the dreams he'd crossed out, dreams he'd brought to life. He had flipped the breaker that morning, after his wife left, so that the house would be as still and silent as it was in the days after Lane went missing, when a summer storm took out the power. When he closed her journal, he heard a tree branch scrape across the glass of an upstairs window. The same sound he woke to that night– limb against glass–as his wife beat her balled fist against Lane's locked bathroom door, a door he later shouldered in. Behind it they found rain pooled beneath an open window and a braid of cut hair coiled in the sink.

Russell left the house. He passed the bare patch of earth where Reesa's car was usually parked and walked to the dry creek bed looking for bones. *Dreamt of cattle bones,* Lane had written, *whittled into stones and kept in the breast pocket of a worn out shirt*. Russell's shirt was red with patchworks of blue, duct tape at the elbows to keep the holes from showing.

He left the creek when he came upon a run-down, three-walled shed and a rusted silo that listed into the branches of a neighboring tree. In the hoof-cratered mud of the shed were three square salt licks, each furrowed in the center from so many hungry tongues.

Russell leaned his head through the open door of the silo, careful not to put weight against the tilted structure. Against the moss-covered ground lay a dozen crumpled beer cans and a spent condom. How many times had Lane snuck out and drunk beer with boys as he sat on the couch, unknowing, watching baseball games stretch into the late innings? He imagined her drunk and tangled up with someone who looked old enough to buy beer and drive his own car. Lane was thirteen and still slept with the bathroom light on. But Russell had already begun to see the woman in her, had noticed other men seeing it as well. He'd found pill bottles in the medicine cabinet, missing their pills. A pint of vodka gone frozen in the freezer door. Welts on

her neck that she swore were curling iron burns. Long sleeved shirts, always long sleeves, even on the hottest days.

Russell placed both hands on the side of the silo and gave it all his strength. He pushed until the muscles in his back strained and threatened to tear. He wanted the thing to fall into a heap of twisted metal. The silo wouldn't give. How could something that looked so feeble be so strong? He pushed himself away and spat on the metal wall.

Behind the shed, Russell kicked at tall grass and leafless bushes until he found what he was looking for. Atop a large, flat rock were the bones of a cow. Its hide was tattered to almost nothing. Only a few patches of thin hair still clung to the sun-bleached bones. Russell toed them, listening to the dry sound they made against each other. He picked four ribs that he thought would be easiest to whittle into pebbles and tucked them into his waistband. He tightened his belt and walked toward the river.

A birch tree grew out over the current. Lane's tree. When she was still little, she would climb its branches to watch things drift beneath her. Deflated basketballs. Fishing bobbers. Driftwood shaped like things she knew. She'd call out to Russell whatever she thought the wood resembled, and, if it was something special, he'd dive in and drag it onto the bank. Tennessee, she'd shouted once as a broken one-by-six floated by. That night, he let Lane hold a palm sander, tight with both hands, as he moved the wood back and forth against the paper. He wet two rags with linseed oil, and they stained the wood together. When they finished, Russell hung the state in her room.

"Where are we?" she asked, pointing at the driftwood.

Russell found a sewing needle in the hall closet. He heated its tip with a lighter and touched it to the wood. He tapped the burned spot in the center of the state.

"There's where we are," he said.

Russell sat beside the river whittling bones into small round pebbles. When he finished, he stood and brushed the shavings from his lap. He circled the tree trunk to where Lane's initials were carved into the birch, the letters dark from age. Russell ran his finger over them. He took his knife and carved them deeper, where the wood was still bright.

Russell kept three of the bone pebbles in his breast pocket and put the rest in a Mason jar he would place beside the blood web. There were dozens of jars scattered about the loft. One jar contained nine dollars of pennies, each coin minted the year Lane was born. Russell placed the things that frightened him in a dark corner of the loft. Glass eyes removed from the heads of antique-store dolls. Knives with names written on the blades.

Walking back toward the barn, Russell remembered when Lane was young and liked to sit on his lap while he watched Braves games on TV. She'd ask him to play with her hair. He'd pin it back with paper clips and cotter pins. When he made a mess of things, she ran to the mirror and laughed. Reesa would hurry in with a brush and worry herself over the knots. One Sunday, at church, Lane bent down to lower the pew's kneeler and a cotter pin fell from her hair. Reesa picked it up, angry. Lane started laughing so hard Reesa had to pull her out of church and sit her in the back of the truck until the service let out.

With one hand on the loft ladder, Russell heard a floorboard creak above his head. Small footsteps. Dust flittering down through the slanted glints of sunlight. He climbed the ladder slow. He held his breath. A young girl crossed the loft with bare feet and picked up a jar of feathers. They were the feathers of a rain owl sprouting from the open-mouthed jar like a vase of flowers.

"Hello?" Russell said.

The girl was shorter than Lane. Her hair longer and blonder. Russell worried her feet were cold. She placed the jar back down next to a small pair of shoes and inside-out socks.

"I'm Juniper," she said. "June. I'm a Glover."

Russell pulled himself up into the loft, and June took a step backward.

"It's okay," he said. "I know your daddy."

She took another step back.

"I have a girl. She dreamed these things." Russell moved toward June with slow steps. "Saw them when she slept. All of them."

June looked around the room as she moved backward.

"I'm supposed to be home soon," she said.

"Do you ever remember your dreams?" Russell said.

June stood at the open loft door.

"Do you want me to show you hers?" Russell said.

Russell reached and took June by the elbow. She looked up at him, afraid. He tried to squeeze gently to let her know he wasn't dangerous. When he felt her twisting, pulling away from him, he let go. She stumbled and put a foot out to stop herself, but was too close to the edge. She stepped out of the barn. Her body twisted, her arms reached for something to grab. She landed against a rotted mound of old hay and fell to the ground. The stale scent of hay dust rose and clouded the air.

"June," Russell said.

She rolled to her knees and gasped for breath. The bottoms of her bare feet were dirty.

"Stay still," Russell said. "You're okay."

When she stood, Russell picked up her shoes and socks and ran to the ladder.

June was gone. He saw a flash of her darting through the woods, clutching one arm against her chest.

Russell climbed atop the hay and sat with his back against the wall of the barn. Through distant trees he could see the sheen of the river. He leaned his head back and watched slow clouds drift by. A chickenhawk screeched high above him. He held June's shoes in one hand, her socks balled and tucked into the toes. He thought of her arms flailing as she fell and wished he had reached out and kept her safe from falling.

Lane is somewhere, he thought. Right now, she is somewhere.

Russell stood. He climbed up into the loft and sat with his legs hanging over the edge. He placed June's shoes on the wooden floor beside him. The sound of a car clattered down the rutted, dirt road. And then the engine shut off, a door opened and slammed shut.

"Someone in there?" a voice said from below.

"Up here," Russell said.

A police officer climbed the ladder, but Russell didn't turn around.

"That Russ?" the officer said. "What you doing up here?"

Russell recognized the voice, had listened to it so many nights, promising they were doing the best they could, that they'd bring Lane home safe and sound.

"Hell is this, Russ?"

Russell picked up June's shoes and stood. The officer poked the painted web.

"Don't," Russell said. "Please."

"This is bizarre, Russ."

"It's not what you think," Russell stuttered.

"Glover said someone threw June out the barn."

Russell looked at the officer and held out June's shoes.

"You know me," he said. "I'd never. She got scared. I didn't know she was up here."

The officer flicked his flashlight on and scanned the jars in the shadowed corners of the barn.

"I come here sometimes," Russell said. He looked around at the jars. He couldn't explain. "I never meant to hurt her."

"I doubt they'll press charges," the officer said. "They know what all you've been through. But you can't be here, Russ."

The officer led Russell to the loft ladder by the elbow.

"Come on. I'll take you home."

Russell sat in the front of the police car. He touched his breast pocket, pressed the whittled bones until he felt them hard against his ribs. The afternoon light was waning. With his face against the window, Russell could just barely see the spider web, still burning red as they pulled away.

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Back home, Russell locked the door and busied himself cracking windows. Reesa's coffee mug was on the kitchen counter, the coffee long gone cold. Russell opened Lane's journal to the first page. She is somewhere, he thought.

A tree limb scraped an upstairs window as dusk shadows crowded the house. He took off his shoes and felt the cold wood on his bare feet. He stood waiting, listening to the sound of the wind through the curtains, the still house taking deep breaths.
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Heirloom

Cole took the last sack of peanuts from the pantry and opened the front door. A stretch of crows crowded the power line that ran from the street to Cole's cabin. When he stepped out into the yard, the birds came alive as if the electricity running beneath them had escaped its wire. They squawked frantically and beat their wings against the morning air. Cole scattered the peanuts across a bare patch of dirt where a car must have once been parked. He watched the birds descend. Some took the peanuts in their beaks and flew away, others pecked at the dry shells and picked at the nuts inside.

A ground bird cocked its head in Cole's direction, a peanut shell hung from its mouth. Cole knew that crows could recognize human faces. He wondered if the birds at his old house were hungry. If they lingered in the tree behind that house and waited for a face they would never see again.

When the crows had finished, Cole walked barefoot down the gravel driveway. Atop a lone fencepost sat a child's hairclip next to an empty peanut shell. The hairclip was bent, the thin metal just beginning to rust.

Cole hadn't told anyone where he was going the day he packed his car and drove to the mountains. But every morning after he fed the crows, he walked to the mailbox and promised himself that if there were a letter inside addressed to him he'd keep it sealed, take it out to some forgotten part of the woods and leave it to rot amongst the fallen leaves.

The mailbox was empty, the same as it had been every day since Cole had moved to the cabin. Cole thought about placing the child's hairclip inside and raising the flag. He imagined the mailman taking the clip home with him and pinning back a child's hair. Cole pocketed it instead and walked back to the cabin. He noticed the hardness of his bare feet. How after months of walking the driveway each morning he no longer winced at the gravel's jagged edges.

When he moved into the cabin, there had been a stack of postcards in the kitchen drawer not addressed to anyone in particular. Just the street name and the mailbox number. Cole had pinned them to the sheetrock above his desk because he liked the pictures. Far off places he'd never been. Cole wondered if another postcard would ever come.

Inside the house, he placed the hairclip in a shoebox that was half full with things the crows had brought. He crossed the room and unpinned a postcard from above his desk. The house was quiet. Only the creaks of the floorboards when he walked, or the wind quivering the windows that were loose in their frames. On the backside of the post card was a list of tools and materials. Craft wood. Teak oil. Brass knobs and hinges. Saws and chisels. Cole put the card in his pocket and laced his boots. Town was three miles away.

Cole entered the hardware store, and the smell of popcorn reminded him of roasting kernels in the kitchen and his son laughing from another room. A man wearing an orange hard hat with *Hard Wear* written across it in white block letters sat on the checkout counter.

"What can we do for you?" the man said. He had a thick moustache and was stroking it with a painter's comb.

"Smells like popcorn," Cole said.

The man nodded at a machine against the side wall.

"For the kids," he said. "Keeps them from getting bored and disorganizing the nail buckets. Help yourself."

Cole shook his head and set the postcard on the counter.

"I need what's on this list," he said.

The man picked up the postcard.

"Have to send off for some of it," the man said, copying the items onto a yellow legal pad. "Come back in a couple days, and I'll have it for you."

Cole put the postcard in his pocket.

"Appreciate it," he said. He turned to leave, but stopped. "Wouldn't happen to know of any work, would you?"

"I might," the man said. "You got a strong back?"

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Cole walked the shoulder of the road and imagined a car swerving off the road as it passed him. The sound of screeching tires then the impact of metal moving so fast it shatters bone. And then
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a split second of nothing before the asphalt dislodges a shoulder and burns away skin down to the muscle.

All around him were hemlock trees that swayed like clothesline sheets when the wind blew. He heard a car engine growing louder behind him.

A pickup truck slowed beside him, matched his speed. The woman driving looked to be in her late twenties, about his age. She had long, dark hair and skin that was darkened by the sun, but not ruined by it.

"Where you walking to?" she said through the rolled-down window.

"Up the road," Cole said. "Not far."

"Hop in," she said.

"Appreciate it," Cole said. "But I'll manage."

She laughed. Her teeth were whiter than any teeth Cole had ever seen. He wanted her to stay like that, laughing, teeth bright against tan skin. She had a dandelion bloom tucked into the hair above her ear.

"Suit yourself," she said. And as she pulled away, Cole watched her rearview mirror to see if she would look back.

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Four days later, Cole walked back into town. A bell above the door rang when Cole entered the hardware store. His white shirt was dirty and heavy with sweat.

"Looks like they put you to work," the man behind the counter said. He'd gotten Cole a job replacing the fencing around the playground at the local elementary school.
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“Again,” Cole said, “I appreciate you helping me out.”

The man nodded.

“Glad to do it,” he said. “Now we got most of what you need.” He bent down and brought out a shopping basket filled with things from Cole’s list. “Some of it still ain’t come in.”

“That’s okay,” Cole said. “I’ll just take what I can carry. Come back in a day or two.”

Cole took out his wallet. The man raised a hand and shook his head.

“Pay up at the end of the month,” he said.

The rain had already started when Cole left the hardware store. He felt the paper bag growing soggy and loose in his arms as he walked. A car horn blew from a nearby parking lot. Cole recognized the beat up truck. A hand extended out into the rain and waved him over. The truck’s fender was bent and dented and littered with faded campaign stickers from elections that neither he nor the woman in the truck were old enough to remember.

“Ain’t taking no for an answer,” she said when Cole came up beside her door.

Cole didn’t fight her this time. He threw the limp paper bag into the back seat of the truck and opened the passenger door.

“I’m soaking wet,” he said.

“It’s okay,” she said. “This truck’s seen worse.”

Cole climbed in. The rain beat loud against the metal roof. The woman pulled back onto the road and eased around the sharp curves, the windshield wipers fighting to keep up with the downpour.

“I’m Tia,” she said.

Cole reached out his hand.

“Cole,” he said.

Tia shook his hand then wiped hers on the leg of her pants.

“You been following me?” Cole said.

Tia laughed.

“I work at that boutique next to the hardware store,” she said. “Got off and saw you standing there in the rain.”

“Well,” Cole said. “Thank you.”

“What you doing with all that?” Tia said, reaching her arm into the back seat and rustling the bag Cole had bought at the hardware store.

“Building an ark,” Cole said.

Tia’s eyes cut over at him, but she didn’t turn her head. A smile swelled on her face.

“Looks like you might need it,” she said.

“Seems this storm is trying to stay a while,” he said.

Tia told Cole that rain owls can smell a storm coming days in advance. She swore that some clouds are so full of fish eggs you can hear minnows flapping on your roof if you listen close.

Cole told Tia a story he’d heard in school about a girl who lived in the mountains in east Tennessee. Her eye lashes grew in long braids down to her waist. In the spring, she would bury pages from the Bible in sacred ground and say prayers in the falling rain. And eventually beautiful things began to grow.

“You know,” Tia said, “that every drop of water on earth has been here since the beginning of time.”

She reached over and poked Cole’s midsection.

“And that seventy percent of the human body is water. So that means seventy present of you has, at some point, been rain.”

Cole didn’t know if Tia had a screw loose, or if she was just aware of all the magic still tucked into the creases of the world. Either way, he figured if she were to pray to the falling rain, something remarkable would surely grow.

When they pulled into Cole’s driveway, the rain had worsened and Tia was leaned over the steering wheel, the speedometer never breaking idle speed.

“You’re welcome to stay on the porch and wait out the storm,” Cole said.

Tia pulled up to Cole’s cabin and shifted into park.

“Wouldn’t even take a ride from a girl one day, and trying to lure her into his house the next.” Tia shook her head and clicked her tongue.

Cole fought back a smile.

Tia cut the engine and looked over at Cole.

“Well, go on,” she said. “Lure me.”

Tia opened her door and stepped out into the rain.

Cole took his bag out from the back seat and ran to the porch. Tia was already standing there drying her face with her shirt tail.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” she said as Cole emptied his things onto the porch. “You need some help with all that?”

“That’d been a nice offer a minute ago,” Cole said.

Tia swatted Cole’s forearm and rested her hand there for a second.

“Got any towels?” Tia said.

Cole hesitated. He didn’t know how the cabin would feel with someone else in it.

Inside was bare. There was a mattress in the center of the cabin, quilts and sheets scattered about it. Books lined the walls in uneven stacks and were topped with coffee mugs and candy bar wrappers. Painter's paper hung in the doorway to the bathroom. The ladder that led to the loft was littered with dirty clothes.

"Don't go up there much?" Tia said.

"Found a dead rat up there when I first moved in," Cole said. "Kind of soured me on it."

"You read all these books?" Tia said.

"Not much else to do," Cole said. "I've got a computer, but no internet. Watched all the movies I brought with me the first week."

Cole made a pot of coffee and told Tia about the postcards. She was wearing a dry shirt he had given her. It hung down almost to her knees. Her wet shoes were next to the door and she walked on her tiptoes when she moved around the cabin.

She unpinned the postcards one at a time and turned them over to look at the pictures.

"Who you think sent them?" she said.

"I don't know," Cole said. "They're postmarked from around Chattanooga so they didn't come from where those pictures were taken. Found them in that drawer over there when I moved in, probably been here for years."

Tia flipped the cards over and read the writing on the backs.

"What're these instructions?"

"Some kind of box, I think," Cole said. "Figured I'd go ahead and start building it, see what it is."

Tia re-pinned the postcards, careful that the tacks went back through the original hole, with the pictures facing out.

“That’s a church in Spain,” Cole said, tapping a post card. “They’ve been building it for over a hundred years.”

Tia traced her finger over the spires.

“Looks like those drip castles you make at the beach,” she said.

“Never been,” Cole said.

“To Spain?”

“The ocean.”

Cole told Tia about other postcards. About the architect, Gaudi, who built entire parks out of mosaic tiles.

“It’s like he just woke up,” Cole said, “and built whatever he saw in his dreams.”

As Cole talked, Tia emptied the last of her coffee out an open window and refilled it with rain water that was dripping from the eaves. She said the moss on the roof was as good a filter as any and drank it down in three long swallows.

Cole shook his head.

“You were born about half wild, weren’t you?” Cole said.

Tia reached the mug back through the window and filled it again. She handed it to Cole, and he sipped at it the way he’d sip something too hot to drink.

“It’s good for you,” Tia said.

She took Cole by the hand and pulled him toward the back door.

“Come on,” she said.

Cole pulled free when Tia stepped off the porch and into the rain. She turned and held her arms out to her sides, the rain pooling in the palms of her hands.

“You know there is a coffin full of water buried in these woods,” Tia said as she stood barefoot in the mud.

“Bullshit,” Cole said. He was smiling, watching Tia move about the yard.

“It’s true,” she said. “This old man died and wanted his ashes to be scattered at sea. Said he wanted to be buried there and in his place told his family to fill his casket with ocean water. And that’s what they did. You imagine that?”

“Sure can’t.”

“My daddy swears that if you stand on that man’s grave you can smell the sea.”

“Y’all been on the mountain too long,” Cole said. “Lost your minds, that’s what I think.”

“You think there’s a girl with braids for eyelashes out here, but can’t be a coffin filled with seawater?”

“Never said I believed in her, just a story I used to hear.”

Tia kicked puddle water at Cole.

“How you want to be buried?” she said.

“Never thought about it.”

“Well, think about it.”

“Just bury me regular, I guess.”

Tia turned and looked out at the woods. Cole stayed on the porch.

“That or burn me up,” he said.

“Sad, if you ask me,” she said. “Those coffins now are made of metal, or wood with so much polish it won’t ever rot. And they cremate so many people you never know whose ashes

you have on your mantel. They just keep those fires running all the time and scoop out whatever ash is closest when the family comes asking."

"What's your way?"

"Plain wood box," she said. "Cut from wood around here. No polish, no nothing. I don't want to be stuck in there too long. I want to be part of the earth quick. Plant a tree over my grave and let its roots grow around my bones."

"What kind of tree?"

"Evergreen," she said. "With leaves that never fall."

That night, Tia slept on the mattress in the middle of the room. Cole hadn't asked her to stay. She'd taken one of his books and sat down on his mattress to read. Before long, she was asleep. Her damp clothes were in a pile on the kitchen table. Cole made a pallet on the floor beside her and listened to the slowing of her breath as she slept. He wasn't used to sleeping beside a living thing.

It was still dark when Cole woke. The mattress springs beside him creaked beneath Tia's movements. Rain was quiet on the roof. Cole felt her crawl off the bed and nestle in beside him.

"I'm cold," she said.

He buried his nose in her hair and smelled the scent the rain had left behind. Her breath was warm against his collar bone. He ran his hand over her ribs, and tugged at the elastic band of her underwear.

"No," she whispered. "Just lay with me."

Cole lifted her shirt and cupped her chest. Tia kissed his neck and removed his hand, pulled her shirt back down.

“Take things slow,” Tia said, sitting up and pulling a quilt around her shoulders.

“I didn’t ask you to stay,” Cole said, his voice flat and even.

“Didn’t tell me to go, neither,” Tia said.

Cole closed his eyes and before falling back asleep felt Tia roll away from him and climb back on the mattress.

Cole woke to the sound of a mug being set on the floor beside him. He could smell coffee and feel a cold breeze coming through an open window. It was morning but not yet bright outside.

Tia was crouched next to him.

“Why are you here?” she said.

“Thought this was the kind of place you could find some quiet.”

“People in town talk,” Tia said. “Think you’re one of those guys like you see on TV, chops up his whole family and comes to the mountains to hide out.”

Tia was smiling. She blew on Cole’s coffee and scooted it towards him.

“So, did you chop up your family?”

She pulled back Cole’s blanket and pinched his arm.

“Did you chop them up?”

“Stop it,” Cole shouted. “Don’t talk about my family.”

He pushed Tia’s hand away and knocked over the mug of coffee.

“Jesus,” Tia said. “I was just kidding.”

“And I didn’t ask you to come here and kid me,” Cole said. “Ask me why I’m here? This is my goddamn house. Why the hell are you here?”

Tia stood. She collected her things from the kitchen counter. Cole heard her moving around but he lay back on the floor and stared at the wall. The door opened.

"They're probably right," Tia said. "You probably are some nut job."

"Please," Cole said. "Just leave."

The door slammed shut. Cole waited until headlights washed across the walls and then were gone. The cabin was quiet again. Cole stood and turned on the lamp. He took a bag of peanuts from the pantry and went outside. He could just make out the sliver of the power line's empty silhouette. The rain had stopped, but clouds were still too thick for the sun to break through. Cole tore open the bag and scattered the peanuts across the wet ground, hoping to hear just one thing caw out from the dark and rupture the silence. Nothing rustled. Nothing stirred.

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A few weeks passed, and Cole worked days digging post holes and putting up chain link fencing. At night, he followed the instructions written on the backs of the postcards. He'd seen Tia passing in her truck a few times as he walked to and from town, her brake lights never lighting as she drove by, her hand never returning his wave.

When the box was almost finished, Cole stayed home from work. He woke up early and tightened brass hinges and drawer knobs smaller than the tip of his pinky finger. It looked like an oversized jewelry box with drawers of different sizes. He wet an old T-shirt and rubbed the box down with a final coat of oil. And as it dried, Cole walked to town.

Tia's truck was parked outside the boutique, and Cole leaned against it and waited for her to get off work.
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“I finished it,” he said when she came out. “No more postcard instructions to follow.”

“How’d it turn out?”

“Not sure what it is, really,” Cole said, as Tia climbed into her truck. “You’re welcome to come see it.”

“Can’t,” she said. “Got to run to the grocery.”

“Don’t want to give me a ride, do you?” he smiled.

Tia rolled her window down a few inches and cranked the engine.

“Sorry, Cole,” she said.

Cole watched her drive away. On the walk home, he kicked at empty beer cans and loose cassette tapes that littered the side of the road. He was halfway home when she pulled up beside him, her passenger side full of grocery bags.

“Change your mind?” Cole said.

“Hop in the back.”

Cole sat atop the wheel well in the bed of the truck. He watched Tia through the glass window. He remembered the smell of her hair after the rain. The touch of her breath on his skin. When they pulled into his driveway, he hopped out.

“Thanks,” he said.

“No problem,” she said. “Got to run.”

The crows were frantic, moving about the power line.

“Want to see it?” Cole said.

“Can’t stay,” Tia said. “Need to get this stuff in the refrigerator.”

“Ain’t showed anybody yet,” Cole said. “I was hoping you’d know what it is.”

Tia shifted the truck into park. She got out and closed the door without a sound, leaned her weight into it until it clicked.

"Those crows are loud as hell," she said. "I don't know how you stand it."

"They're waiting for me to feed them."

"Really can't stay, Cole," Tia said.

"One second," Cole said. He ran into the house and came back out with a bag of peanuts. He handed it to Tia. She looked at the bag and reached it back to Cole.

"Just toss them," Cole said.

Tia opened the bag and dumped the peanuts in a pile at her feet and they walked back to her truck.

"I've got to go, Cole."

"Just watch."

The crows picked over the pile of peanuts and returned to the power line.

"Look," Cole said, pointing to a crow balanced on a fence post. The crow had something round in its mouth.

"What's it got?" Tia said.

The crow dropped the thing onto the fence post and it rolled off into the grass. The bird followed and took the thing in its beak. It dropped it back on the post again, this time steadying it with its beak before flying off.

Tia walked over and picked the thing from the post and turned back to Cole.

"It's a marble," she said.

"Come here," Cole said. "I want to show you something."

Cole led Tia into the cabin and flipped on the light. The finished box was on the kitchen table. The wood was dark and smooth and the lacquer reflected the lamplight.

"That's an heirloom box," Tia said. "My momma has one. Keeps passed-down things in it. My grandmother's rings. Family pictures. Locks of infants' hair."

Cole scooted a shoe box out from under the kitchen table with his foot and toed it open.

"They leave things," Cole said. "Those crows."

Tia lifted the box up and emptied it onto the workbench. There were dozens of small objects. She picked up a safety pin and a brass hinge-screw.

"I had a boy before I came here," Cole said. He picked up two beads and looked through their holes before setting them back on the table.

Tia was watching him pick things off the table. There were ball bearings and a bent paper clip. A broken button and bits of blue string. A wheat penny. Shards of colored glass.

"He'd drop bits of food in his car seat," Cole said. "When we'd get home from wherever we'd been, I'd take that seat out and dump out the crumbs. Cheerios or bits of chicken nugget. By the time he was two and walking around, a family of crows had taken to the tree in our back yard. They'd swoop down and pick over all the crumbs he left behind."

As Cole spoke, Tia pulled open the drawers of the heirloom chest and placed the objects inside, arranging them in rows by color and size. She closed each drawer without making a sound.

"He was tickled pink with those birds," Cole said. "Soon as he could say a few words, he'd ask me for a cup of peanuts so he could go out there and feed them. You wouldn't think it, but crows are smart. They'd see my boy come outside, and they'd start cawing. We started finding little things in his pockets and didn't know where he'd found them."

Cole closed his eyes and ran his fingers through his hair.

"A car hit him," Cole said. "Some high school kid. I remember him so well. Just sitting in the ditch beside the road crying. 'I'm sorry,' he kept saying. 'I was on my way to soccer practice, I was on my way to soccer practice.'"

Tia put a hand against Cole's neck. He opened his eyes. The crows outside were quiet, and Tia was looking at him.

Cole opened the drawers of the heirloom box and looked at the rows of objects neatly organized.

"Looks good," he said. "Like that was what it was meant for."

The child's hair clip was in the smallest drawer by itself. Cole took it out and pinned it in Tia's hair.

"Look good?" Tia said. She reached out and grabbed Cole's hand. "Come on," she said.

They walked out through the back door and into the dark woods. Branches scraping the skin of their arms. Heat bugs pulsed loudly from trees around them.

"Where we going?" he said.

Cole listened to the sound of their footsteps disturbing the dry leaves that carpeted the ground. Tia stopped, turned to Cole and smiled. Cole reached out and touched the paper bark of a cedar tree.

"Where are we?" he said.

"Take a breath," she said.

Cole breathed deep through his nose. And there, in the dark of the forest, he smelled it for the first time. The heavy scent of salt from a buried sea.

Jaima

Spook Stories

Jaima let me sleep with the bathroom light on. She brought the phone into my room and put a cold washcloth on my head. Mom called from a truck stop payphone in some town I'd never heard of. Mom said, Love, goodnight. Love you sweet girl, goodnight. Then Dad called sometime later, sometime after I had fallen asleep. Jaima woke me up just barely and put the phone on the pillow by my head. Dad said, Sleep tight, don't let the bed bugs bite. I asked if he baptized anyone that day, and he told me he led an old man into a creek and had to dunk him twice because when the old man came up the first time he cussed the cold water, used the Lord's name in a way that wasn't fitting of a Christian mouth.

Jaima left the door cracked and hummed loud so that I could hear her from the other room. When I was scared at night, I liked to hear her voice. As long as she was singing, I knew nothing bad would happen. The doctor said I'd be back climbing trees by summer, but sometimes I had dreams where I never got out of bed. Jaima said little girls like me didn't need

to worry about dying. Little girls just needed to think about skinned knees and skipping rocks well enough that they landed on the other bank without the tops getting wet.

In the morning, Jaima made pancakes with nuts and all of them were burnt on one side. She called the burnt side 'pancake bark' and we scrapped it off with our finger nails, leaving dark flakes on the kitchen counter. Jaima said her mom never made pancakes, never made breakfast that she could remember.

The living room fan wobbled as it spun, and its chain moved in thin shadows across the carpet. Jaima stood on a bar stool and spat her gum into the palm of her hand. She reached up and slowed the fan with her other hand and stuck the gum to the top side of a fan blade. I thought the blades would have hurt, but she smiled when they thunked against her fingers. I couldn't tell if the fan moved slower afterward, but that's what I imagined. That gum, still wet with her spit, slowing things just enough so that the world was different after she left, even just a little bit. But I think Jaima was just trying to make a sick girl smile and forget about how it hurt to stand up out of bed.

That night, I asked Jaima to tell me a spook story. It was two weeks after we brought her home with us to Cleecey's Ferry. I crawled into bed and asked Jaima to tell me the scary ones, the ones that really happened.

She told me that sometimes thunder is strong enough to shake a little girl's teeth loose from her mouth. Jaima lived next door to a girl in Mississippi who came home one night soaking wet with an empty mouth. The girl slept-walked out into a storm, and the thunder cracked so close she spit her teeth into the tall grass. That's the world Jaima came from.

Jaima turned the light off and cracked the door so just a thin tail of light stretched from the hallway into the dark room. She spoke in a whisper with a hand on the quilt covering my

shins. I listened to her talk about the lightning and the thunder and a field scattered with lost teeth that the night animals carried off toward the darker places in the world only they know how to find.

When the story was over and Jaima was leaving my room, I asked her to hum until I fell asleep. I could hear the floor boards bending beneath her as she walked into the living room. She was humming something made-up, a song that never repeated itself.

I tapped the window above my bed and was glad for no storm. Not tonight. I wondered about them sleeping birds out there when all that weather starts up. Them clinging tight to twig nests. Cold rain and moments of electric blue that light up a sleeping world. How close does the thunder have to get before they come loose from the limb crooks where they are sleeping? How could the momma birds fly with feathers so heavy with storm water?

Deer Tick

The doctor found a rash on the back of my thigh, and that night Mom ran an extension cord out to her rig and worked on the engine. She said we'd have bills that no amount of baptizing could cover, that she could go back out on the road like she did before I was born. I watched her work that engine until the whole thing shook alive. That was before Jaima came. Dad traveled most days baptizing people in divine water. Before I got sick, me and Mom drove around with him. I slept in the back seat, and Mom rode up front reading Dad his sermon notes and scribbling out the things that needed scribbled out. Jaima was a girl Dad baptized in the bay waters of Mississippi. When she heard I was sick, she moved to Tennessee and promised to watch after me when they were both on the road saving up money to make me better. Dad couldn't pay her much but she came anyway.

A few months after Jaima came, she started leaving the house in the afternoons and not coming back until after dinner. One night, I saw a car pull up, and Jaima snuck out the back door. When she came back a few hours later, she smelled like cigarettes and orange juice. She twisted her pinky around mine. I crossed my heart and hoped to die. I told her I could keep a secret, and from then on when that car pulled up, I'd pretend to be asleep when she came back into the house.

Jaima asked me if I'd ever kissed a boy, and I lied. Told her I kissed two boys that were twin brothers but didn't look alike. One had a loose tooth that he was scared to pull, and the other left his gum in my mouth. Jaima nodded like she believed me and told me I shouldn't be in a rush to round the bases.

I knew she wasn't talking about baseball, but all I could imagine was the first time I'd heard Dad cuss. In the summer, he liked to sit out on the back porch and listen to baseball games, and I knew sometimes they tried for a base they weren't fast enough for and got tagged out and everything was over. That's when he said, Horseshit as someone slid into third, and the umpire called him out, and the Braves lost a game they could never get back. He turned the volume down slowly when he saw I was watching him.

I stared at things outside the window and wondered if I'd ever feel like getting out there again. Tree limbs low enough to climb swayed in the wind. Jaima carried me to the bathroom and sat me down. She waited outside with the door cracked until I told her I was ready. Sometimes I would finish and just sit until she knocked on the door and asked if everything was okay.

Dad hung a rope from the ceiling above the bath tub and told me never to let go of it when I took a bath. Jaima said he was worried because we didn't let him in there when they

bathed me, thought someone would forget to keep an eye on me and I'd slip below, too weak to pull myself out. Sometimes Jaima and I would surprise him in the bathroom, still wearing his shoes and standing in the tub, tugging at the rope to make sure it was strong enough to hold.

Jaima never asked what it was like, and I didn't know how to tell her. Dreaming of climbing a tree and falling into water so cold it took a few seconds to get your arms and legs moving, but in the dream they always got moving again. Only to wake up to the same bed you've been in for too long, knees and elbows aching. In a room where the only change was the way the shadows fell across the wall.

Are the spook stories in Tennessee the same as in Mississippi? And, Jaima, have you seen a ghost in this house?

She asked me how I would sleep if I knew snakes were shedding their skin in the walls of my room. Told me mice sometimes nursed their young in the folds of the couch and didn't even scream out when we sat down and crushed the babies. That there is a hemlock tree growing tall with bones wrapped in its roots. Some things cast shadows even at night, and some animals don't make noise when they walk. Jaima knew things kids weren't supposed to hear, and she'd tell me because some nights I didn't want to go to sleep. I'd stare at the ceiling and imagine every noise was some slithered thing wiggling out its own skin.

Some nights I'd start to cry, and Jaima would sit on the bed next to me. She'd say not to worry. That stories were just stories, and why do I ask her to tell me if I know they'll keep me up at night. I'd lay with my head on her thigh and she'd braid my hair. In the morning, I looked off balance, one side of my head thick with braids and the other side matted flat against my face from falling asleep in her lap.

Bay water, Mississippi coast

Jaima wore cut off jean shorts when I first saw her. Mom said, Oh Lord, and fished a dress from her bag. Dad shook Jaima's hand, and she reminded him that he baptized her years ago. But she didn't think it had stuck. Said that if God had washed away her sin once, it was about time he make another go of it.

When she came out of the water, her thin dress was see-thru and stuck against her body so you knew what every part of her was shaped like. Dad stayed waist deep in the water as Mom took Jaima away to dry off. She said Jaima needed privacy to get dressed, so she led her to the car parked behind St. Stanislaus School. Stanislaus, Dad kept saying, pronouncing it different each time. He picked up mussel shells from the beach, and we tried to skip them like rocks over the choppy bay water. None of them got very far. Mom and Jaima were gone a long time, and when they came back Jaima cussed under her breath after stepping on a piece of green sea glass. She said, Don't you ever start. Foul mouth ain't something for a little girl.

Mom wrote our address on Jaima's forearm and after that we started receiving postcards once a week. When we told her I was sick, the post cards stopped coming. For three weeks we didn't hear from her, and then one day she knocked on the kitchen window.

When she was nervous, she would flick her teeth with her finger nail, and when she slept her legs would jerk as she dreamed.

She kept found things in her pockets. Showed me acorns missing their caps. Creek gravel in the shape of shrunken faces.

The first night she was with us, she pinned autumn leaves to my window sill with safety pins she'd bent open and pressed into the wood. In the morning, the window was cracked just enough and the leaves shuddered as morning air came in, carrying with it the smell of dew. I

wondered how she came into my room without waking me and just then a strong wind caused all the leaves to ride up the safety pins as far as they could go. A half dozen colored leaves hovering a few inches from the window sill, stirring against the whirl of the outside world.

Rain

Mom got home two days later than she was supposed to. For two days, Jaima didn't quit flicking at her teeth, and I got to where I couldn't stand to be in the same room with her. It was two months she'd been living with us. When Mom finally did come home, Jaima stayed sitting in the living room with the TV on like she didn't even hear the door shut.

Where you been, she finally said when Mom came in and cut the TV off.

Picked up another haul, Mom said.

Supposed to be back days ago, Jaima said.

We need the money, Mom said.

She came over to me and ran her hand through my hair.

How are you feeling? she said.

Jaima went outside to smoke a cigarette. She stood at the window and watched Mom and me. When Mom saw her, she crossed the room and fogged up the window pane with her breath. The ceiling fan made wobbling noises. Mom wrote something on the fogged window with her pinky finger, and when Jaima came back inside she was smiling.

That night, Mom carried me out to her truck and the three of us sat in the cab listening to the CB radio with all the lights off. Jaima laughed at the filthy things the men said and sometimes Mom turned the volume down and said, Easy now we got young ears here. Hanging from her rearview mirror was a Christmas ornament I'd made when I was younger. A popsicle

picture frame and a green piece of construction paper with the words Merry X-Mas written in glue and sprinkled with glitter. Mom flicked the ornament, and the three of us watched it spin until the fishing line it dangled from grew tight and the spinning slowed. It lingered for just a second before beginning to spin again in the opposite direction.

Rain started up, and we watched it streak down the windshield. Jaima opened the passenger side door and said, Be right back. She came back soaking wet and holding an antique hand mirror and two wine bottles already uncorked. Mom put a pillow behind my head and kissed my hair.

Don't tell your father, she said, taking a bottle from Jaima. And if you are cold, honk the horn.

She shut the door, and they walked out into the rain.

Jaima lit a cigarette and hunched forward to keep it dry. Mom spun with her arms crossed, clutching the bottle of wine to her chest. Her face was up towards the clouds, and her eyes were closed. I wondered what the rain felt like against her eyelids.

I rolled down the window and listened to them laughing.

Jaima blew smoke at the mirror glass and announced she was watching the reflection of the rain.

Mom carried me inside, but I couldn't sleep. I imagined baby birds asleep in their nests, not knowing how to fly and worried that the thunder would get too close. The TV light gleamed beneath my door. I heard them talking. Then everything was quiet for a long time. I tiptoed across my room and cracked the door. Its hinges made a sound, but neither of them moved. They were asleep on the couch. Both curled and warm beneath the same blanket.

In the morning, our damp clothes lay in a pile by the back door. The mirror had a crack down the center, and when Dad walked in, he said it was like walking into a house lived in by strangers. The shower was running, and Jaima was in the kitchen making eggs.

We had a storm party, she said.

Storm party, Dad said.

Little one was tired of being inside, Jaima said, pointing a yolked spatula at me.

Mom came out of the bathroom wearing a white T-shirt and jeans. Her hair wrapped up in a thin yellow towel.

Home early, she said.

Dad sat down at the table and waited for breakfast.

I worry about them sleeping birds, I said, but no one seemed to hear.

Glass Saints

Dad was on the phone when Mom came through the back door. She had slept in her rig and was dressed in the same blue jeans and T-shirt from the day before. Jaima combed my hair, and we sat there listening to Dad mumble, Uh huh, every couple seconds.

When he was preaching in some town far away and had to sleep in his car, Mom would walk around in her sleeping clothes as long as she liked. Sometimes she stood next to Jaima making pancakes for dinner wearing one of Dad's T-shirts that came down to the back of her knees.

Mom said she had picked up a job when Dad hung up the phone.

Down through South Carolina, she said. Then off to Florida. Shouldn't be more than a few days.

Jaima pulled the brush through my hair and caught a knot. She yanked hard, but I didn't make a noise at the pain. Mom came over and kissed me between the eyes.

Take care of her, she said to Jaima.

Soon as we heard the sound of Mom's rig disappear, Dad said it was about time somebody clean the bathroom. He fished beneath the sink for supplies.

Jaima said she liked the smell of bleach and followed Dad into the bathroom. I could hear her talking, saying bleach made the air taste clean when she breathed it in. When he turned on the shower to wash the tub out, I couldn't hear them talking anymore.

Awhile later, Jaima came out of the bathroom and fixed a bowl of ice cream. She sat near me on the couch and asked if I was awake. I didn't open my eyes, and I tried hard as I could to breathe the way sleeping people breathe. When the shower went quiet, Jaima turned on the TV, clicked it to mute and went out the back door. I waited a long time, knowing that when I opened my eyes I'd be alone in the room. When I sat up, Jaima was standing at the back door looking in at a TV she couldn't hear.

The kitchen sink dripped all night, and I couldn't sleep because the drips were uneven. Sometimes two came so close together it was hard to tell them apart, and sometimes I didn't hear anything for so long I thought there was no more water. But another drip always came, and I was worried the sink would fill and begin to leak onto the kitchen floor. I got up from the couch and stepped over Jaima who was sleeping on a pallet she'd made on the floor. I tiptoed to Dad's room and knocked lightly on the door.

Come in, he said. His bedside light was still on, and I could see that he had been crying.

What's wrong? I said.

Dad tried to smile.

It's never how you think it's going to be, he said.

He told me that when he was a boy he imagined the stained glass saints at St. Bartholomew's Episcopal Church could hear what he was thinking. They knew the sins he confessed when the congregation knelt in silence weren't the only sins he needed to repent for.

One winter, an ice storm hit and took down a tree beside the church. A limb crashed through the face of St. Peter. At church that Sunday, St. Peter's window was covered in plywood. The chapel was cold that morning, and when Dad knelt to confess, he saw a shimmer of red beneath the pew in front of him. He picked up the shard of stained glass and swore it burnt his hand.

Mute

The last time Jaima snuck out of the house, she walked barefoot out into the night like she wasn't worried about stepping on things she couldn't see. Heat bugs seemed to grow louder when she was amongst them. I stood at the screen door and watched. Her footsteps were silent in the wet grass, and when she slammed the car door, it sounded like something breaking. Jaima stayed in that car long enough that I fell asleep for real, and when I woke up the car was gone, and Jaima was asleep on the couch with the TV on mute. A pill bottle and wad of dollar bills had fallen out of her pocket. There was a lady on TV selling knives that could cut through the sole of a tennis shoe, and I couldn't imagine ever needing anything that sharp.

Wednesday

The sky looked dangerous. The kind of weather Jaima liked to sit at the window and wait for. Dark clouds that hold on for as long as they can before they let go of everything, unleashing all that slanting rain. And that's how it was the day Jaima left for good.

She told me she needed to leave but couldn't until I was better. I started crying, and she hugged me tight. I could hear the drip of the kitchen sink.

Medicine's been working, I told her.

Jaima put her cheek against mine.

Before you came, they'd yell most nights, I said. Before the sickness.

I don't know how long she held me like that. At some point, I was alone on the couch and wrapped in the quilt that smelled like Mom and Jaima all at the same time.

I drew a picture of Jaima that night when I knew she wasn't coming back. But it didn't come out right. Dark hair not dark enough, eyes brown but not brown enough. And a smile that seemed not like her smile at all. Because I didn't have enough color to draw Jaima right. Jaima was something can't be captured. Jaima was once, and then Jaima was never again.

Jaima left on a Wednesday.

Flecks of Paint

Thursday night, me and Dad were the only ones in the house. Dad sat down on my bed and told me stories from the road. He was wearing the 1996 World Series shirt that he put on whenever there was painting needed done around the house. I listened to him talk and picked dried flecks of paint from his shirttail. He said you can't ever understand all of someone, can't know every part of them.

I wondered if Dad could smell her on the cushions the way I could. He leaned his head back like he was looking at the ceiling, and I brushed the paint flecks off his lap and onto the carpet. It was getting dark outside, but I left the lights off and waited at the window.

That car pulled up and parked, same as always. Headlights off. Ember moving in and out the open window. If Jaima were there, she would have flicked her front teeth and said, Time for bed. She'd be smiling. Not smiling like she was happy, but like she was pretending to be. She'd come back in a while later and switch the TV to mute. That's what Jaima would do if she had been there. But Jaima wasn't.

I opened the front door without making a sound and walked barefoot through the dewing grass. A hand reached the burning ember out the open window and flicked it into the rain ditch. I heard the engine crank. When I got close, the tires made a screeching sound atop the asphalt, and the car was gone before I could see the face inside. When I turned back to the house, the front porch light was on, and I could see Dad standing inside, watching behind the screen door. I raised a hand, and he raised a hand, and I think in that moment he was wondering what kind of daughter he was waving to, why I was out there alone in the dark.

I crossed back over the yard and didn't worry about stepping on things I couldn't see. My joints didn't hurt the way they had since the doctor found the rash on my leg. All those pills that caught in my throat when I tried to swallow were working. The ground felt good beneath my feet.

Inside, Dad rustled my hair with his knuckle.

Was I baptized? I said.

Dad locked the door and told me I was baptized in the church he and Mom were married in.

I don’t remember it, I said.

He put a hand on the back of my neck. You were just a baby, he said, pulling me in. I wrapped my arms around his waist.

She’s not coming back, he said.

The ceiling fan muttered. The sink dripped. Flecks of dry paint littered the carpet.

I didn’t know who he was talking about, but I knew he was right.

Shinebone

Shinebone tucked hawk feathers into the laces of his boots and lit a cigarette. He had been scared of snakes ever since he'd seen his brother's arm swell up from a cottonmouth bite when they were kids. He figured if they smelled a hawk coming, they'd stay coiled up in their holes. It was early morning, before dawn. He stood on his porch listening. It was the hour of silence. He smoked down to the filter and flicked the butt into a lidless Styrofoam cooler that was in the yard. It was half full of month-old rain and bloated cigarettes. Shinebone knew the grass beneath it was dead. He and Clint both smoked Marlboros. Shinebone only smoked Reds and would joke that he must have been a lousy parent to raise a boy that smoked 27s. But now Clint was dead, and there were still a couple 27s somewhere in the cooler. Shinebone couldn't bring himself to clean it out.

He stepped off the porch and headed toward the woods. He wanted a drink. A quick nip to warm the back of his throat and quiet the thoughts in his head. Not today, he told himself. Even in the dark, he could make out the shortcut path that led to the neighbor's trailer. The

woods were quiet around him. Birds still sleeping. Possums and coons done savaging for the night. When he got to the dry creek bed, he stopped. He knelt and gathered a handful of dust. Millions of years of rock and animal bone crumbled to sediment. Clint'd told him that. As a kid, Clint had kept a box of fossil stones beneath his bed. Shinebone would take him down to the creek to hunt for them. Clint would flip the stones and check their bellies for the outline of ancient shells. Shinebone taught Clint how to lift the rock in case there was a snake underneath it. Always lift the edge that is farthest from you, keeping the rock between you and whatever is sleeping beneath it. As a teenager, Clint said he was going to go to college to study geology. Instead, he dropped out after his junior year of high school and never left the mountain. Never would.

Shinebone wiped his hands clean on his pant leg and crossed the creek bed. Day was beginning to burn at the horizon, an ember light slowly warming. Shinebone bent at the neighbor's mailbox and picked up some driveway gravel. He circled to the back of a hard-worn trailer and tossed a rock gently against the boy's window.

Shinebone's brother had told him about a woman at the foot of the mountain that caused miracles by praying to God and floating candles downriver, out toward the sea. When they released Clint from Brushy Mountain, Shinebone started paying a neighbor boy ten dollars a couple times a week to climb an old oak tree and burn candles in the highest branches. Shinebone hadn't prayed in fifty years, figured there was no use starting now. God didn't keep an ear open for people that'd done the things Shinebone had done. But he burned those candles anyway, always at dawn, and hoped his son would straighten out, hoped for a miracle.

After three rocks, the boy slid his window open and gestured with his hand for Shinebone to wait a second. A moment later the trailer door opened, and the boy came out

carrying his boots. He sat down on a cinder-block step with chipped-off corners and laced up his boots.

"When's your daddy getting out?" Shinebone said.

"They got him up for parole in eighteen months."

"My boy was in there for a bit."

"He out now?"

Shinebone nodded. He had never talked to the boy about Clint, never told him why he burnt those candles. Ten dollars to climb and keep quiet, Shinebone had told him the first morning. He couldn't have explained it anyhow. Burning candles to keep his grown son safe. Didn't make any sense, not even to him. But he had to do something, and he had kept at it even when it was clear that Clint was beyond saving.

The boy stood up. "Where's the stuff?" he said.

"We ain't going down there no more," Shinebone said.

"Then what'd you get me up for?"

Shinebone reached into his pocket and handed the boy five twenty-dollar bills, tightly folded.

"What's this?" the boy said.

Shinebone tossed the gravel he was still holding back into the driveway. "I'll be around from time to time," he said. "To check up on you."

The boy and Shinebone both looked at the fold of money, then back at each other.

"I won't waste my money if I hear you've been finding trouble," Shinebone said.

The boy put the money in his pocket.

"All right then," Shinebone said, turning to leave.

“Thank you,” the boy called out.

Shinebone kept walking.

The last time Shinebone saw Clint, he had come by looking for money. Shinebone told him he couldn’t help him. Clint said he had figured as much but had to check anyway. He only stayed long enough to finish a beer he’d brought with him and a cigarette. It was almost dusk. No stars visible yet, but a sliver of crescent moon. Clint got in his truck and rolled the window down.

“Ever heard the Grundy County mating call?” Clint asked as he pulled a pill bottle from his breast pocket.

Shinebone tried to force a smile but couldn’t. He sipped his coffee. Clint had been telling the same joke since he got out of prison. Shinebone wanted to tell Clint to flush those pills and straighten up, but Clint knew all the old stories about his father and wouldn’t listen to a word of advice from a man who’d lived just as crazy as him. Shinebone wished Clint would hide those bottles from him at least, like he used to do. But since he’d been out, he’d treated Shinebone more like a friend and less like a father. Even called him Shine like everyone else did.

Clint shook the pill bottle. The pills clattered loudly against the plastic. “Grundy County mating call,” he shouted.

He laughed and put the truck in gear.

That bottle sounded more like a rattler to Shinebone. A mean snake with a mouthful of poison, quick to strike at anything that moved past it.

When he got home from the neighbor’s, it was full morning. His yard was wet with dew. He stood outside, not wanting to go in. Today he was scheduled to identify the body.

Opening the back door would put him one step closer. He stood and listened to the morning birds test their sleepy voices. Dogs barked at truck engines starting. Shinebone went inside.

He buttoned up his shirt from the bottom, misaligned the holes, and had to start over. He fumbled at his tie, and when he finally tied it right, it didn't even reach his belly button. Shinebone looked at himself in the mirror. His sleeves came down to his knuckles, pant legs touched the floor. Just one sip and all of this would start to ease away. He walked into the kitchen and took the jar from beneath the sink. He'd kept it there for the last twenty years and never opened it. When he felt that thirst, he'd take out the jar and feel the weight of it, just to know he could if he needed to. He held it up to the light and slapped it. High-proof bubbles formed on the surface. Not today, he thought.

In his truck, Shinebone turned on the radio and listened to the weather. Rain was predicted to come in after midnight. He turned the radio off and rolled down his window. He felt the wind strong against his palm. He thought of Clint coming home from first grade with plans to catch fish with a kite. They had taught him in school that clouds are made from water sucked up from rivers, lakes and seas. Clint's face lit up when he told this to Shinebone.

"There must be a thousand fish up there," he said. "Just like the ones we caught in Uncle Fez's lake."

Clint spent the rest of the afternoon tying rusty fish hooks to the kite's string and trying to fly it high enough to make a catch. When the wind died down, the kite got caught in a tree limb, and Clint threw rocks at it until the sun went down.

Shinebone parked in front of the coroner's office and turned off the engine. He lit a cigarette. He tried to take the whole thing down in one long pull, but he started coughing spit all over the steering wheel. A mother and son passed by on the sidewalk. Shinebone held up a

hand to tell them he was okay. They hurried by and averted their eyes. He wasn't okay. They could see that. He tossed the cigarette into the parking lot and went to the door. He saw his reflection in the dark glass. He'd forgotten to comb his hair. The knot of his tie was crooked. His suit was too big. The skin beneath his eyes was wrinkled and drooping. He went inside.

They led Shinebone into a room bright with a light so white it seemed almost blue. The stainless steel countertops were clean and empty. The floor made squeaking sound beneath his shoes. All the drawers were shut, cabinet doors closed. Everything had been put away, everything except for Clint.

A man whose name he had forgotten led him by the elbow to the side of a table. Clint was covered by a sheet.

"Ready?" the coroner said.

Shinebone nodded.

The man pulled the sheet down just enough to reveal Clint's face and the tops of his shoulders. His eyes were closed. His skin pale and cold, as if a light had been switched off behind it. His hair dark brown and just long enough for it to be worn messy. Shinebone noted the scar that separated Clint's eyebrow. He remembered the cut was too close to the optical nerve, so the doctor couldn't give Clint Novocain. Clint was eleven years old. The doctor strapped him to the table in something like a straightjacket to keep him still. Shinebone held his hand as the doctor sewed his eyebrow shut. Clint didn't even squeeze. Shinebone had wished he had, wished he had sqeezed hard just so Shinebone could share some of the pain.

Shinebone wanted to cover his son's body back up and carry it out. Clint wouldn't have wanted to be in there. He didn't like places like this, so neat and sterile. Clint liked weeds that came up through the sidewalk, kitchen sinks full of dishes, jeans with holes at the knees.

Shinebone wondered if he still had the strength to sling Clint over his shoulder. When Clint was little Shinebone would call out, *Bedtime for Bonzo* every night before bed. Clint would run around the living room begging for thirty more minutes. When Shinebone caught him he'd shout out, *Sack of potatoes* and sling Clint over his shoulder, carrying him to bed.

"Would you like a moment?" the coroner asked.

"No," Shinebone said. I'd like a drink, he thought.

The coroner covered Clint's face and handed Shinebone a one-gallon Ziploc bag. "Everything that was on him," the man said.

Shinebone took the bag without going through its contents. He signed some papers and left the building. He breathed deep, relieved to be outside.

Shinebone took off the suit and laid it on the bed. He stood looking at it, knowing the next time he wore a suit he would be lying in his own casket. He got a wire hanger from the closet and hung the suit on the nail he'd half-driven into the bathroom door. He'd been hanging things from that nail since before Clint was born. Twenty-seven years, and it wasn't going anywhere anytime soon.

In the kitchen, Shinebone put on a pot of coffee and waited. Through the window above the sink he watched the sun struggle to keep the world alight. Only a sliver still visible above the tree line. When his coffee was ready, he took it to the porch and lit a cigarette. He smoked it down and listened to the paper sizzle when he took a deep drag. When he finished, he flicked it into the cooler and heard the sound of the ember tip hiss as it hit the water, all its heat gone in an instant. He set his coffee down, unsipped, and walked to the cooler. The water was murky and crowded with cigarettes and dead leaves. An insect floated belly up, legs kicking for something to grab onto. Shinebone wondered if Clint had fought, had kicked and struggled to

grab onto something as life slipped him, but with so many pills in his stomach he'd probably just fallen asleep.

Shinebone tipped the cooler over with the toe of his boot. The water spread across the yard and pooled, only for a second, before soaking into the ground. Soggy cigarette butts littered the grass. The insect righted itself and scampered away. Shinebone went to the garage and came back with a shovel and a rake. He carefully dug up a clump of grass and set it aside. Daylight was no longer on the horizon, but he could still make out the cigarettes against the dark blanket of grass. He dug two shovelfuls of dirt from the hole and raked all the cigarette butts into it. He filled the hole and returned the grass clump, tamping it down with the heel of his boot. He imagined what noises could be heard underground. Blind creatures tunneling their way through the darkness, scratching roots as they passed. Footprints from the above ground world, like slow rolling thunder.

Shinebone unwound the garden hose and washed the cooler out. A brown stain marked the level the water had been and no matter how much he scrubbed the stain remained. He placed the cooler back where it had been. He knew what he was going to do now. He was going to leave it there, let it fill back up with rain. But this time he would keep it clean. No more cigarette butts. He would buy a goldfish net and skim the water each morning. Clean as tap water. He would watch storm clouds come in slow and unleash water that had evaporated from rivers and oceans halfway across the world. He would drink coffee on the porch, watching the cooler fill, watching till the water rose up and spilled over the edges.

Shinebone returned to the kitchen and took the liquor jar from beneath the sink. He uncapped it and breathed in the fumes. The scent burnt his throat, made his eyes threaten to water. Not today, he told himself. He poured the liquor down the drain and turned on the faucet

to rid the sink of the smell. He rinsed the jar. This was the first time in his life that he was living in a dry house. From that moment on when he felt the thirst tightening its fist, he'd fill the jar with storm water and drink. Jar after jar, until his belly was tight. But tonight the cooler was empty, tonight he would sit on the porch and wait for the rain.

Rainpainting

The summer we lived with Dad, there was a neighbor whose voice we never heard. We'd see him walking through the woods, fingers brushing the bark of trees. Or rustling the leaves of bushes, collecting berries in a paper sack. Sometime he crouched in the creek bed and picked red pebbles from the cool water.

He moved slow. Always quiet. And often stopped as if listening to things we couldn't hear, like roots growing deep beneath him. The crack of a bird's egg in a high-up nest.

Once we drove by him on the gravel road near our house. He stepped into the ditch and waited for us to pass. Dad raised two fingers from the steering wheel, and the man lifted his hand to his forehead. Waving hello or shading his eyes from the sun, we couldn't tell.

"The Rainpainter," Dad said, watching the rearview mirror.

When we asked what he meant, he told us he'd show us, but we'd have to wait.

We stayed up late that night making up stories. The Rainpainter standing beneath a heavy sky, wetting his brush with storm water. Slashing at a canvas until something evil took

shape. We listened with our ears pressed against the window for some promise of rain to break loose from the sky, some spark to waken the dark world. And if it had, we'd have been afraid to open our eyes, afraid the stories we told were true.

The next morning, he walked past our house carrying a stack of folded sheets.

"What's he doing?" we said.

"Getting ready for the rain," Dad said.

Dad had been checking the weather every night after calling Mom behind a closed door. We'd lie on the floor outside his room and listen as he begged her for just a few more days. When the storm came, Dad called in sick to work. With the first tinks of rain on the roof, he told us to hurry.

We followed him through woods that were thick with the smell of rain. The air had cooled. We reached out our hands and felt the trees' bark as we ran.

Dad stopped and pointed to the canopy of the woods.

"Sheets," he said.

We ran in circles beneath sheets that were hung between branches so high above us. Each sheet stained a different color. We outstretched our arms, our palms catching all different colors of rain. The strange rain dripped from our hair and down our faces. Reds and blues and purples. We opened our mouths and tasted it.

Some sheets were heavy with the weight of picked berries. Others colored with the dust of crushed creek pebbles.

When the rain lightened, our clothes were stained. Our tongues and teeth carnival-colored. We were laughing. Dad stood far away, watching silently.

The next morning we slipped back into the stained clothes we had begged him not to wash. And when Mom picked us up she shook her head.

"Couldn't even keep them clean," she said, before taking us away.

Elephants

The day the river froze, The Pervert came to class with a black and white photo of a circus elephant hanging from a railroad crane. It was the day of our class presentations. *Local History: Cleecey's Ferry, Tennessee* was written on the board in Miss Milligan's slanted writing. T-Boy nudged me when The Pervert pulled the photo from his backpack and put it on his desk. Two girls nicknamed the Prissy Sisters were giving a presentation about a woman who invented the windshield wiper. One of the sisters said that the wiper woman sold the idea to Cadillac. Said she used the money to buy a summer home in Cleecey's Ferry and never had to work again. The other sister wore a dress that looked like a picnic tablecloth and pretended to attach a wiper blade to a windshield made of cardboard.

When the girls sat down, The Pervert squirmed in his seat with his hand above his head. Miss Milligan looked for other volunteers. When no one else raised a hand, The Pervert walked to the front of the room holding the loose sheet of paper and had a smile wide on his face.

“There’s an elephant buried in Cleecey’s Ferry that weighs more than a school bus,” The Pervert said. “At least before she died she weighed that much. Now she’s just a skeleton in the ground by the railroad tracks.”

T-Boy leaned forward with his elbows on his desk.

“And if you know where to look,” The Pervert said, “you can see her tusks poking up out the dirt.”

T-Boy looked over at me and made his arm into an elephant’s trunk.

“Mary the Elephant preformed for the Sparks World Famous Circus until she went crazy and squashed her trainer’s head beneath her foot like a spoiled tomato. The next day, the circus came to Cleecey’s Ferry, but people refused to pay the price of admission until the crazed elephant was killed. They fed her apples as they led her to the tracks where she was hung.”

As he talked, The Pervert passed around the picture of Mary hanging. A chain was wrapped around her neck and her feet were so close to the tracks it looked like if she could have pointed her toes they would have touched. I felt sick to my stomach. John Hackett made a trumpet sound, and one of the Prissy Sisters started crying as she held the picture of the dead thing. That brought Miss Milligan out of her seat. She snatched up the picture and pulled The Pervert out of the room by his elbow.

When the bell rang and Miss Milligan hadn’t come back, T-Boy flicked my ear.

“Reece,” he said. “We lucky dogs. I wasn’t ready to get up there. Were you?”

I pressed my fingers against my pocket and felt the sixteen coins I’d brought to school.

“You think he’s full of it?” I said.

“I know where she’s buried,” T-Boy said.

After school, I stood behind the baseball field and waited for T-Boy. I hadn't gone straight home after school since my mother got sick. I didn't like the smell of the house, or the way Dad tiptoed in and out of her room, telling me to be quiet and switching the TV off as he passed into the kitchen. T-Boy didn't go straight home either. On hot days we'd wade the creek, looking under rocks for things we could drop into the murky water of our Styrofoam cups. When the weather was bad, we'd spend saved-up quarters on the claw-catch game at the Dairy Queen.

I was scratching in the dirt with the toe of my boot and wondering about those elephant bones when I heard T-Boy's voice. It was the coldest day of the year, and nothing around had any color. Trees were grey-limbed silhouettes against grey sky. Yards were straw colored. Salt littered people's driveways and sidewalks, but there was no snow. It was too cold for snow. I shook the coins in my pocket just to make sure they were still there. They were my grandfather's coins. I'd brought them in to tell the class how he'd found them at the bottom of the river beneath Benton's Bridge. In my pocket, they felt heavier than new coins somehow, like they'd soaked up a little bit of every hand that had ever held them.

"Come on," T-Boy said.

We crossed through the woods behind school and followed the railroad tracks that led to Benton's Bridge.

"Think The Pervert got thrown out of school?"

"Don't call him that," T-Boy said, kicking some gravel at me.

"I heard that Coach Jennings walked in on him in the locker room. None of the showers were running, but The Pervert was butt-naked with two colored pencils up his ass."

"That ain't true."

"I bet you his shit looks like Skittles coming out."

T-Boy punched me in the shoulder.

"Keep it up," he said. "He told me if he got sent to the principal's office one more time his mom would send him off to reform school. Probably won't ever see him again."

"He told you that?"

T-Boy didn't respond.

"Is there really tusks coming up from the ground?" I said.

"Girl elephants ain't got tusks," T-Boy said. "Just like deer."

"Then how are we going to know where she's buried?" I said.

A few minutes later, we stopped at a concrete slab beside the tracks. It was covered in spray paint. There were dates written beneath initials and enough cuss words to fill a boy's head forever. *Terrence love Stacey* sprayed in blue. T-Boy stood on the slab and said we'd found her, that they'd paved her over after people started showing up with shovels, looking to take bones away as souvenirs.

I walked across the slab looking down at the black spraypaint outline of an elephant's trunk. Red paint, like blood, was leaking out the tip.

"They tried to shoot her first," he said.

"The Pervert's elephant?"

"I told you don't call him that."

The sky was thick with clouds that seemed not to move at all. Like they'd frozen there.

"Used a pistol," T-Boy said. "But it didn't bring her down. They had to hang her twice. The first chain wasn't enough. Snapped. And when she fell her hip bone broke so loud people

could hear it when she landed. Like a tree splintering in a storm. And the ground shook because she was so heavy. People said they could feel it through the soles of their shoes."

"How you know all that?"

"I was at the library when he was looking it up."

"I didn't know you to go to the library."

T-Boy got quiet, and when he started talking again, it was almost a whisper.

"Sometimes," he said. "Lettie gets to yelling at Gary, then sees me and starts yelling at me for nothing. Gary will slip me a couple bucks and tell me to take off for awhile, until she cools down."

Gary was related to T-Boy someway, but I never could figure how. T-Boy said Gary and Lettie got a check every month that T-Boy lived with them, said they talked about it sometimes when they thought he was asleep.

"Never seen you read a book," I said.

"I just get on the computer. And they have sports magazines in the back. He's always there. Says he's not allowed to be at home alone. So he waits there for his mom to get off work."

T-Boy jumped off the grave site.

"Got something better to show you," he said, walking through the tall grass that grew beside the tracks. "Follow me."

"How you know the girls don't have tusks?" I said.

"My uncle took me out hunting a few years back, when he was still coming around. He said we only shoot the males, the ones with antlers."

"I saw a ghost deer once," I said. "In the woods out behind our house."

“A ghost deer?” T-Boy said.

“Its fur was white,” I said. “My dad says sometimes they’re born that way. But it makes them easy to see, and so they don’t live long.”

“If it snowed, you wouldn’t be able to see them at all,” T-Boy said.

At school, the teachers told us the river had frozen for the first time in fifty years. T-Boy spat on the train rails and bent down to see if it would turn to ice.

“Gary said his grandfather rode a bike across the river when he was a kid. Even all the way in the middle it didn’t crack.”

“How thick was the ice?” I said.

“All the way thick,” T-Boy said. “Frozen to the bottom.”

“ Rivers don’t freeze all the way to the bottom.”

“This one did.”

“Bullshit. No river ever froze like that. There’s always some water still moving beneath the surface.”

I stood on the rail of the train track, balancing on one foot.

“Wonder how close the trains got to be for you to feel the rails shaking,” I said.

T-Boy pushed me off balance and steadied himself in my place.

“So what were you going to give your talk about?” he said.

I took the coins from my pocket and told them where they’d come from, that my grandfather used to dive down and run his hands through the silt searching for wished-away coins, back when people thought prayers could be answered if thrown into moving water.

“My grandfather had to swim out there at night,” I said. “He thought if people knew he was taking those coins they’d pull him out of the river and beat the snot out of him.”

"And where did people throw them when the river froze?"

I fingered the coins in my pocket. Each was cold to the touch.

"I don't know," I said. "Never thought about that."

I felt my nose beginning to run, and the cold was pin-pricking the tips of my ears.

T-Boy snapped a twig from a fallen tree and held it between his two fingers like a cigarette. He blew out a mouth full of winter breath like it was smoke and started talking like he was in the movies.

"I'm gonna take off to California and change my name," he said between puffs.

I grabbed the collar of his jacket and tried to look serious.

"If you run, boy, you'll always be running," I said. "But if you stay." I tapped him in the center of the chest. "If you stay you can fight like a man."

T-Boy laughed and flicked his twig at me. I made a sizzle sound and pretended it burned my shoulder.

I'd seen my mother smoke a cigarette only once in my life, after her first doctor's appointment. I wasn't allowed to follow them inside. When she came out, she walked across the street to the filling station and bought a pack. Dad and I sat in the car while she stood outside and smoked. When she climbed into the car she looked back at me.

"First cigarette I've smoked in twelve years," she said.

When T-Boy and I got to Benton's Bridge, T-Boy threw a rock down at the river, too far for us to hear it hit the ice. The surface was dark with white cracks where the ice had splintered. I wondered if there were fish down there swimming up, trying to figure out what was above them.

T-Boy pulled at the sleeve of my jacket and pointed out at the center of the bridge. There were two brightly colored sheets hanging from the trestles like hammocks.

"What's that?" I said.

"I hung them there," T-Boy said. "Found them in the woods tied between the branches of a tree."

He turned away from me and headed out onto the bridge.

"Come on," he said, not turning back to see if I was following.

I could see the river through the gaps in the railroad ties, quiet and unmoving beneath us. I wonder what would happen if we fell, if we'd break through and drift downstream below the ice or if we'd land hard against it and hear the snap of our bones.

T-Boy slipped down between the rail ties and into the sheet hammock like he'd done it a million times.

"Don't worry," he said. "It's safe."

"Why's there two of them?" I asked.

T-Boy didn't respond.

There were candy wrappers in my hammock. I lowered one leg and tested my weight. The sheet tightened but didn't rip. I pulled at the knots to make sure they would hold. When I sat down, all I could see was the thick gray sky through the dark railroad ties above me.

"Reece, can I ask you something serious?"

T-Boy had never asked about my mom being sick, and I never teased him for having an uncle that showed up at school once without a shirt on and tried to steal the cafeteria refrigerator.

"Okay," I said.

"You ever felt a titty?" T-Boy said.

His voice came from the sheet next to mine. I knew he was smiling. When I moved, the fabric around me made a stretching sound.

"Jayme Rhae bent over my desk the other day," I said. "I could feel hers on my arm."

"I mean under the bra, stupid. With your hand."

I tried to think of something to say that wasn't a lie but not quite the truth either.

"No," I finally admitted.

"Me neither."

I was glad he hadn't.

"But he has," T-Boy said.

I imagined the Pervert in the back seat of his mom's car leaving Cleecey's Ferry forever, a crumpled black and white photo in his pocket.

"He went up a chick's shirt in the workout room at a Howard Johnson in Panama City."

I sat up in my hammock. T-Boy mimicked lifting a barbell with on hand and grabbing a breast with the other.

"I know which workout's better," he said.

I slapped his titty hand, and we both lay back and let our hammocks cocoon around us. We were laughing, but soon I remembered how high we were above the river, and how something so thin was all that was between me and the ice below.

"These sheets are what I was going to give my presentation on," T-Boy said. "Gary showed them to me. There were these two brothers lived around. They heard about an underground spring that had water that could make sick people feel better. They figured they could make a lot of money if they found it."

T-Boy coughed, and I breathed into my hands to warm them.

"So they were out looking for it one day and saw this girl standing out in the woods. It was raining, and when they got close to her, they saw her eyelashes were so long she couldn't open her eyes. And they swore that the rain all around her was coming down in all different colors."

A train whistle sounded in the distance.

"Gary said she was the prettiest girl these two brothers ever saw. Sounds scary to me, but Gary said sometimes things can be both."

"So what happened?" I said.

"She disappeared. One of the brothers died in a train wreck in Nashville, and the other still hangs these sheets from the trees, paints them different colors so that when it rains it looks like the day he first saw her. Gary says he does it hoping she'll come back."

"Sounds like a story Gary made up to get you," I said.

T-Boy leaned out of his hammock and pushed against mine. We both started rocking, and I reached up and grabbed the ties above me to stop myself.

"Quit it," I said, worried the knots would come loose.

The train whistle grew louder, and T-Boy pulled my hammock close to his.

"Give me a coin," T-Boy said.

"They ain't mine."

"Just one so I can flatten it."

I handed him a wheat penny and he pulled himself up and set it atop the rail. I did the same and imagined it hot and flat after all those cars ran over it.

"Now grab on and let's see who can hold the longest."

As we both held onto that rail it began to snow. I knew that I could never hold longer than T-Boy. He had his tongue out collecting snowflakes. I felt the shake of the train. I let go and sat down. T-Boy held on until the train got so close it shook the coins from the track. If the world was silent, I imagined we would have heard two small sounds as they hit the ice at nearly the same time.

"Make a wish," T-Boy yelled, sitting back into his hammock.

I wondered how thick the ice would need to be to keep a coin from breaking through. I imagined two matching holes in the surface of the frozen river. Cold water seeping up and spreading a dark puddle over the ice.

The train came loud and shook everything around me. I closed my eyes and tightened my fists until I could feel my nails sharp against my palms.

When it passed, I heard T-Boy laughing. He was shaking his sheet to make it sway beneath the heavy rumbling tracks, like danger so close wasn't enough for him. I kept as still as I could. When the sound of the train was far off, I sat up and tried to see the coins but they were too small. I knew there was current down there somewhere, but none visible. I just saw cold and ice and snow coming down heavy all around us. That noise still in my ear. That train so loud it shook loose the heaviest coins in the world. But not heavy enough to break through the stilled river. There was no dark puddle of water. The coins were quiet atop the hard surface, listening to the strong vibration of the current beneath them, and waiting for the ice to crack so they could find their way to the moving body of cold water, healing water.

T-Boy climbed up onto the tracks.

"What'd you wish?" he said.

"Can't tell you or it won't come true," I said.

I couldn't tell him I wished that elephant hadn't been killed, that there was no black and white photo of it that made me sick to my stomach. Because a wish like that was silly when there are moms that can't get out of their own beds and uncles that no longer come around and take their nephews hunting. And somewhere there's a boy getting sent to a school for kids who can't keep out of trouble. I didn't tell him I wished for something that couldn't be undone, something two pennies could never change.

"I wished to grab a titty beneath the bra," T-Boy said.

I laughed and knew he had wished for snow.

Beneath Dark Water

Darcy hadn't said a word to Rae since she'd gotten home from the clinic. He listened to her repeat everything the doctor told her, about trimesters and prenatal vitamins. He didn't look at her as she spoke, and when she said she was sorry, he left the house, leaving the front door open.

There were three men with him when he came back. Men Rae had never met. Each of them carried a case of beer or a bottle of liquor. Rae assumed they were friends of his from before she'd met him, before he'd gotten clean. One of them set a plastic bag on the kitchen table. None of them spoke to her. Rae watched Darcy from the couch. He snorted a line of powder and drank Old Crow whiskey and chased it with warm 7UP.

It was almost morning when Rae decided she'd had enough. Through the window, she could see the sky beginning to lighten. She walked into the kitchen and took the bottle from Darcy's hand.

“Tell them to go,” she said, not looking at the strangers standing mute around her. “And when they’re gone, hook up the trailer.” Rae emptied the bottle into the sink. She handed it back to Darcy and slammed the front door behind her as she went outside.

Darcy followed her. He had a beer in his hand, and she heard the crack of the metal tab as she climbed into the boat.

“We’re going to take the boat out and run it ’til the tank’s empty,” she said, laying an orange life jacket over her knees and running her fingers over the broken plastic buckles. “You have to talk to me, Dar.”

Darcy took off his ball cap, tilted his head back and put the cap over his face. Rae didn’t say a word. Dawn was quick on the horizon. Darcy readjusted his hat onto his head and dusted some powder in the corner of his hand between his thumb and forefinger. He sniffed it and started to say something to Rae but walked to his truck and backed up to the hitch instead.

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They were ten miles upriver when the engine quit. The boat settled into the water, its own wake washing around its sides. Darcy shook empty beer cans, looking for a few more swigs. Rae sat staring at her toes, hugging her knees tight to her chest. The current was calm and flat, but the dark sky promised bad weather.

It was a weekday morning, and there were no other boats on the river. No one to see him throw me overboard, Rae thought. No one to see us if we make up and tangle ourselves in fishing line, lures dangling from our naked shoulders, hooks stuck in our bleeding skin.

“Gonna rain?” Rae asked.
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"Always rains," Darcy said.

Darcy dropped the trolling motor and turned the boat so that they were pointing downstream.

"It's bullshit," Rae said, just barely a whisper. "Not like you've never run around on me."

"Not the same."

Rae watched a blue heron glide a few inches above the river. She wondered what it saw beneath the surface of the water.

"Not the same, my ass," she said.

Darcy pulled the trolling motor back onto the boat and sat down facing Rae. She figured he was studying the scar on her cheek, crooked beneath her right eye. The scar he sometimes touched when she pretended to be asleep. She wondered if he even remembered the girl's name who gave it to her. All she remembered was the sound it made in her skull when the lamp exploded against the side of her face. And how she'd bled into the carpet and wouldn't let him help her up. She could hear that girl gathering her clothes and running barefoot from the room as Darcy said *Rae, Rae* over and over again.

Hours passed. The boat drifted slow in the current. Darcy slept most of the morning and into the afternoon. Rae wondered why forgiveness came so easy to some people and didn't come at all to others. She paddled to the bank and tied the boat to a low-hanging limb. She looked at Darcy and then climbed out of the boat, unsure if they would ever make it home. Rae walked through the woods that lined the river, collecting fallen buckeyes and thin peelings of cedar bark, things her mother had told her would bring good luck when she was a child.

When she got back to the boat she tossed a buckeye at Darcy. The sound of it ricocheting off the boat woke him.

"It doesn't have to be different than we planned, Dar," Rae said.

Darcy sat up but didn't meet her eyes. "All it's gonna be is different, Rae," he said. "Who knows what the hell that thing is even gonna look like."

"That thing?" Rae said. "That thing." Her voice was a slow wind beneath dark clouds.

The boat teetered when Darcy stood. He sat next to her and put his arms around her.

"Don't," Rae said.

He kissed her neck and kept his head on her shoulder.

"Just give me a name," he said. "I can handle this if you just give me a name."

Rae combed her fingers through his hair. Thunder echoed down the bluffs of the river.

"I told you I can't," Rae said. "I don't know what you'd do." She felt the muscles in his jaw tighten. "Hell, Dar, you don't even know what you'd do."

Darcy didn't speak. Rae pressed her hand against her belly, wanting to feel movement. She knew there was something growing in there she had wanted her entire life, something she would love. But all she felt was poison. Because what was inside her causing her to be sick in the mornings also changed the way Darcy looked at her.

The current took them toward the bank. Limbs submerged just beneath the surface scratched the bottom of the boat. Darcy pointed at something floating in the water that looked like a twisted stick curling its way toward them. He grabbed a wooden paddle and raised it above his head. The paddle made a loud crack when Darcy brought it down against the water. The snake raised its head as if to get a better look at them. Rae saw its tongue tasting the air. She scooted to the far side of the boat. She'd always heard that cottonmouths nest their babies

in the edgewater of rivers, just below the surface in the tangles of fallen trees or the hollows of old stumps. Rae's cousin told a story of a water-skier who lost the line and fell too close to the bank. Those on the boat heard him yelling that he'd fallen into a snarl of sunken barbed wire, that it was tearing the skin all over his body. When they pulled him on the boat, he was covered in baby snakes. And it's the babies you have to worry about. They bite quick and don't save any poison for later. Rae heard that boy was dead before they got the boat off the water.

"I've heard that too," Darcy said. "Told a hundred different ways by a hundred different people." He pushed off from the bank with the oar and let it drop back to the floor of the boat. They slowly drifted toward deeper water. "All bullshit. Cottonmouths don't nest like that. The babies take off on their own soon as they're born."

Rae scratched at her skin, thinking of how it must feel to sink into a bundle of baby snakes, their teeth sharp as razors. She hoped Darcy was right—told herself he was—and there wasn't anything to be afraid of. But she knew the kind of nightmares that waited for her when she fell asleep, knew it's the babies you have to worry about.

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Before they knew each other's names, Darcy called Rae *sweetheart* when they were alone. He would come into the filling station twice a day just to see her. Dirty Braves cap and jeans stained with grease around the pockets. He'd pull a Coke from the bottom of the ice chest and wait until she wasn't checking anyone else out. He'd pay in exact change and say, *Thank you sweetheart,* as he turned to leave. Rae knew he probably talked to all the pretty girls that way, but she pretended it was just for her.
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Then one day, he didn't show up. She heard he'd been asking around about her. She figured he was working up the nerve to ask her on a date. For three days, Rae came in to work with perfume sprayed at her wrists and her makeup done. And for three days he didn't show. When he finally came in, he was wearing church pants and no hat. Rae could tell he'd tried to comb his hair. She wanted to tell him he cleaned up nice, but she was mad at him for making her wait, mad at the way people had snickered at her for wearing a nice dress behind a filling station counter.

He walked straight up to her without grabbing a Coke. "I'm Darcy," he said, reaching her his hand. "I was hoping you'd let me take you out."

"And when were you hoping to do that?" she asked.

"Friday night."

"I work Friday 'til eight."

"Well, I'll just park right out there on Friday," Darcy said. "Maybe when you get off, you'll feel like taking a ride with me."

He smiled and turned to leave.

"And maybe I won't," she called out after him, but he was already out the door.

Another customer was waiting to check out. Rae turned her back and tried to keep from smiling.

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It was dark when Rae woke. She didn't know how long she'd been asleep. She'd been up all night, and they'd spent the better part of the day running upriver and floating back down,
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slow as driftwood. She rubbed her eyes. Her dreams had been tangled in the dark places beneath the water. Darcy was standing at the front of the boat, motionless. Rae sat up. She could smell fire. Above the trees downriver, she saw the glow of flames and the dense rising of thick smoke.

"What is that?"

"Don't know," Darcy said. "There's a bend in the river. Can't tell if it's on the shore, or if the burning is coming from the water."

"Hope everyone's okay," Rae said. She could see Darcy clenching his fists in the moonlight. She thought about the muscles in his forearms tightening, the same forearms she had gripped onto so many times in bed. There was a strength in Darcy she was afraid of. Strength she had often hoped would keep her safe.

The smoke was a dark shadow against the blackened sky. Rae prayed for rain to come and put out whatever was burning so hot, prayed no one was close enough to the flames to feel the heat.

Before they came around the bend, she could see the reflection of fire in the current. Red glow flickering atop the water. Darcy picked up the paddle and started to row toward the blaze. The movement of the boat rippled the surface of the water and caused the reflected light to tremble.

"Don't," Rae said.

Darcy quit paddling and held the shaft with one hand, letting the blade trail behind the boat. When she saw the flames, Rae asked Darcy to sit.

"Barge fire," he said, and Rae scooted close to him.

The flames bellowed thirty feet into the sky. The air smelled of burning rubber. The fire roared an uncontrollable noise. She saw the light reflecting in Darcy's eyes. He wouldn't look away from the flames.

"Tell me something," Rae said.

Darcy talked toward the smoke.

"I ever tell you about my dad running the boat upriver to the lake?"

Rae didn't say she'd heard about it more times than she could remember. She wanted to hear something familiar.

"He knew every inch of that lake," Darcy said. "Where the fish were, what lure to throw at which log."

Rae could feel the warmth from the fire. They drifted toward it as if being pulled by the heat.

Darcy paddled the boat closer to the other bank.

"When I was little," he continued, "he'd hook one and keep it on the line until the fish wore itself out. Then he'd hand the rod to me. He'd tell everyone about it later, about the big fish I caught. I always felt guilty, everyone acting like they believed I'd really hooked it. And I remember once we went out there without any poles. He had him a cooler of beer and a couple Cokes in there for me. Only other thing he brought was this round magnet, looked like a weight at the end of a barbell. It was tied to a length of rope, had to be a hundred feet or more. Daddy just drank his beer while we ran upriver, and I sat wondering what in the hell we were doing."

They turned to keep their eyes on the fire. Rae rested her head against Darcy's chest and listened to the vibrations of his voice echoing through his body.

"When we got there, Daddy told me to keep an eye out for a dead tree taller than the rest. Said it was our guiding tree. He let me spot it even though he knew where it was. He got us right up next to the bank under that tree and turned the boat around, started heading out away from it. He was counting, looking back over his shoulder the whole time. One-Mississippi, Two-Mississippi."

Darcy counted the numbers out with his fingers as he talked. Rae waited until he got to five, took his hand and wove her fingers through his.

"When he'd counted off Twenty-Mississippi, he stopped trolling and dropped that magnet off the back of the boat. He'd given me gloves to wear, men's gloves that were loose over my hands. He told me to hold the rope, but not tight, just let it run through my fingers as the magnet sank to the bottom. When the line stopped running he told me to pull it up."

Darcy dipped his free hand into the river and dragged his wet fingers over Rae's forearm.

"'We're on it,' Daddy said when the magnet came up with a rusty roof nail and a dinner spoon. So we dropped that magnet again and again. And again and again it came up with all sorts of metal. Silverware and door hinges, a letter opener shaped like a willow leaf, and a metal hairbrush with missing bristles. Daddy said when they dammed the river all sorts of people had to leave their homes. Some of them refused to go, stayed in their houses until the water came up through the floorboards. Neighbors had to come in boats and get them out, didn't even have time to pack up their stuff."

Rae imagined whole towns sunk beneath dark water. She saw baby snakes slithering through keyholes, wrapping themselves around the handles of refrigerator doors.

“That water rose quick and took the roofs with it. Now there are all these houses at the bottom of the lake without roofs. And some of them still have dining room tables set for dinner, chests of drawers full of dead men’s clothes.”

The river turned, and the fire was behind them. All Rae could see was a faint glow of it reflecting off the rippled current.

“Before we left that day, Daddy threw the magnet in and brought up a pocketknife engraved with initials. The blades were corroded but he gave it to me and promised he’d clean it up, get it sharp. But he never asked about it again, never polished it up. I couldn’t even open it—the blades had rusted shut. I kept it in my pocket every day until I was old enough and had saved up money for my own boat. This boat. First time I took it out on the water I ran upriver to that lake. I found the dead tree and counted off Twenty-Mississippi. I stood there and drank beer and dropped that knife from the back of the boat.”

“You never told me that last part,” Rae said. “That you threw it back.”

“Weren’t my initials, Rae.”

They stayed quiet for a long time. When Darcy finally spoke again, Rae had to lean forward to hear him.

“What’ll it call me?” He sat slumped forward with his head in his hands.

“What do you want to be called?”

“I always imagined a mess of them,” Darcy said, “running around, hiding behind my pant legs, calling me Daddy. And even last year when we saw that doctor and he said it wouldn’t ever happen for me, I couldn’t believe him. Still didn’t this morning. I looked at your belly and thought maybe it could be mine. But I see it in your eyes, you’re so sure of it. You know it ain’t.”

“It can still be yours, Dar. You can still be Daddy.”

“No. Can’t be like that.”

“It can be however we make it.”

“Just like that? And we’ll pretend forever?”

“No pretending.” Rae knelt forward and rested her chin on top of Darcy’s head. “No blood ever made a man a father. I got veins full of mine, and what’d he ever do for me?”

“Just tell me who, Rae.”

Rae felt a quiet rain on her neck. She heard its small *tinks* sounding off the aluminum boat. Darcy didn’t move, didn’t flinch when the rain hit his skin or when the thunder cracked so close they could feel it. And he didn’t look at her when she placed her hand against his cheek. Rae thought about the fire. She imagined the water beneath that barge warming from the flames. And about those baby snakes. She wondered if they would swim close enough to feel the heat, if they’d snap their jaws at the flames and crack their teeth trying to sink their poison into the metal hull.

Rae felt the coarse stubble on Darcy’s face. She wanted to grab him in her arms and tell him everything would be all right. She wanted to dive into the dark water and see if the baby was too much weight for her. She wanted Darcy to watch her struggle to stay afloat and reach in and save her just as her last breath bubbled out from her lungs, to pluck her from the deep like something he’d keep in his pocket forever. She wanted to tell him the name she’d kept hidden so he could straighten everything back to normal.

“Tell me, Rae.”

“Dar—”

“Tell me the goddamn name,” Darcy shouted. He pulled her by the wrist, close enough that she felt his spit on her face when he spoke. “Tell me the name.”

“No,” she said.

Darcy swung quick and caught Rae on the side of the face before she could put a hand up to stop him. She had seen him punch men before. In a fight outside a baseball stadium in Chattanooga, and once in the parking lot of a Dairy Queen. And she knew this was different—this time he hadn’t closed his fist. This time he’d kept his hand open and felt what it was he was hitting. Rae would have rather he punched her like she’d seen him do to those men. This was worse. This wasn’t the bone of his knuckle, it was the palm of his hand. The hand she held when she woke up scared from nightmares, the hand that helped fasten her dress when she couldn’t reach the zipper.

Rae sat down in the boat. Darcy watched her and chewed his lip. The rain was light, but steady. The sky was still dark, but the thunder had stopped. Rae watched the wet drip from Darcy’s hair down his face—the closest thing to tears she’d seen on his cheeks in a long time.

Rae dipped her hand into the water and left it there as the boat moved downstream. She moved her fingers, feeling for fish skin or snake tails. But all she found was the cold touch of water. She imagined that the river was depthless, eternal. A vein of dark current that had no bed.

Rae brought her fingers to her mouth and tasted the river. It made her think of a damp basement, the way rock beneath moss must taste. Rae reached into the water again.

“Ain’t good for you,” Darcy said. “Either of you.”

“Since when does that worry you?”

“That water’s dirty as hell. I wouldn’t even swim in there.”

Rae brought her fingers to her mouth. “Well I’m not you, am I?”

When they came up on the bank near their house, Darcy jumped ashore and pulled the boat up onto the grass. Rae stayed sitting. She could still feel the heat pulsing in her cheek where he had hit her, but she wasn’t crying.

On the shore, Darcy unzipped his pants and relieved himself in the tall grass. Rae stood and stepped into the knee-high water, feeling the silt between her toes. She bent, took the river in her hand and brought it to her face. She knew if she were to see her own reflection, she would see that her blood had boiled to the surface, that his handprint was stained across her skin. She prayed the water would wash her clean, rinse away the pain that swelled on her cheek.

When she looked up, he was watching her.

“Hell you doing?” he asked.

She didn’t respond.

“Rae, I’m sorry,” he said.

Rae turned and waded into the river, pulling the boat back into the water. She felt the current pull at the hem of her dress. She waded deeper, until she could no longer touch the bottom.

“Rae, come back here,” Darcy said. “I’m sorry,”

Rae climbed into the boat the way her mother taught her as a girl so it wouldn’t flip.

“Rae,” Darcy shouted. “Rae, where are you going?”

She rolled into the boat and fell onto the floor. She stayed that way, lying on her back looking at the sky. The current moved her downstream. She heard a splash and the rustling of water behind her. She knew Darcy was swimming toward the boat. She breathed deep and took

in the damp smell of the stormy night. The clouds were thick and curtained the stars. She wanted to stare up at them until they broke, until something bright came through to lighten the night sky. Darcy was getting closer. Rae strained her eyes and asked God to thin the clouds and allow just one thing to flicker to life before she felt the boat tilt beneath Darcy's weight.

When Rae sat up, Darcy was close to the boat with his face in the water, swimming like there was something after him. She felt rain on her shoulders, rain that was growing heavy and beginning to unsettle the surface of the river. Rae bent and picked up the wooden oar. She gripped it tight in her hands and raised it above her head. It ain't the babies you have to worry about, she thought. She brought the oar down hard against the water. It made a loud slapping sound that surely woke anything sleeping beneath the surface. Darcy stopped swimming and raised his head. He was close enough that she could hear his heavy breathing.

"Don't place one finger on this boat," she said. "I'm gonna float this river until the storm breaks. I'm gonna wait for the stars. If you're still back there when I see them, maybe I'll let you on."

Rae turned from Darcy and lay back down. She felt the cool rain soaking her hair, felt her shirt heavy and wet against her swollen stomach. She closed her eyes and waited. She knew that if she dove in now, she could stay above water forever. That she could kick her legs and swing her arms and keep breathing in the night air for both of them.

The Drowning Game

It was a game we called The Drowning. Sarah-Beth brought one of her dad's dumbbells from the garage, and Loren, her twin sister, unscrewed the garden hose from the spigot. It was August, and the cicadas were singing a vicious song. Loren blew into the nozzle of the hose until all the water left inside was puddled on the concrete beside their pool.

"You first," Sarah-Beth said, handing me the dumbbell.

"I'm not going in," I said.

"You're the boy," Loren said. "That's how it works."

I put the garden hose in my mouth and practiced breathing. The metal tasted like pennies. The twins watched me, smiling. Sarah-Beth had cut her hair short that morning, and it was the first time I could remember them not looking like mirror images of one another.

I handed the other end of the hose to Loren.

"Hold it tight," I said, dipping a foot into the water.

Loren covered the mouth of the hose with the palm of her hand.

“Don’t,” I said. “Seriously.”

“I’m joking. Go on.”

As I stepped into the pool and let the dumbbell pull me quick to the bottom, the noise of summer hushed. I looked up and could see the twins on their knees leaning over the edge of the pool starring down at me, but the shape of them was strange, like a watercolor painting of two girls that had been left out in the rain. I closed my eyes and tried to steady my breathing, taking breaths through the hose. In the silence and the dark, it felt like I was nowhere at all.

When I came up, Loren took the dumbbell and hose from me and jumped in. Sarah-Beth was still knelt beside the pool.

“How long was I under?” I said.

“Two minutes,” she said, and before I pulled myself out of the pool, she leaned in and kissed me. A quick kiss that tasted like cinnamon gum.

“Don’t tell anyone,” she said, holding the palm of her hand against my cheek.

A month later she was dead, lying on the floor of her bathroom alone.

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Years later, I took my wife and two small children to a fast food seafood restaurant while driving through the Smoky Mountains on vacation. The woman taking orders had a faded tattoo peaking up from the collar of her shirt and *Loren* written in Sharpie across her nametag. I ordered two kids meals and a Sampler Platter for my wife and me. Loren rung up our orders and handed back the change. She was busy with the next customer when the manager called our number.
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My wife brought the tray to our table, and the kids begged to play in the ball pit. When they finished their meals, my wife filled a napkin with popcorn shrimp and followed them to the play area.

I was tracing my pinky finger through the maze printed on the back of the children's placemat when Loren sat down across from me.

"Hey," she said.

"Hey," I said.

"Didn't recognize me, huh?"

"I saw the name tag," I said.

She smiled, and I recognized something in her face. She'd aged, but it was still there.

"How you been?" I said.

Loren put her arms out as if to say, *Look around*.

My wife was watching us. I wondered if she had seen Loren's nametag, wondered if she remembered the stories I told her when we were dating.

"Nice family," Loren said.

I leaned forward and whispered, "They aren't mine."

Loren laughed and didn't seem to notice that her shift manager was eying her.

"Just renting?" she said.

I stood up when my wife came back inside.

"Eva," I said, "this is Loren."

Eva took Loren's hand.

"Oh wow," she said. "Y'all grew up together."

“Yeah,” Loren said. “He probably didn’t tell you he used to get beat up by a couple girls.”

“Thanks,” I said.

“Y’all should catch up,” my wife said. “I’ve got to get back to the kids.”

I waited until she was gone before asking Loren about her parents.

She picked the tail off a shrimp and laughed at how predictable it all happened, how it fell apart. They started fighting more, and began treating her as if she were somehow more breakable after Sarah-Beth died. They each wanted to keep her safe but didn’t agree on how to do it. When they split, she divided her time between two small apartments close enough to each other that she could walk from one to the other, but wasn’t allowed to.

“Moved out of the house at seventeen,” she said.

I told her about college, and how I met my wife. That the first kid had been a surprise, but now we were all in, parents twenty-four seven, three sixty-five.

I wrote my number on a napkin stained with tartar sauce, and Loren promised to call.

“I don’t stay put long,” she said, and we promised to have a drink and catch up if she was ever in our neck of the woods. We hugged before she made her way back to the register.

“Not what I expected,” my wife said as we buckled the kids into the back seat. “For all the stories you’ve told about them.”

“A lot’s changed,” I said.

After the kids fell asleep in the car, I told my wife everything I remembered about the day of Sarah-Beth’s visitation.

Loren sat with her mom on the couch as family and friends crouched in front of her and whispered things to make her feel better. Loren’s father had left and slammed the front door

when he saw that her hair had been cut short just like Sarah-Beth's. I was afraid to walk near the open casket because I knew that she and Loren would look the same. Or maybe different somehow, and I thought that might scare me more.

On a foldout table were pictures and flowers that all seemed too bright. In each photo the girls were together. As babies sharing a crib. Posing sweaty and grass stained, each with a foot on the same soccer ball, the only difference between them was the number on their jerseys. Halloween pictures arranged chronologically. In the latest one, they were standing back to back, conjoined twins connected be a single braid or hair they had weaved together and tied at the end with a black ribbon decorated with white silhouettes of spiders and bats.

I was in the background of that picture, blurry and holding a bent piece of cardboard I had cut into the shape of a butcher's knife.

The night that picture was taken, our parents let us stay up past bedtime and sort our candy. We sat in the floodlight concrete of their driveway trading sweets for chocolates and flicking what we didn't want into the fresh cut grass. The girls were back to back, still braided together.

"Unconjoin us, please," Sarah-Beth mumbled through a set of wax vampire teeth.

I pulled at the Halloween ribbon and the girls shook loose of each other. Before they noticed, I slipped the ribbon into my pocket and picked up my candy.

"I think my parents are waiting," I said, turning to run.

"Wait," Loren said, and when I stopped and looked back, both girls pelted me with candy corn.

I looked for myself in other pictures and twisted the buttons of my suit coat until the room began to empty. Out the window, I watched men loosen their ties as they walked to their cars. When Loren's mom stood from the couch and went to the bathroom, Loren left out the kitchen door.

I found her outside holding a dead leaf she'd painted red. A bottle of nail polish was turned on its side near Loren's feet. Red leaked into the green grass.

"What's that?" I said.

Loren tucked the leaf behind her ear and the wet polish streaked red through her fresh cut hair.

"Sarah-Beth used to dip dozens of them in Dad's paint cans," Loren said. "She'd let them dry and we'd drop them from the overpass when it snowed."

"It hasn't dried."

"I know."

I followed Loren to the garage. She took her father's dumbbell from beneath a rag pile and carried it to the pool. I didn't understand, but I picked up the garden hose and followed. It was late September but still warm enough that the pool was left uncovered.

Loren stood at the edge holding the dumbbell in one hand and the garden hose in the other. I held my end tight and when she looked at me I nodded. She turned toward the pool.

"Loren," I said.

But she didn't turn around, didn't bother to slip out of her funeral dress before stepping into the pool. She made a small splash and the rippled water distorted the color of her sinking to the bottom. The leaf she had painted red was floating on the surface, its color bleeding into the surrounding water.

In the house, we had left behind a few quiet people holding small paper plates and eating small bites of food. I could see them through the bay window, and I could see the rim of Sarah-Beth's casket.

Loren's breathing was quick and didn't sound six feet away. It sounded close enough for a secret. I put the end of the hose to my cheek and tried to feel if the air coming out was warm. Or maybe cold somehow. Aunts and uncles and friends of the girls' parents hovered over the casket. Some leaned in close and mouthed words I couldn't make out.

My father came to the casket but didn't look down at Sarah-Beth. He tapped the glass pane with his finger and motioned me back inside. I held up the garden hose as if he would understand. He motioned again and his tie fell loose from his sport coat. It hung above the open casket, and I wondered how close it was to Sarah-Beth's lips.

She had kissed me when Loren was at the bottom of the pool two days before school started that fall. Twenty-eight days before her funeral.

Loren tugged on the hose, and I braced myself against her weight. She pulled herself up the way we had learned to do, the dumbbell in one hand and the other quickly jerking its way up the hose. In the beginning, we would often miss the hose with our free hand and sink back to the bottom.

The first thing out of the water was the dumbbell. Loren set it on the lip of the pool and grabbed the hose with both hands. She was heavier with the top half of herself out of the water. She put both feet on the wall of the pool and pushed against it. I had to lean back to keep from falling in.

"Mom never wanted her to cut her hair," Loren said. "Thought we looked best when we looked the same."

I couldn't see Loren's eyes through her new cut bangs, but I figured she wasn't looking at me anyway, wasn't looking at anything at all. If I had let go of that hose, she wouldn't have even realized. She'd have sunk to the bottom, her words bubbling to the surface until there were no more left to bubble.

I held tight.

"But this morning," she said. "I woke up, and she was sitting at the foot of my bed. It was still dark out, and she was holding a pair of scissors. She kept saying that it needed to be perfect, that she had to make it right. And I didn't know what she was talking about until she led me into the bathroom and started cutting my hair."

I knew that in the window behind me there were grown up faces looking out at us, and I was glad that there was a pane of glass between us so they couldn't hear Loren speaking.

"I was afraid it would scare people," she said. "Seeing me come in looking just like her."

Loren brushed the hair from her face, and I could see that her eyes were red. From the chlorine or from crying I couldn't tell.

"When I came into the room, everything got quiet. Dad came up to Mom and said, It's not right. It's just not right. I think he was trying to whisper, but it came out loud. And that's when he left and slammed the front door."

When Loren climbed out of the pool, she pushed the dumbbell back into the water with her foot before walking back inside dripping wet.

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When we pulled into the motel parking lot, my wife and kids were all sleeping. I left the car running, afraid that if I shut off the engine the sudden silence would wake them. An RV was parked sideways taking up four spaces in front of us. Behind a curtained window, I saw a light come on and then the silhouette of a person moving. I imagined they were tiptoeing to keep whoever else was inside from stirring awake. The light went off.

My wife reached for my hand in her sleep, and I knew it was something frightening she was dreaming. She began having nightmares when she learned she was pregnant the first time, and they never went away.

My phone buzzed in my pocket. An area code I didn't recognize, but I knew who would be on the other end if I answered. I didn't. I let it vibrate in my hand until the light went dark and the car was still again. In the rearview mirror, I watched my children sleep. Their faces pressed against the sides of their car seats at angles I couldn't imagine would be comfortable. Arms hanging at their sides. I knew that soon I would have to shake my wife awake and unbuckle them from the backseat. Pick them up, still sleeping, and feel the full weight of their small bodies on my shoulder.

My phone buzzed again, but only once this time. A voicemail. I put it to my ear and clicked the volume low. Loren's voice sounded burdened, like the voice of someone knelt for confession.

She said the day of Sarah-Beth's viewing she had come inside soaking wet and locked herself in the bathroom until all the guests had left. She stripped off her clothes and left them in a damp pile on the tile floor. Twin bathrobes hung from the same hook on the door. Loren slipped into one that was stitched with her own initials. She put her ear to the door, and when she didn't hear voices, she opened it slowly. Sarah-Beth's casket had been shut, and in the

middle of the dining room her father was on his knees toweling up the wet spots she had tracked in from the pool. When he looked up at her, she stayed still.

"You're home," she said.

"Why is my dumbbell in the deep end?" he said.

Loren crossed the room and looked over her sister's casket. The weight was still at the bottom of the pool.

"We needed something heavy enough to keep ourselves sunk," she said.

Loren quit talking, and for a moment I thought the message was over. I looked in the mirror at my kids and squeezed my wife's hand.

And then Loren continued.

"That morning," she said. "The day Sarah-Beth died, she was mad at me for accidently spilling her nail polish in the sink. She came in when I was cleaning it up and told me that she had kissed you. She said, 'I was going to keep it a secret, but now you know.' She knew I liked you, told me about the kiss just to get even. So I turned the sink off, let the rest of that nail polish dry there and ran out into the woods behind our house. I wasn't with her when she collapsed, always thought that if I had been she could have gotten help sooner. Still be alive today."

The message ended and my wife stirred next to me.

"Who was that?" she said.

"Loren," I said.

"What'd she want?"

"She said we needed something heavy enough to keep ourselves sunk."

Nightmare Prayers

It's 2:00 a.m., and the old man is sleeping. He keeps me up most nights crying out his nightmare prayers to God. I guess something behind his eyelids looks too much like Hell. His words come out tangled up and twisted. I listen to him, lying in bed scared those dreams will be my dreams one day. The doctor said people in his condition often have trouble sleeping. I didn't tell the doctor that before Mom died, and before his condition, they slept in separate rooms so that she wouldn't wake up with bruises on her arms from where his fists swung at things that haunted his sleep.

She said it didn't happen much. But now, with half his mind gone and the other half going, seems like these fits come on most every night.

When he wakes, the old man says he doesn't remember anything about his dreams, but he's always drenched with sweat and sore from shaking. His bones must remember. You can see it in the way he limps around the place.

It's 2:00 a.m., and the neighbor girl's light comes on. I can see it out my window. Just for a second and then off again. I pray she's just getting up to use the bathroom. Sometimes her

man comes over late. Roughs her up. He keeps at her until he tires himself out and falls asleep on the couch. Sometimes the light is on all night. Sometimes he doesn't get tired.

The hands on the clock move slow in the shadows, but I don't blame them. They got nowhere to be and no one to help them get there. I try to close my eyes, but the old man is at it again, and these thin walls don't keep nothing secret.

When I was fourteen, he got drunk one night and told me about a girl who used to live in the woods. A girl whose eyelashes grew in long braids down to her waist. I'd heard about her my whole life, rumors told in whispers at school but never from the old man. He said she'd showed up the first day of school one year. He wanted to talk to her, wanted to walk with her, hand in hand, and fall in love. He saw beauty in something so strange. But she was gone after a week. Her daddy took her back into the woods because she couldn't see nothing and the other kids would pull at her eyes when the teacher wasn't watching. The old man never tried to stop them, and he always wondered what would have happened if he had. He heard that her father had taught her how to divine sacred ground, how to move slow through the lost parts of the woods and feel for God's breath. And once she got the hang of it, she charged folks a week's pay to show them where to bury their prayers. She'd even dig the hole for them. And sure enough the following spring they'd come back with prayers answered to the spot she'd marked and see that something beautiful had grown. But one year nothing bloomed, and people claimed the prayers they'd buried hadn't been answered.

The girl cut her braids one morning when snow was thick on the ground and shot herself through the chest. At her funeral, her eyelashes had already started to grow back out. The priest closed the lid of the casket and refused to open it, even for family, because he believed there was evil inside.

For all I know, the old man said, she's buried somewhere with her eyelashes still growing, maybe up toward the sky like trees. Maybe deeper into the earth like roots afraid of the sun.

The old man said her daddy was holding a locked box at her funeral and wouldn't speak to anyone. Must have had those braids locked up in there. Thrown the key somewhere it would never be found. A week later he was gone. Probably drove until the road ended into shoreline and threw that box in the ocean, prayed for it to sink.

Maybe that's what the old man sees when he sleeps. That wild girl cutting her braids and firing a pistol into her breast. A dust of blood being covered by a slow fall of snow.

I check the clock and count off three fingers, three hours until the sun lightens the timbered horizon. In school, they laughed at me for counting on my fingers when everyone else had calculators powered by sunlight. The old man said he'd never had need of a calculator, and that was that. Good enough for me. When I moved back last year, after Mom died, I noticed the old man counting on his fingers, always starting with the thumb, same as me. But now, sometimes it seems like the numbers get lost, and he has to shake out his hand and start from zero.

A few cars pass on the road outside my window. Some of them moving too fast, some moving too slow. All of them moving at a speed that seems dangerous this time of night. I hear a thud from the old man's wall. Sometimes he swings fists. Sometimes he kicks his bare feet. Always he fights back.

I worry I'll walk in there one morning and he'll be dead, lying on the floor. Knuckles bruised and head split open. People will come to his funeral and see what a mess he'd done to

himself and whisper to each other that I shouldn't have been the one caring for him, that I couldn't even keep him safe at night.

The girl I was with before I moved home said I was crazy. Said I should just put him into a home where people who knew what they were doing could look after him. I told her I wasn't going to lock my own father up in place he didn't know, surrounded by people drooling down their shirts and waiting to die. The next day, I quit my job at the rock quarry and didn't even tell her goodbye. Didn't know she was right for saying what she'd said.

Three more hours, I think, and open a window to let the cool night in. I like the damp on the pillow in the morning, the smell of a new day beginning again. It's only then I can sleep, with the scent of the old man's coffee coming from the kitchen and the birds calling out songs to wake dawn.

The clock is getting closer now. The neighbor girl's light turns on again and this time for good. Maybe she'll make a pot of coffee, an egg or two. If her man isn't passed out on the couch, she can sit and watch infomercials until it's time for work. His truck isn't out front so maybe he didn't show up. Maybe there isn't a bathroom sink full of bloody tissues. Sometimes she goes into work with a busted lip and eyes swollen and bruised. I imagine her telling well-worn lies about sleepwalking into a doorframe, her coworkers nodding and waiting until she's gone to exchange knowing glances. She'll hear them whispering, and she'll run to the bathroom to cry, the tears coming out red and trailing down her cheeks like braids.

The world is turning gray. The old man is in the bathroom running hot water over his stiff fingers. The neighbor girl starts her car and tries to back out of the driveway without bumping the mailbox. She gets too close and pulls forward, turns the wheel and tries again. The sun is coming. Dew is damp on the sheets. Soon I will be able to sleep.

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When I wake up the old man is gone. Fishing. A baitless hook and the child's pole I bought him at the flea market. There's a good size pond next to the house. Used to be you'd get a bite almost every cast. Not anymore. Now, I don't know what's beneath the surface.

The doctor said the old man would have good days and bad days. But good or bad he always leaves the house with that pole and comes back hours later having caught nothing. On the bad days, he has trouble remembering my name and wakes me up to tell me he's going to the big pond to meet Markum Lundgrave. Markum was a friend of his from growing up. He died almost fifteen years ago. On good days, he doesn't say anything to me at all, lets me sleep until the high sun comes through my window.

Today is a good day. I get up and pour what's left of the coffee into a SEE ROCK CITY coffee mug with the old man's name on it. Mom bought it for him years ago, and there are coffee rings inside that don't come out when it's washed.

The coffee is cold, but I've learned to drink it that way. The old man unplugs the coffee maker before he leaves, even on bad days.

I finish my coffee and go into his room. The bed is made, sheets tucked tight beneath the mattress. Even with his brain turning to shit, he still keeps clean and organized. I open the drawer and remove his shirts and underclothes. I try to keep them creased the way he folded them. His suitcase is in the closet. I start filling it with things he'll need. When it's full, I put a picture of him and Mom on top of his clothes and zip the suitcase shut. In the picture they are standing together, leaning against a railing, the ocean behind them hundreds of feet below. I
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wonder if he'll even remember taking that picture, if he'll open the suitcase and try in vain to remember the woman's name.

Before Mom died, I asked her about the story the old man told me when I was fourteen. She told me she'd heard of a girl living in the woods with braided eyes since she was a little girl. Everyone around here had their own story.

"And that's your daddy's," she said. "He had him a girlfriend in high school, thought he was going to marry. Her father was a preacher, and he'd take your daddy out with him to run his birddogs. Taught your daddy these prayers to say as they went along. 'Lord bless this earth beneath us lest we walk on unholy ground.' Stuff like that. Before they graduated, that girl killed herself. Your daddy never could figure out why. Blamed himself, I think, for not being able to keep her safe."

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I pull my pickup to the edge of the pond and cut the engine. The old man sees me and nods in my direction. I stay in the cab of the truck, watching him. The tip of his rod is motionless, the surface of the pond as still as a pane of glass. I sit and watch until the truck's too hot and I can't bear it any longer.

"Catching anything?" I say.

"Couple nibbles," he says. He is standing but motions for me to sit in a folding chair beside him.

I can't tell if he recognizes me or is just being friendly.

"Pulled a catfish the size of your thigh out of here couple years back," he says.
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I sit down. “Is that right?”

He turns to me. “You remember.”

“My eighteenth birthday,” I say. “You brought the grill out, and Mom cooked them up as quick as you could catch them.” I don’t tell him it was almost twenty years ago.

The old man reels in the line and spits on the naked hook and throws it back into the murky water. “You ran off soon as it got dark,” he says. “And that girl Loren, her uncle brought you home around daybreak with nothing but your britches on. He said he pulled you out of that house while his brother was looking for a rifle, didn’t have time to get your shirt.”

We both laugh, and I try to keep smiling, but it seems like the good days are harder than the bad ones. Days when his brain snaps back into shape for an hour or two and I think he’s back for good, then his eyes start moving quick, and he asks me my name again, tells me it’s been nice talking with me but his wife and son ought to be home any minute for supper, and that he’s sorry, but he’s not interested it whatever it is I had come to sell. That I should run along and good luck.

I think about that girl, with eyelashes in long braids. I wonder how she knew when she was standing on holy ground. What prayers could she help me say for the old man? And what would grow out of the ground if I said them right?

I tell the old man I need to take him somewhere, and he doesn’t say much. He reels the hook to the tip of the rod and folds up his chair. He puts both in the bed of the truck next to his suitcase. I see in his eyes that he recognizes it.

“Where you taking me?” he says.

I climb in the cab of the truck and crank the engine.

He gets in and pulls his door shut, but not all the way. The ajar symbol lights up on the dash.

"Door ain't all the way closed," I say.

"Where we going?"

I'm already sweating, so I turn the A/C on high. He cranks it off. I stare at the ajar light and feel his eyes on me.

"Dad, I just can't," I say. "I just don't think I can do it on my own anymore."

The old man turns away from me and pulls his door closed. He rolls down his window. I try to think of something else to say, but it's too hot in the car, and my mind's not working right. I put the car in gear and turn the radio to his favorite station. I don't know if he understands any of this. Neither of us says anything. The old man's eyes look angry. The muscles in his jaw are clenched.

After an hour, the old man begins humming along to a John Prine song. The boy in the song wants his daddy to take him back to the green river. The daddy says, son I'm sorry, but it's no longer there. The old man knows every word. I turn and look and see the anger has left his eyes. He is calm and relaxed, one hand hung out the open window, tapping along to the beat of the song.

"Next anniversary," he says, "I'm taking my wife down to Nashville to see John play the Opry. Already got the tickets, hidden in my sock drawer."

I pull over to the side of the road and cry into the steering wheel. I feel the old man's hand on my back, a hesitant pat, the way you would try to comfort someone crying next to you at the bus stop.

He says, “Everything is going to be okay, fella,” and gets out of the truck. I know that when I pull it together and tell him to hop back in he is going to ask me my name.

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I stand in the parking lot of the assisted living facility. The old man’s fishing pole and chair are still in the bed of my truck. His suitcase isn’t. I wonder if I should run back in and bring him his pole. But I already made a scene in there, cried like a boy watching his dog get put down. The old man just watched me wondering who the hell I was. The nurse said I could come back anytime, sign him out and take him fishing. When she said this, the old man smiled big and told her that a few days ago he’d reeled in a catfish as big around as her thigh.

On the way home, I drive through the Depot and get a bottle of Dickel. I take a pull while the cashier makes change. He gives me a cross look but doesn’t say anything. He reaches me my change, but I tell him to keep it. I see his arm still outstretched as I pull away.

When I get to the pond, there’s a good bit missing from the bottle. The sun has already set, but there is still a gloam of light hanging onto the horizon. A white pickup passes by slow and stops in front of the neighbor girl’s house. I watch it, red taillights lit up. A bullfrog splashes the water. I wonder if there’s any fish left beneath the surface, or if the old man pulled them all out years ago. The white pickup pulls off.

It’s almost full dark when I see the pickup come back again. This time it doesn’t stop. The neighbor girl’s man is inside. He’s got the dome light on. I can see him in there, one hand at the top of the steering wheel and a ball cap pulled low over his eyes. He guns the engine just to let her know he’s out there. He looks at me when he passes the pond and turns the dome light
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off. I figure he's going out to find him a barstool somewhere, figure this isn't the last time I'll see him tonight.

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It's close to midnight when I knock on the neighbor girl's door. I saw her leave an hour before, but even when you're sure no one's home you still knock. I turn the knob, but it's locked. Around the back of the house, I find an open window. I reach through and feel a sink faucet. There are no lights on inside. I set the bottle of Dickel on the counter and climb through the window. The handle of the faucet catches my foot, and I hear the water turn on as I fall to the floor. I stand and turn off the water.

In the living room, I find a worn out leather recliner and sit in the dark and wait. The house is as quiet as a church prayer. I think about the old man in some new bed, shouting Hell into the shadows. Sweat staining the mattress beneath his sheets. Bones fighting to hold together, as he shakes violently until morning. I wonder if the walls at that place are thin like ours, if those other old men and women have their hands over their ears, afraid of the voice they are hearing.

A few minutes go by or maybe a couple hours. Headlights brighten the room, casting shadows where before there was nothing but darkness. I reach for the bottle and feel that it's empty, lighter now and not capable of as much damage. It'll have to do. The old man once taught me where to hit a man to bring him to his knees. I figure if I close one eye I can see straight enough to know where to swing. The lights go off, and I'm standing in the dark. The floor is swaying to try and tip me over, but I widen my stance and stay upright. I hear a key
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slide in the lock and the bolt clicks into place. Keys placed on a wooden table. High heels kicked off onto the floor. The lights come on, and I've got one eye open and a bottle neck tight in my fist.

She sees me and just stands there trying to figure me out. I imagine she's been scared by men so many times she doesn't even scream anymore. I look to the door to see if he's coming through. She follows my gaze but doesn't seem to understand.

"Where he at?" I say.

"Who?" she says.

I wonder if I picked the wrong house.

"That man who comes here to see you," I say. "Drives a white pick up."

The girl lets out a sigh and hunkers her shoulders as if beneath some lonesome weight. "What did he do?" she says.

I point the bottle at her and have to shift my feet to stay standing. "He done that to you."

She covers the yellow-bruised skin around her eye and opens her mouth to say something, but I cut her off.

"And he done it before," I say. "And I reckon to keep him from doing it tonight."

She sets her purse on the floor and sits on the shoulder of the couch. "And who are you?" she asks. I can tell she's anxious, but she tries to act relaxed. She knows that seeing fear makes some men turn violent.

"My old man lives next door," I tell her. "I've been staying with him the last little bit. Keeping an eye on him."

"Thought you seemed familiar," she says. "Sit down and let me get you some coffee."

I try to form a sentence in my head, but I can't seem to find the right words. "Left my old man today," I say.

She looks at me funny. "Take your coffee black?" she says.

Coffee's a good idea. It'll sober me up a bit in case that son of a bitch shows up and tries to get at her. I fall back into the chair and mumble something that sounds like 'yes, please.'

I hear her take the phone off the hook in the kitchen, hear her pressing the number quick. I can't make out everything she is saying, but I get enough to know this was all a mistake.

"…man in my living room…please hurry…1217 Trussle road…"

She comes back in with two cups of coffee, but I'm already at the door. I know I should apologize, try and explain that I only came to help, that I made a mistake, that she's a good girl and deserves better than to have men showing up at her house when all she probably wants is to be left alone. I know this is what I should say, but instead I feel my stomach retch, and it's all I can do to make it out to the front lawn. When I'm done, I wipe my mouth on the sleeve of my shirt and hear the door lock behind me. I don't turn around. I pray she keeps it locked forever.

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I sit beside the pond and wait for morning. The cops came. I watched them from a bush. They stood in her yard and talked to her. She stood in the door and kept her arms crossed. She pointed to the old man's house. Later, when they were finished with her they crossed the street and knocked on the old man's door. No one there to answer. Just an empty house. They drove
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away. Now, all there is to do is wait for morning, when I can get some rest. I hear the birds already beginning to wake. The old man is probably already up, running warm water over his sore hands.

As the sun comes up, I lie back and close my eyes. I feel sleep hanging from my eyelids, like heavy braids. The ground beneath me is good ground. Sacred ground, I think. But I don't know if God is listening, and I don't know how to pray. So I just tell him what I'll do. I'll sleep the whiskey off and then drive out to see the old man. I'll take his rod with me and sign him out for a couple hours. I'll bring him to the pond and sit right here and watch him toss that spit hook into the water. Both of us hoping something hits it and pulls hard. The rod will bend and threaten to snap. And the old man will remember how it feels to bring something heavy to the surface.

VITA

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