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Wisteria and Other Stories

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Wisteria and Other Stories

A Thesis

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

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

by

Michael Clayton

B.A. Georgia State University, 1998

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Abstract

We are forever shaped by the worlds we live in. The following stories are musings on the importance of time and place and on the conflicts that arise for characters who are born into and who live with or rail against those forces. The stories are set in and around Laurel County, Georgia over a period of decades. They look at the people who are made there and the lessons they learn or fail to learn as they work to make their way.

Dead Roosters

We're holding our birds on the long line, eight feet apart in the center of the dirt circle. The other rooster is a big red. My Jimmy looks bad because he's taken a couple spurs, but his feathers are dirty white and they show every drop of blood. Makes it seem worse than it is. I'm not worried though because I know Jimmy is game. He's been hit with some shots before but he don't give up. Won't hack no matter what. My Jimmy's a fighter.

At the call, we let go. Dry dust scatters as the two roosters take off and meet hard in the middle of the chicken wire ring. They both leap straight up, flapping and cackling and kicking at the same time. More dust flies off of their feathers. They land. Peck. Slash with the bony spurs on the backs of their feet. They're a whirl of feathers as they go up again. I suck in my breath when Jimmy scores a hit. The red quits kicking in mid-air and flaps away. He lands on his feet and kind of stands there. For a second I think it's over. Jimmy'll move in to finish him. The crowd around the ring thinks so too because they go quiet for a second. But the red's not down. Then I hear Jimmy bubbling which means he got clipped and has a hole in his chest. I get a sick feeling in my stomach knowing that his lungs are filling with blood. Even so, he can still win this one if I get a chance to handle him. Game roosters don't usually like to go after a bird that ain't fighting, and both of these birds look like they want a break. If they'll stand off each other for just a minute, Barefoot McIntyre will call out "handle that" to signal a restart, and then I'll have the chance to work on Jimmy. But no matter how this goes now, Jimmy may be done for and on his way to the pile.

The red is still standing about where he landed. He don't look like he wants to move, but he sounds fine. Jimmy probably stuck him down low in the shanks, but with them dark feathers,

I can't tell where he's bleeding from. It ain't bad enough to end the fight though. Jimmy is walking a worrisome slow circle, kind of twitchy because he can feel he ain't breathing right.

Barefoot throws out his hands and tells me and the other guy to handle our chickens. The fella across the ring from me is one of the few people I don't recognize here today, but I can tell he don't really know what he's doing. He takes his red under his arm and starts rubbing along his back. That won't do nothing. I pick up Jimmy, hands on each side of him, pinning his wings safely down. I tuck his body under my left arm and turn his face up to me, putting his whole beak in my mouth. I give a good strong suck, pulling the blood and fluid from his lungs. I spit and do it again. Barefoot will give us thirty seconds to work, and if I can get his lungs clear, Jimmy'll have a few more minutes of fight. I fluff the feathers across Jimmy's butt and blow it to cool him down, and then Barefoot points at the center of the ring and says, "Long line." People around the ring pick up hollering, cheering for their bird, placing or changing bets. For the first time today, I notice how hot it is up under the tin roof of the shed where the ring is set up.

I put Jimmy back on the eight foot line, holding him out in front of me like I'm snapping a dirty white football. Jimmy's lungs are clear for the moment, and his body's twitching to get across the ring. It's crazy how these roosters are born hating each other like they do. Barefoot yells "Get 'em ready. Pit," and jumps back to the edge of the chicken wire circle as the two roosters clash again. The red ain't moving good. He don't even make it to the center before Jimmy's on him. They go up in the air, squawking and flapping and kicking. The red ain't got much leap to him though. They go again. And again. And then, from the middle of all them spinning feet and feathers, I see it. Jimmy catches the red in the neck with his heel spur. A little jet of blood sprays and pulses from the bird's neck, making a wiggly red line on the ground

every time its heart beats. The rooster still tries to come at Jimmy but veers off course, like he's drunk. He runs in a big circle and smacks right into the wire fence in a heap. Jimmy never stops. He pounces on the red, pecking and kicking till he figures out the bird ain't fighting back.

I grab Jimmy when Barefoot calls it. His feathers are bloody, but what worries me is the rattle that's back in his chest already. I give him another suck. While the crowd breaks up, everyone going to collect or pay or set up bets for the next fight, I stand there holding him and listening to him.

"That bird's done, Ethan," Barefoot says from behind me. His voice is kind of croaky from them gross ass Swisher Sweets he's always smoking. "He was game though. I thought that red had him. That's four or five wins for him, ain't it?"

"Five, yeah."

"Bird of mine wins three fights I put him up. Breed him. Keep that bloodline going." Barefoot wears dirty jeans and a dusty t-shirt that's stretched tight over his watermelon belly. A bush of grey hair squirts out from the v-neck. His bald head is brown and leathery and like always, he's barefoot. He's a lifelong poker player and bookie, and Barefoot loves chicken fights. *Shows*, he calls them. "You want me to wring him out for you?"

"Nah," I say, still holding Jimmy under my arm, petting him. "I may see if I can't fix him yet. Get him well enough to chase some tail around the coop."

"His lungs are busted. That's too good a bird to let him suffer. Give me him."

Jimmy is calm now. He's got no idea of what's going on. He just can't get his breath. I hate to do it, but I let go when Barefoot pulls him from me. He steps over the fence and heads towards the pile where they throw all the dead roosters. He doesn't swing Jimmy in front of me.

It makes me sick, but I still have four other roosters fighting today, and I'm handling three more besides. A handler is like a boxer's cut man. The job is to keep the chicken alive longer than the other guy's. Last chicken living and pecking wins. Barefoot's been teaching me, and next to him, I'm probably the best around. For only being twenty-seven years old, I've already built something of a reputation, if I do say. I'm guaranteed a hundred dollars to handle each bird. Double for a win. And if the betting is good, I stand to make a grand for each of my own chickens that win. I doubt I made that much off of Jimmy because everybody here's seen him fight before, but my other birds are new. I expect to do alright on them.

Since I have a while before I'm up again, I ease along the pasture fence, keeping an eye out for my boy, Blake, who's off playing somewhere. Bill Curvin's farm is one of the nicest spots I go for shows. Running water. Electricity. He's even sitting out in his straw hat grilling hot dogs and selling damn Slush Puppies. Normally, you don't have all that because you have to hold these things where people can't just wander by, but we don't worry too much at Mr. Curvin's. His land is at the end of Alabama County Road 55, and one of his son-in-laws is a deputy here in Cleburne County. Only way a body'll end up here is if he's looking for the place.

I light up a cigarette and shoot the shit with some people I ain't seen in a while. There's a good turnout today. At least thirty or forty people are watching and betting, and a bunch of them brought the families along. Others are just out for the day and company. There's blankets spread out for picnics and kids running about. And it's a hell of a view. We're on the top of a rise, and the pasture rolls down from where I'm standing. I can see no telling how many miles back towards Georgia from here. Except for the heat, it's a perfect day.

And then I see Melinda pulling up in the passenger side of an '88 Silverado, faded red with a Georgia Bulldog front plate. I know the truck. It belongs to that big fucking Houston Pharr she's been running with. My stomach squirms, nervous and excited at the same time. Melinda's my wife. She left home five months ago, and I've barely heard a word from her, much less seen her. Then, two weeks ago she called and said she wanted to get Blake for a few days. I told her if she wanted to see her son, all she had to do was come home, but she said she wasn't going to. I'll be damned if she's gonna show up and take him now.

I'm off to her side of the truck about fifty yards, watching her get out. She pulls that black hair of hers back in a ponytail. She's wearing a tank top and shorts. With them sunglasses on, she looks like a movie star. She's looking around and saying something to that Houston. They don't see me yet, so I skirt along the edge right quick and get among some of the people. I want to find Blake before she does.

I spot a buddy of mine named Doug Carlyle. I been knowing Doug since little league baseball. Him and his wife are a Harley couple through and through. Even in this heat, Doug's wearing his chaps and a confederate bandana. If a stranger saw him on the street, they might hesitate to ask directions, but he's a nice enough fella if you know him. "Hey Doug," I say. "You seen my young 'un around? He's wearing a Braves jersey."

He ain't seen him. His wife Becky comes up and hugs me but she ain't seen Blake either. I tell them Melinda's showed up and ask them to be on the lookout. They've heard the rumors by now, like most everybody. Becky hugs me again and gives me this pitiful look, says how sorry she is. Doug's pissed that Melinda's got the gall to show up here. He stares into the crowd like he's looking for someone's ass to kick, but I tell him to leave it alone.

I spot Barefoot standing under the shed near the ring, smoking one of his cigars in between fights. He says he's seen Blake playing over at the pile behind the barn. I guess he spots something in my face as I start to scoot away, and he asks what's wrong.

"Melinda just turned up. And she's with that fella I told you about."

Barefoot chews on the end of his cigar. He spits it out, puts a hand on my shoulder and leads me away from the other people standing around. "You alright?" he asks me.

"I guess. Hell. I don't know. This is first time I've seen her since I don't know when."

Barefoot leans in. "Now you know we can't be having no police out here. Ambulance neither. Can't put Bill on the spot like that."

"I know," I tell him. "I'd like to talk to her, but I ain't looking to start nothing. I don't want her taking the boy though. I just want to find him where I can keep an eye on him."

"Alright then. I'll spread the word. He won't leave with nobody but you." Barefoot lights another one of those stinking cigars and walks back towards the shed.

The dead roosters get piled on the compost heap around back of the big metal barn where Bill Curvin stores his hay and equipment. I find Blake and several other boys back there. A couple of them have cut the heads and feet off of two roosters and are pecking and stabbing at each other in their own little chicken fight. Others are stepping on the dead ones, making sounds with them by pushing the air out of the bird's lungs. Blake and another boy are taking turns throwing a pocketknife at a rooster they've stood up on the pile.

"Blake Windom!"

"Yes sir?" He's busy lining up a throw with the knife, pump faking before he lets go.

“You best look at me, son.” Blake and his friend stand stock still with their hands at their sides, looking back and forth, wondering if they’re in trouble. Blake is a wiry, dirty ten-year old. He’s a little skinny version of me. His brown hair has grown shaggy of late. He leans his head back to see out from under his bangs. “You staying out of everybody’s way?”

“Yeah, Daddy.”

“Well go fetch all your belongings. I want you to find Barefoot at the shed and hang around him till I come get you.”

“Alright, Daddy.” Blake gives a sharp nod with the words. Whenever he says something with feeling, Blake will bob or shake his head like he’s gonna give it some extra weight.

I notice he’s not wearing his Braves jersey. Instead, he’s got on an Auburn Tiger t-shirt that ain’t quite big enough for him. “Boy. Where’s your jersey?”

“I swapped it.” Blake gives another nod as he says it and leans back to see out from under his hair again.

“It was brand new.”

“I got this.” He pinches up a necklace and holds it for me to see. It’s a black cord with some silver beads around little white lettered tiles. It says “Vacation Bible School.”

“You shitting me?”

“And I got this.” Blake closes the pocketknife they’d been throwing and holds it out to me. I open all three blades to check it out. It’s a stockman’s knife about three inches long. “It’s a Case,” Blake says, nodding his head again.

“Who’d you swap with?”

“Marty Floyd.”

Fact is, it's a damn good knife. Cost a sight more than that jersey did. I close the blades again and hand it back. "If you swapped, it's done. I don't want to hear you whining later about another jersey." He gives me one more strong nod. "And I wouldn't be throwing it if I was you. You're gonna chip that handle. Now go get your stuff and do what I tell you." I start to leave and Blake asks me what's wrong. I think about lying to him. Or I could tell him I just said so. But he's looking up at me through that shaggy hair and I tell him the truth. "Your momma's here. I'm worried she might try to take you with her. And I don't want her to."

"I ain't going nowhere with her." Blake's voice surprises me. It bites. He swings his head to the left to shake the hair out of his eyes. I haven't seen that move before. He looks mad. "She run out on us," he says. I guess he's been listening to me. I walk back and squat in front of him, give him a good solid pat on the left shoulder that makes him take a step to regain his balance.

"She knows where she can find us, don't she?"

He says, "I reckon so," and punches me back in my left shoulder.

"Now go do like I say." Blake takes off away from me and splits the group of playing boys.

Back at the shed, I'm in a half circle with Barefoot, Doug, Bill Curvin and a few other fellas. Blake is within earshot, looking at the roosters in the line-up under the tin roof. We're aimed at Melinda across the yard. She's been walking around and hugging necks and laughing, dumbass Houston tagging along behind her. You'd think she was at a church social the way she's milling about and acting like nothing is out of whack. Doug's wife Becky thumps her cigarette right at Melinda's feet, but everybody else is cordial to pleasant with her. I can't really expect people to

be mad at her just because I am. Hell. I guess I'm still mad at her. Mainly, I just don't understand what's going on with her, what's got into her head. How can she stand there laughing with Judy Goode like I ain't over here looking at her? Like her kid ain't here?

"That shit ain't right," says Doug.

"It's my property," says Bill, wiping under his straw hat with his handkerchief. "I'll run 'em off if you want." At seventy, Bill Curvin has worked most every day of his life. He's thick shouldered, wearing a sweat-soaked short sleeve shirt that's unbuttoned half-way down his white belly. The hair on his chest is stuck wet. He spits a thick stream of tobacco.

"Nah, I appreciate it Mr. Curvin, but now that my boy's squared away, I reckon I ain't too worried about her staying. To be honest, I'm a touch curious as to what she's thinking showing up here."

"She didn't have to bring Houston with her," says Doug. "Y'all not even divorced. That shit ain't right."

Fact is, I'm not exactly sure how I feel about her showing up with him. I know I should be madder than hell. I did go off the rails when I first heard about it last month. I went over to Melinda's sister's house, where she was staying. Banged on the door and broke a window. Got the law called on me. I started drinking pretty heavy and kept cruising Houston's place, looking for her car. I hit Johnny's Bar every other night, hoping to run into them. I guess the good lord was looking out for me though because it turned out that I never met up with either one of them, which was probably for the best. I suppose I am still pissed about it. I mean, she's my wife, and I don't want to see her with somebody else. But more than that, even though I feel like I ought to be stomping a mud hole in somebody's ass, or at least wanting to, I just feel sick about

everything, and the fact is, more than anything else, I want her to come home. I don't say that to the fellas though.

Barefoot lights a cigar. "I know it ain't my business," he says, "but what was it sent her off? She just squirrely or y'all been fighting?"

"Ahh, you know how feisty she is. We've argued like cats and dogs, but I ain't never laid a hand on her. She's the one that likes to throw things. The night she left, she splashed me in the face with a glass of Coke."

"What's that now?" says Bill, spitting tobacco again.

Thinking back on it, I can't help but grin. "She was going at me about some shit. I don't know. Some normal business like helping with the cleaning or something. Next thing I knew, she was mad." I remember her standing in the kitchen across the bar from me, black hair pulled back. "I had some chips and a two liter on the counter and I'd just poured myself a big glass of Coke. I wanted to watch me some TV before bed, so I was letting her get whatever off her chest. Then all of a sudden she screamed like a crazy woman and ripped her damn ponytail holder out of her head, jerking hair and all with it. Then she splashed my Coke in my face, got it all in my eyes. By the time I wiped 'em clear, I look and she's pouring up another one to throw at me."

"That shit wouldn't fly in my house," Doug says. "I'd feed that bitch a mouthful of sheet rock."

I shake my head and smile. "Well. At the time, I couldn't make enough sense of it to be mad. She threw the two-liter against the wall and spun gravel out of the driveway. I just figured something had got under her skin that day, and I'd see her later. I didn't know she was flat leaving."

Across the way, I see Houston bring Melinda a Slush Puppy. I bet it's grape. That was always her favorite. She pokes around in it with her straw and says something to him.

Wondering what she said does rankle me a bit.

"That shit ain't right," Doug says again.

"It ain't," I say. "But there it is."

When it comes time, I gather Blake and we get my next chicken ready for his fight. He's a grey that Blake's been calling RayRay. He ain't much of a leaper, but he likes to sneak under the other bird and kick from the ground. He'd probably be good in a knife fight, but we ain't using them today.

Barefoot, God bless him. He catches me eyeing about for Melinda and figures I ain't in a state to do much of a job, so he offers to handle RayRay for me. I let him, and to be honest, it's a good thing because that other chicken is a tough old bird and the fight goes different than I would've expected.

They tangle about ten minutes and they're both bloody and neither one of them's jumping anymore. Hell, they're crawling more than walking, so Bill moves them to the short line, about two feet apart, and puts them on a count, which means the fight's basically done. It's two birds kind of flopping or laying near each other and hating one another. When one of them leans over and pecks the other, you start the count. You get to ten before the one pecks back, the fight's over.

RayRay gets a peck in, and then when Barefoot handles him, he does something I ain't never seen before. He takes old RayRay's head and closes it up under his armpit. It looks like he's trying to smother my bird to death, but it turns out he's just putting him to sleep. Then

when he sets RayRay on the short line he don't move none. The other rooster thinks he's dead and don't bother crawling over to him, so RayRay wins on the count because he's up a peck. Out of nowhere, the damn thing's over. There's folks calling us cheaters and wanting more fight, but it's just slap over.

After the fight, I'm sweating under the shed, bragging on Barefoot and collecting my winnings. I turn around, and there's Melinda. God damn, she looks good. Those tan shoulders. With that long black hair, she sports these crazy blue eyes. They killed me when I was fifteen and they still do. I catch myself staring so I look down at my hands, pretending to count my money. I feel everybody looking at us, watching to see what I'll do. I want to say something, but she don't look mad, and no matter what the crowd's expecting, I don't plan to start a fight if there don't have to be one. Looking at her right then, I doubt I can find enough mad or meanness to have a go at her anyway. I don't want to puss out either though. "Did you lay a bet?" I ask.

"Let's go talk." She isn't telling me, but she isn't begging either. It feels kind of nice somehow. Friendly.

"So, now you're ready to talk."

"Yeah," she says.

"Well. I can get with you in a little bit, but right now ain't—"

She puts a hand on my forearm and stops me. "Come on Ethan. You know you want to talk." When she speaks, I can see she has a red Kool-Aid tongue from something she's been drinking. It's kind of sexy.

I look around. Most people are pretending to ignore us, but Doug's staring a hole in Melinda. I go hand him my money and ask him to collect the rest for me. He wants me to tell

her to fuck off, but I say it'll be alright and I walk out towards where the cars are parked figuring she'll follow.

I stop when I'm out of earshot and scratch at a rust spot on the back of somebody's old Ford pick-up, waiting on Melinda to say something, but she don't offer. She just stands there right in the open looking at me while I stare at my own dirty fingernail picking at a speck of paint. "What is it you want?" I finally ask her. I just can't bring myself to cuss her, but I can't be sweet either.

"I want to see Blake. Spend a couple days with him."

"And you bring another man here? You think that's gonna help?"

"I told him not to come, but . . . I thought coming here would be easier than going to the house, and he didn't want me to come without him. I'm sorry about that Ethan. I am. I just want to see Blake. Please."

"Then come home with us." It comes out quicker than I want it to.

"I don't live there anymore. I'm gone." Her voice still throws me off. She's not fighting. Or apologizing. But she ain't cold neither.

"I know you're gone. For five months you've been gone. And now all of a sudden, you want to come see Blake when it suits you?"

She takes a seat on the open tailgate. I don't understand how she can look so easy.

"Hell, Ethan. I know I haven't handled it right. I just . . . I don't how to explain to you."

"Why don't you give it a shot." I try to say it hard, but I don't look up from the speck of paint.

"Well. I just . . . I had to figure out who I am."

"Figure out who you are? What the hell is that supposed to mean?"

“Ethan, we been together since we were fifteen years old.”

“I know exactly how long we’ve been together. Twelve years. You’re throwing away twelve years.”

“I’m not talking about the twelve years so much as the fact that we were fifteen. Think about it. I was just a little girl then. A sophomore in high school. And you were still a boy.” Now I’m starting to feel my blood rise because I ain’t seeing her point. I start to say something, but she holds up her hand and goes on. “You haven’t done anything wrong. But I’m not sure I have either.”

“You left home.”

“I had to. I couldn’t stand it Ethan. I’m not that little girl anymore.”

“Too fucking bad.” I’m getting loud now and wanting to get louder still. “You had a kid. You got married. You can’t just walk away from all that. Till death do we fucking part. How about that?”

“I didn’t want none of that.”

“Have you lost your fucking mind? Do you hear what you’re saying about your own son?” I slam my hand on the side of the truck.

“It don’t mean I love Blake any less now, but it’s the honest truth. I didn’t want to get pregnant. I’m not even sure I wanted to get married, but I was a girl and I thought that’s what we were supposed to do, so I went along, and I guess maybe that part is my fault. Maybe that makes all this my fault, but . . . I was starting to hate myself, Ethan. And you. I was hating my whole life. I ain’t gonna spend my days wanting to pull my hair out.”

I’m around at the tailgate now, standing over her, boiling, while she just looks up at me. I don’t mean to get mad, but what she’s saying don’t make sense to me. And she ain’t

apologizing. She ain't even arguing. And it sure as hell don't feel like she's coming home. I know Doug and Barefoot and other people are taking notice and coming over, but I don't give a shit. "You think I'm gonna let you take our kid? That you didn't even want? While you go off with Houston fucking Pharr? You really have lost your god damned mind."

The devil himself shows up then. Big ass Houston walks up asking if everything is under control. I step back from the truck to give myself room and tell him, "You don't want to be here right now."

Then I hear Barefoot over my shoulder. "Nah, fella. You really don't." I look and Doug's there with him, and he's got a knife out working on a fingernail. I can tell from Houston's face that he sees the knife too.

Melinda stands up between me and Houston. She puts a hand on my chest, kind of gentle, but I can hear some steel in her voice. "Fighting Houston won't change anything. This ain't about him and you know it. Just let me have Blake for a couple days and we'll go. Please." Melinda notices something and looks down past me, and then I see the first sign of hurt in her eyes.

Blake is standing behind me, just inside the other men. His face looks more angry than a ten-year-old ought to know, and his arms are bowed back. He's holding his open pocketknife in his right hand.

Melinda full on cries when she sees him looking like that. She takes a step towards him, but Blake runs back through the crowd and it closes up behind him. She stands there crying into her hands with Houston looking useless behind her. I look back to the spot of ground where Blake was just standing while Melinda walks off with Houston. When they get in his truck and leave, I'm still staring at the dirt, wondering what in the hell has just happened. By the time they

pull out and head down the road, the spectators are dispersing and I've bit my lip bloody. All my
mad is done gone, and I'm trying not to cry myself.

Oreos

Cindy watches the top counter weight on the scale as Barbara slides it towards the right. The numbers climb beneath the pointer at the center of the lead weight. Before she expects it to, the scale's balance beam tips. Cindy inhales sharply and covers her mouth. Barbara taps the smaller of the two weights back to the left until the metal frame across the top of the scale floats, easing left then right, but floating.

“Is that right?” Cindy asks.

“Yep. Look at it. 396 pounds.”

Doubtful, Cindy looks down at her feet to make sure they're on the scale. They're swollen and red with the puffy little toes creeping over the edges of the platform, but there they are. There it is. 396 pounds. Barbara leans into Cindy's shoulder and reaches across her back in an approximation of a hug. Before she steps off, Cindy uses her phone to take a picture of the scale's beam, larger bottom weight centered on 350, the arrow on the smaller top weight pointing to 46.

Cindy cries while other women in the clinic gather and congratulate her. Barbara cries too and gives Cindy a pin marking her first fifty pounds lost, and she takes a picture of Cindy for her book. For now, it will be the “after” picture, but eventually it will become one in a series of “progress” pictures. Cindy is afraid she blinked so she asks for a second picture. She pushes her hair back over her ears, stands straight and smiles. She's glad she wore her yellow dress.

Walking across the parking lot to her minivan, Cindy barely notices the usual pain in her left knee. Lately, she parks at the far end of the parking lot to force herself into that tiny bit of extra exercise. She sways from left to right, swinging one big thigh around the other to make

each heavy step. Her Crocs scrub the pavement, so she puts in the effort to make sure she lifts her feet completely. She doesn't want to cheat.

At the minivan, Cindy places a foot inside and a hand on each edge of the open doorframe. With a heave and a grunt, she pulls herself into the seat. She uses momentum to swing her right arm over her left shoulder to grab the seat belt and uses the belt extender she bought to click it in place.

As she drives away from the clinic, Cindy is already thinking about the present she's going to buy herself. She has a chart at home that grants one dietary lapse every twenty-five pounds. It isn't a part of the program. In fact, Barbara would be mortified if she knew about it, but Cindy decided to do it anyway. She was afraid that if she didn't let herself celebrate occasionally, she'd fall off the wagon completely. At twenty-five pounds, she had allowed herself one large Snickers bar. And now, after losing fifty pounds, she could have one pack of Oreo Cookies. She promised she would make the pack last for a full week.

When she gets to the store, she parks at the farthest end of the parking lot again. It's a hot day, and Cindy uses the washcloth she keeps in her purse to wipe the sweat from her temples and chin. By the time she makes it through the doors, her knee is hurting enough to notice. She doesn't like to use the electric carts to move around the store, but today she's celebrating. She puts one foot in position, takes the handlebar, and pulls herself up while lurching onto the seat. She has to do it in one quick motion or, as she's learned, she could pull the cart over on top of her. Seated, the front of her yellow dress is pressing against the handlebars.

Cindy smiles at the elderly greeter and drives around the store, patting her right foot to a tune she's making up. She could actually use some detergent and a few other groceries, but that's not what she has on her mind. She wants her present first. Oreos. Not Double Stuff but

Oreos. Not the cheap fake brand that she used to call Pooreos. Oreos. And milk. She'd settle for skim milk, but you can't have Oreos without milk.

She's patting the handlebars by the time she turns into the chips and snacks aisle. She passes the Doritos and the knock off two-dollar corn chips beside them. She loves corn chips and Frito-Lay jalapeno cheese dip. Or bean dip. The bean dip with a little Trappey's Louisiana Hot Sauce. But she's not here for those.

The Oreos are on the top shelf. She parks as close as she can to the shelves and reaches for them. She leans a bit further because she's sure she can snag them without tipping over. They're going to be so good, she thinks. She loves to eat the first few completely whole. Two bites per cookie. Two drinks of milk. Then she'll twist a few apart, raking the cream with her top teeth and stacking the chocolate halves into a crunchy sweet sandwich. Stretching that extra smidge, she takes the ruffled edge of the plastic between her fingers and pulls. The cookies flip over the lip of the shelf and fall towards her. She slaps both flabby arms together and catches the Oreos in an awkward hug. Then she hears a click.

She turns to her right, and two teenage boys are at the end of the aisle. One of them is pointing his cell phone at her, taking a picture. She freezes in place, staring at the boys, pack of Oreos still held firmly against her chest, just under her chin. The boy without the phone blows out a spitting laugh and pushes the other backwards out of the aisle. The one with the phone says "holy shit."

Cindy sits in the aisle by herself staring, first at the spot where the boys were standing and then at the fat arms holding a pack of cookies tight against her squishy, yellow clad body.

Wisteria

Madge Millerfield stood on her side porch and gave a small clap when she saw the tiny purple clamshell buds along the vines climbing the white posts and rails on either side of the steps. The wisteria would be in full bloom in a few days. The timing would be perfect. Her son was finishing the lawn, and with the wisteria, everything would be beautiful next week when her older brother came to visit from California.

Madge was planning a special visit for Teddy. He would arrive on Monday morning. She had arranged for the preacher to pick him up. She wanted to do it, but driving in Atlanta made her nervous. Besides, she intended to have a warm, home-cooked meal ready when Ted walked in the door. Wednesday, she was having her two children over to eat with them. It would be a nice, quiet family dinner. Teddy hadn't seen her grandchildren in almost five years, when they were barely more than infants. And Friday was the shindig. She'd reserved the fellowship hall at her church and, with the help of a couple nearby cousins, she'd whipped up an impromptu family reunion so Teddy could see everyone and vice versa. It was going to be a hoot.

She heard her son, Robert, milling around in the kitchen and went to check on him. He was bent over looking into the refrigerator, shirtless, grass sticking to his sweaty body.

"What can I get you?" Madge asked.

"Nothing. Just looking for something to drink."

"Well, here. Let me make you some tea."

“Nah, I’ll just drink some water.” Robert filled a glass from the tap and guzzled. Madge eased him aside to fill a saucepan with water and dropped in two teabags as she put it on the stove. “Don’t make that for me,” Robert said.

“It’ll just take a few minutes. I needed to make some anyway.”

“You hardly even drink tea.”

“Sometimes I do. And I like to have it in case someone else wants a glass.”

“Alright, but it’s just gonna sit there in the fridge until—”

“Robert,” Madge cut in, pointing at him. “The hair on your chest is turning gray.”

“What?”

“Your hair. It’s turning gray.”

“Mother, I’m forty. It’s been gray.”

“Has it really? Hm. I simply have never noticed.”

While Robert rolled his eyes and gulped another drink of water, Madge took her glass tea pitcher from the cabinet and scooped in two cups of sugar. She almost mentioned the chair then. She certainly needed to bring it up before Robert left, but she was worried he might not react well. He didn’t particularly like his uncle, which was a shame. They were both wonderful men.

Later, Madge looked on as Robert wrestled his push mower into the back of his pick-up. She wanted to help him with it, but she seemed to get in the way when she tried. She did lift the plastic gas can with both hands and set it in the bed. Robert put his t-shirt back on and said his see-you-laters. He cranked the engine, and moved to pull the door shut when Madge put her hand on the open window and said, “Oh, by the way. You remember that your uncle’s coming in next week?”

“Yes,” he said with a growl. “I remember.”

“Do you think we could look at the downstairs toilet before he gets here? It’s flushing slow again.”

“Yeah, we can pour some more Drano. I’ll pick some up and come by after work tomorrow or Friday.”

“Thanks. Oh. One more thing. I almost forgot. Ted wanted me to mention your grandma’s chair to you. Before he leaves, he’d like to pick that up so he can ship it home with him.”

Robert turned the engine off. The tell-tale seagull wrinkles that Madge hated dug in his forehead. She’d been afraid of that. “Do what?” he said. “What chair?”

“Oh, you know. That old parlor chair that sat beside the piano.” It was a narrow, Victorian style chair, with a worn, tufted green velvet back and thin, curving legs and arms. “I don’t know why he wants it—you do have it don’t you?”

“Yeah, it sits in my living room. What makes Ted think it’s his to claim?”

“Well,” Madge forced a polite smile. “Your grandma did leave it to him in the will.”

“That was nine years ago. She gave it to Ted but said we could have it if he didn’t want it. Nine years qualifies as he-didn’t-want-it.”

“It’s not worth anything and it’s dreadful to sit in,” Madge said.

“That ain’t the point. Of all the self-absorbed—”

“Well.”

“Well, nothing. Here comes old uncle Ted again from his throne out west, expecting everybody to snap-to just because he decides it’s time to visit. I’m sick of him popping in every few years telling everybody what’s what.”

“Oh, he’s not like that.”

“This whole time, he hasn’t mentioned that chair. And he don’t even consider that we’ve been living with it and hanging our coats on it or putting our shoes under it or whatever we’ve been doing with it for the last nine years. But now he wants it, so I’m just supposed to smile and hand it over.”

“Now you know you’re exaggerating,” Madge said, looking at her polished nails.

“And why’s he bothering you with it? If Ted knows I have it, why didn’t he call me himself?”

“Well,” Madge said. “I’m sure he’s picked up on the fact that he’s not your favorite person. I guess he wanted to take the high road and avoid any trouble.”

“So he pushed it off on you. On top of everything else you’re doing for him. I swear. That guy is a real piece of work.”

“Now, son. I don’t want you creating any turmoil over this little thing. You know I can’t stand that.”

“Yeah, I know, and that’s why he’s been getting away with being a asshole for so many years.”

“Robert,” she said, drawing his name out. “Are you not going to let him have that chair?”

“Don’t try the guilt on me.” He shut his truck door again. “I’ll tell you what. You’ve got enough worry on your plate. Why don’t you let Teddy come talk to me about it? We’re a couple of grown men. We’ll figure it out.”

“Okayyyyyy.” Madge managed a smile and a wave as Robert turned around and left. She stood there for another full minute, picking at her lip, unsure what to do next.

She went inside and put on a pot of decaffeinated coffee. While it was brewing, she washed Robert's glass and the plate she'd used for lunch. She swept the few bits of grass he'd tracked into the kitchen and wiped the already clean counter again. She didn't want Robert to be upset with her about this chair business, but she didn't want to disappoint Teddy either. She hated that they didn't get along, but Teddy only visited every few years, so she didn't see the harm in following his wishes while he was here. Her own mother taught her that that's what you do for company. If Ted came and had a terrible time or if something went wrong, he might come visit even less than he did. Then where would she be? Ted was Madge's older brother. With her own mother and daddy gone and her husband long dead, Ted was the only immediate family she had left. So sure. She wanted to make things go smoothly for Teddy while he was here. Robert just didn't understand that because he was looking out for her. He was a good son, but she didn't need that yet. She was still his mother. She was the only mother left in her family, and she was still able to look out for her and hers, just like she'd always done.

Her husband had died when Robert was five and Julie was three. It was drink that got him. Cirrhosis. But Madge made sure that her children never saw their daddy laid up in the hospital with his yellow skin and eyes, belly all bloated like an overripe watermelon. With her children thinking that their daddy was off working in Texas for Southwire, that he'd died helping to put out a fire in the plant, his passing and the years that followed were a little easier. They eventually found out the truth, and both Robert and Julie had been hurt with her. That was very unpleasant, especially when they wouldn't talk to her for a while. But their anger did pass, and even though she felt guilty sometimes, Madge still believed she'd been right in smoothing out the bumps when they were babies, and she remained thankful that neither of them seemed to remember what their daddy had really been like during their brief time with him.

After his passing, Madge continued to handle things for them as much as she could, trying to make sure her children never suffered for not having their daddy around. She sold the place out in the country and bought one of the old houses in town to make sure there would be other children close by. She kept them in church and made sure birthdays and Christmas mornings were always special.

But this trip was special for Teddy too. He hadn't been in so long. Madge didn't want Ted thinking there were any problems with her, that she wasn't doing well. She didn't want him worrying about her or her children any more than he likely did already. He had his own family to worry about out west, and she knew he didn't need the added stress. No. Madge couldn't have that. She'd simply have to smooth this over.

The next day was Thursday. For over twenty years, Madge had worked at the Laurel City Hall in the Clerk's Office, but she'd taken off the rest of this week and all of the next. Since she had a little time that morning, she decided to stock up on groceries for the coming week. She took a special, half-hour trip to the nearest Publix so she could pick up some better coffee than her local Piggly Wiggly carried. Because of her blood pressure, Madge only drank decaffeinated Folgers, but Teddy always said he preferred "a little gas in his tank." She remembered him mentioning that he was a fan of Starbucks, so she chose their nice, dark French roast. She thought about getting whole beans because that's what Teddy used at home, but she didn't have a grinder. What about looking for one at Walmart? It was a possibility, but she thought she should go ahead and get the ground coffee just in case she didn't have time. She could always come back for the beans. She filled her cart and was in the checkout line when she decided to go back for some fresh strawberries. Teddy loved strawberries.

Madge spent the rest of the afternoon washing bed linens and making sure her house was clean and dusted. It was a lot of work, but she loved her house. It was a two-story Victorian, decorated on the outside with beautiful scrolling gingerbread at the eaves and corners. An attached two-car shed had the cutest little cupola and weathervane on top. Inside, there were hardwood floors, high ceilings, tall windows and transoms over the doors. When she bought it, no one wanted old houses, so she lucked into what she thought was a good deal. With the money from the old place and sixteen acres, she bought this house on a half acre. She also had white siding put over the flaking paint, and she installed new appliances in the kitchen. It could be a pain in the neck, and it was expensive to heat in the winter, but the house was so pretty.

On and off throughout the day, it occurred to her that she hadn't figured out how to handle the chair business. She tried to focus on cleaning mildew from the shower curtain or folding clothes, but every so often she would feel somebody scrambling eggs in her stomach. What to do? What to do? Before she knew it, she had folded two blouses while they were still inside out. Several times, she found herself teary-eyed and nervous. But later, while she was having her bath, an idea occurred to her that gave her some hope for a fix.

On Friday morning, Madge dressed and drove to Robert's house in Tyson, the next town over. She knew Robert would be at work, but his wife Amy would be there because she worked out of her home, managing web sites for local businesses and such. Madge thought she might chat with Amy a bit and see if she could go ahead and pick up that chair. That would ease matters for everyone. She knew Amy thought the world of her and wouldn't mind.

Amy was at her computer when Madge arrived but said she was due for a break, so she put on a pot of decaf. Amy was a very pretty, sweet little thing with blue eyes and short blond hair. Madge thought that, quite honestly, Amy kept her hair a tad too short, almost boyish even,

but Robert often said how cute it looked. The two women sat at the kitchen table and chatted over the current this-and-thats. Amy was looking thin, Madge told her. The kids were doing well. Looking forward to spring break, Amy said. Poor old doctor Thomas had cancer, which was a real shame. A wonderful man, Madge said, shaking her head. He stitched Robert's tongue when he bit it so terribly wrecking that silly skateboard. Did he ever tell you about that?

Before leaving, Madge washed and dried their coffee cups. She gave a cheery good-bye and already had the back door open when she stopped. "Oh, by the way. While I'm here. I don't guess Robert mentioned anything about mother's chair, did he? That old faded green thing?"

Amy was putting the coffee cups away, but she hesitated. "Yeah . . . we talked a little bit."

"Y'all have it in the living room, don't you?"

"Uh-huh. We do." Amy closed the cabinet and leaned back on the counter.

"Well, since Teddy's wanting to get that, you think I could just go ahead and take it with me? I'm sure it'll fit if I fold the seats down. I mean, I know Robert would just bring it over in his truck, but since I'm here I might as well save him the trouble." She let the door close and took a few casual steps back through the kitchen.

"You know Madge. I, um . . ." Amy clasped her hands under her chin and her face shrank into an awkward grimace. "I don't think I should let you take that without Robert here."

"You don't?" Madge's mouth worked to maintain its smile.

"I really don't think I'm comfortable doing that. You know? Robert said he wants to talk to Ted about it first."

“I just—” It wasn’t going to work. She felt a tiny knot start to form in her chin. She didn’t want to cry. “Can I please just . . .” Her chin dimpled and quivered and her eyes started to fill, but still, she tried to smile.

“I’m so sorry Madge, but I don’t think so,” Amy said.

Madge quickly wiped her eyes. She didn’t have control of her lower lip, and her voice was tight. “I have been so worried about this.”

“I know you have, and I really am sorry.” Beads started to brim in Amy’s eyes. She touched the corners of each with a napkin.

“Why is Robert doing this?” Madge asked, her voice strained.

“Madge, he’s just . . . you need to talk to him.”

“Won’t you talk to him for me?” Madge asked her, a touch of desperation in her voice and face. “Couldn’t you ask him to let it go?”

“I can’t do that.”

Madge wasn’t exactly sure what she was feeling but she knew she had no control over it. Her heart was thumping. Her throat was aching. She looked over her shoulder into the living room to hide her face from Amy. Across the top of the sofa, she could just see the thin green back of the chair sitting against the far wall near the front door. It was right there. She was so close to putting everything right, but it wasn’t going to work. She put her hands to her temples and stifled a sob. “This is going to ruin the whole week. It is. It’ll ruin the week.”

“It won’t.” Amy took a step towards her, trying to be reassuring, but Madge moved away and took a paper towel from the roll.

“It will,” Madge said. Did she yell that? She didn’t mean to.

“Madge, I know Robert doesn’t want you worrying about this. Why don’t I call him and see if he can come home early.”

“No.” Madge pressed the heels of her hands into her eyes and held them there. “He already left early to cut my grass this week. I’ll . . . I’ll just go.” She sniffed and smiled at Amy.

“I don’t want you to leave like this.”

“No, I’m sorry.” She smiled again, her cheeks still glistening. “I’m sorry, honey. I shouldn’t have . . . I’m gonna go.” She patted Amy on the arm. Amy touched her hand, and Madge left. Looking in her rearview mirror, she cleaned the mascara smears from her face and then drove home.

After lunch, Madge put her butter out to soften and measured the ingredients for her German chocolate cake that Teddy loved so much. On second thought, though, she decided to wait until tomorrow to bake the cake. She wanted it to be as fresh as possible. While she was sealing each of her measured ingredients in separate Tupperware bowls, she hoped that Robert wouldn’t be mad at her for going to his house like she did, for getting upset with Amy. But she didn’t see why Robert had to be difficult about this. Why couldn’t he just let Teddy take the chair without making a fuss? It seemed like whenever there was a fuss, it was usually Robert creating it. She thought and thought about it through the day, and she decided that she was just going to have to put her foot down. She would simply have to.

Later, she was upstairs when she heard Robert’s truck in her driveway. Peeking from the window, she saw him walking up the sidewalk with a small grocery bag. Her stomach felt a bit swirly again, but she needed to hash this out with him. She checked her face in the mirror and went downstairs.

When she opened the front door, Robert held the grocery bag up. “I brought you some Drano. For the toilet?”

“Oh. Thank you.” She felt an awkward pause. “Should I just . . . pour it in?”

“Yeah, or I can do it. Probably needs to sit for a half hour or so.”

“Okay,” Madge said, stepping back from the entrance. She followed Robert to the bathroom and leaned against the door, listening to the glugs and splashes while he poured. She was antsy, uncertain exactly what she should say to start the conversation, but she was determined.

As he shook the last drips from the bottle, Robert said, “So, were you just going to take that chair today? Really?”

Madge’s head tilted and her hand went to her chest involuntarily. “Is that what Amy said?”

“Isn’t that what it was?” he asked. “She told me you wanted to take the chair and you got really upset when she wouldn’t let you.”

“Well.” Madge turned and went to the kitchen for a glass of water. Robert followed but said nothing while she took a small sip. “I don’t know about that. I suppose I looked a little upset.”

“She said you were crying.”

“Well, I saw her start to cry and when I see someone cry, then I do too. I can’t help it.”

“Mother. You’re worrying too much about this.” Robert was leaning on the counter. He took a toothpick from the dispenser and used it to clean a nail.

“Of course I worry.”

“Enough to come take that chair behind my back? That doesn’t seem a bit . . . extreme?”

He looked up from his nail with a faint grin.

“I don’t know what you expect.” Madge set her glass into the sink harder than she intended. “My own son being this stubborn. Just so you can start an argument?”

“I don’t want to start an argument.”

“Then let Ted have the chair. Just let him have it. Please.” Madge could feel her heartbeat again.

“I may let him take it. We’ll see about that. But he’s gonna come ask me for it. And see it in my house and explain to me why he thinks it’s his chair.”

“Why?” Madge’s throat was getting tight again. She wasn’t sure if Robert could hear it in her voice yet, but she could tell it was happening.

“Because I’m a grown man. I don’t have to overlook his self-centered behavior. All our lives, he’s been popping in when it suits him and acting like he’s head of the whole family, like we need him to come save us. Every visit, he drops his little passive-aggressive comments about how we’re living or he gives some patronizing lecture about how we ought to be living. Then he’s back off to California. He don’t seem to realize that I’ve been living every day whether he’s here to see it or not.”

“All he’s ever tried to do is help.”

“No. Is it helpful when he makes some snide comment about what you let us watch on television growing up? Or about which church we should be going to?”

“You just don’t understand Teddy’s ways.”

“Or how about when Grandma was sick? While you were here every day taking care of her, Teddy would pop in just long enough to act like he was helping. And while he was here, of

course, he had a bit of advice as to how you could be doing a better job. Or how me and Julie could be doing more to help you. But then, rather than stay and deal with Grandma, woosh. He's off again until it's time for him to give the eulogy at the funeral."

"You're just mad at him about all this past, childish nonsense so, what? You want to make him beg?" Madge picked up her glass again and filled it, turning the tap on full and splashing the water.

"Childish? Like trying to sneak around and take that chair?"

"Don't you accuse me. I'm still your mother." Now she was yelling. "I was simply trying to stop you from creating turmoil . . ." Her bottom lip quivered on its own, and she could feel her chin dimple again. "—in my family."

"Listen to how melodramatic you're being."

"What a wonderful thing to say to your mother." She felt the first unchecked tears spilling down her face.

"I wish you'd just calm down, Mother. This is a small deal between me and Ted. It's not even your problem."

"Of course it is. Of course it is." The words came out in a squeaky shout as Madge pushed them from her aching throat. "You're trying to ruin this whole week. The whole trip will be ruined."

"It will not. You're exaggerating."

"It will. It'll be there in the room with us every second Teddy's here. It will. We'll feel it. And it'll be your fault."

Robert pushed off from the counter, brow furrowed. "Why is it my fault? Why isn't it Teddy's fault? He's the one demanding the chair."

“You’re the one who won’t give it to him.” Madge shook a dish towel at him.

“Why don’t you get on my side for once?”

“What?” Madge stiffened and brought the dishtowel to her chest.

“Sometimes, when I buck it’s because I’m sticking up for myself or you or Amy or Julie, but every time, you act like I’m—”

“I am *always* on your side. How dare you say that. How dare you.”

“Look, Mother—”

“I’d like you to—” A sob interrupted her. “. . . leave, please.”

“Mother, you’re acting like . . . this all seems a bit irrational to me. I mean, you can’t even talk. Do you see how upset you are? Over this?”

Madge put the dishtowel to her face. She tried to control her breathing enough to speak again. “I asked you . . . to please leave.” She could feel Robert staring at her.

“Alright,” he finally said. “Geez. Alright. I’ll go. I’ll talk to you later.” Her face still covered, she listened as he opened and closed the door. She didn’t move until she heard his truck backing out of the driveway.

Madge spent the next hour going back through the argument again and again. How had it happened like that? She couldn’t stop her chin from quivering, and she couldn’t keep her eyes dry. Twice she picked up the phone, but she never dialed. Finally, Madge took a whole Ambien instead of the half she usually took when she got upset, and she went to sleep.

Saturday, Madge didn’t leave the bed until eleven. By twelve, her eyes were still puffy and she was concerned that, if she went out, people would think she’d been crying. She did have a few errands to run, but she decided to wait a while. She went downstairs, boiled an egg, and made a tuna salad sandwich for lunch.

At some point, she remembered that, before their argument, Robert had come over last night to work on her downstairs toilet, so she went to check it. When she flushed, she saw that it still wasn't behaving. The water swirled and rose, but instead of spinning away like it was supposed to, it just sat there a bare inch from the top of the bowl. She left it alone for a while and thought about calling Robert, but after their trouble, she just couldn't bear it yet. When she came back to check again, the water had gone down enough for Madge to try the plunger. She could hear a sucking sound coming from her bathtub drain each time she leaned down on the plunger's handle. She thought that was a good sign because it must have meant the pipes were clear, so she flushed the toilet again.

Initially, the water went down, and Madge gave a clap, happy that she'd fixed the problem. But then she heard a glugging from the bathtub. She looked and saw brown water coming from the drain, and then came something else. Her first thought was that it looked like brown oatmeal. Maybe it was too grainy for that, with specks of black and other colors. Trash. Then the sour, rank sewage smell hit her. Madge put both hands to her mouth to stifle a gag. She froze, wide-eyed, staring while the substance bubbled into her bathtub.

Without deciding to, Madge ran from the bathroom. She leaned over the kitchen sink and let free-flowing saliva drip from her mouth. She retched but kept herself from vomiting. Her mind was flying about but going nowhere. She started to realize she had to do something but she had no idea what. She should call Robert, she thought. But she couldn't. She couldn't call Robert. What about Julie? Her husband could help, couldn't he? No. Julie was delicate. Madge couldn't bear for her to see.

She tiptoed back towards the bathroom, stepping just close enough to let her lean in. She smelled it before she could see. Her stomach started pushing against her again, but she forced it

under control. Something was still in the tub. Speckled, earthy colors. But not dirt. Something much, much worse. It seemed to have stopped bubbling, but it was sitting there. It must be two inches deep, she thought. Oh no, she thought. Oh no. Teddy would arrive in two days. Monday morning. A day and a half, practically. And this. This had to go away.

She took the plunger from the toilet and pushed it over the tub drain. It resisted at first, but when she pushed harder, the sludge squirted from the overflow drain. She felt some of it splash on her hands, but she tried several more times, slowly realizing it was useless. Crying, she hurried to the sink to wash her hands, scrubbing them under hot water. Within moments, she heard the bubbling sound in the tub again. It was all going there. All the nastiness. Madge shut off the water quickly and hurried from the bathroom with her hand to the side of her face like a blinder, blocking her view of the filth in the tub.

She paced back and forth across the kitchen. She knew that she had to call someone. Robert would be so mad if she didn't call him. But he was already mad. And he wouldn't want to deal with what was in her tub. That might upset him more. And she was still angry with him. But . . . a plumber. Of course. She'd call a plumber. Again, she realized that might upset Robert. They were so expensive. Especially on weekends. Robert would want to try to fix it himself. To save her the money. "Why in the world didn't you call me?" he'd ask, hands upturned, shaking at her. But she couldn't. Not after last night.

In the Yellow Pages, she found several listings. Dobson's Plumbing had a nice big ad, so she called them first, picking at her lip while the phone rang. Pick up. Pick up.

"Hello. Dobson Plumbing."

"Oh yes. Hello." Madge made a conscious effort to sugar her voice. "Yes. This is Madge Millerfield and I live at 31 Brighton Street in Laurel. I am having . . . well, I am having a

severe plumbing problem.” After a brief but polite description of the details, Mr. Dobson agreed to come out and see what he could do.

Madge couldn't stand to stay in the house, so she spent most of the next hour waiting outside. She walked into the back yard first. It was a pleasant day. Sunny but mild. Then she meandered around to the side porch and her mouth fell open at the sight of the wisteria. It looked like a purple waterfall had frozen over the trees and fence along the side of her yard. Her house looked like a cake with purple icing spilling out of her gutters, down the posts and rails of her porch. My, my, my, she thought. What a lovely sight.

She held some of the tiny purple blossoms close to her face and smelled their sweetness. She brushed their soft petals against her cheek. By the time she heard a vehicle in her driveway, she was feeling much better. She greeted Mr. Dobson with a smile and a delicate handshake, grasping his fingers with hers. He was a slightly chubby man, about her age, with thin, graying hair. A younger man tagged along behind him. She waited in the kitchen while he investigated her bathroom, and she stood with the Wisteria while he dug around outside.

“That's backed up sewage, Miss Madge,” Mr. Dobson said after a bit, joining her on the side porch. “Them Azaleas in your front yard or them trees at the road likely got their roots into the line. Since the blockage is so close to where yours joins the main, you might get the city to fix it for free if you can wait till Monday.”

With her connections at City Hall, Madge thought that was almost certainly true, but she simply couldn't wait. “Oh no,” Madge said. “I absolutely must have it fixed as soon as possible. I'm having company, you see.”

“Alright,” Mr. Dobson said. “But it's gonna run you around fifteen hundred dollars. I'll have to dig up enough of your line to put in a clean-out, and even then, all I can do today is run

my machine up there and get the roots. They'll grow back though. You can count on that. What you need is to pull them Azaleas up and have the whole line replaced."

"Well. Maybe I can do that later, but for now, I just need you to do what you can."

"Alright, Miss Madge. We'll get to it." He watched her standing by the rail, smiling up at all the color. "Is that name short for something? Madge? I never known a Madge before."

She turned, giving him a shy smile and sniffed the bloom close to her face. "My full name is Majestic Sarah Walton Millerfield."

"Majestic Sarah." Mr. Dobson grinned. "Now that is something else. Why you want to nickname that?"

"Well that's a lot to bear, Mr. Dobson. I was never pretty enough to be Majestic." She smiled up at the purple cascade. "Not like my Wisteria. Isn't it lovely, Mr. Dobson?"

"It's right nice, Miss Madge, but it's a climber. You leave it alone, it'll keep going till it tears your gutters down."

"Well."

Sons of Decent Men

Barry Milton was twisting his face away, but from the corner of his eye, he could see the pearly yellow snot wad dangling from Ernest's tobacco-stained lips. It swung slower and slower as it stretched from that dirty mouth and dropped closer to his own face. Barry craned his neck in every different direction trying to avoid it, but Ernest was sitting across his chest and had him locked down. As it finally splattered against his left temple, the other kids on the playground "ooh-ed" and "ahh-ed" and pointed. Among them, Barry saw pretty Sarah Ridley covering her mouth to hide her laughter and her disgust. His face was burning.

On the walk home after school, he was still picturing Sarah and hearing the other kids when the Henson mutt startled him with a bark from the side of the road. The dog bounced forward and back, barking and barking. Barry hated that damn dog. It barked at him every morning when he walked to school, and it barked at him every afternoon when he headed to the house, and Mr. Henson never did anything about it. Barry threw his foot at the dog's face, but it dodged out of range, so he picked up a rock and slung it, hitting the ugly critter in the ribs off a bounce. With a yelp, the dog scurried under the front porch and growled from there.

Barry kicked at the gravel as he resumed his walk, trying to figure out what to do. This business with Ernest was ruining his school year. Unlike many of his friends, he'd been excited about the fourth grade. Barry liked school. He knew he was smart. Schoolwork came so easy that the occasional effort produced some of the best grades in the class. But as much as he enjoyed the notice his grades earned, what he really loved was being with the other kids. He was sure that most everybody in school knew and liked him. He had a good smile that he practiced in the mirror, raising his eyebrow just a bit like Robert Mitchum, and his daddy always told him

that the girls were going to love his shining blue eyes. And Barry could tell that everybody thought him the funniest kid in school. Even the teachers. When Mrs. Kilgore caught him doing his Curly impression, lying sideways on the floor and running around in a circle, of course she had to scold him in front of the others and tell him to sit his little fanny down, but Barry saw a happy little twinkle in her eye as he flashed his grin. Unless someone caught him shooting dice or playing cards, Barry rarely had any real trouble at school, so as long as he was careful with those, everything was a-ok.

Until this year, he thought. Until that big bullying sumbitch Ernest Anable started keeping an eye out for him. Barry had a stocky build, but basically, he was a normal-sized ten-year-old boy, so any average sixth grader would have given him trouble. But Ernest Anable wasn't an average sixth grader. He was big. Even to his classmates, he was known as Big Ern. His coarse black hair stood up in a stiff crew cut, and he had one thick eyebrow over two scowling eyes. His nose had a hump where it was out of whack, like it had been busted sometime. Barry wished he could bust it for him again. The problem was that Big Ern wasn't just big. When it came to a tangle, he was tough as hell.

Ernest lived at the other end of town, so the walk to and from school was relatively safe. In the school building, it wasn't bad either. Since there were only two grades per room, Barry didn't have class with Ernest. The third and fourth graders had Mrs. Kilgore while the fifth and sixth graders were a few doors down with Mrs. Lynch. And the halls were okay because a teacher was always around to break up a scuffle. But one school meant one playground, and out there, a grown-up could be hard to find. Old Mr. Brown would sit in the shade and smoke a cigarette, but just as soon as he dropped his butt and gave it a twist with the toe of his shoe, he'd disappear back inside the building. That gave Big Ern three good shots at Barry each and every

day. For the last week, Barry had run home for lunch, but still, morning and afternoon recess were hazardous.

Ernest didn't often resort to outright physical violence against Barry. Instead, he seemed to prefer such techniques as the "wet willy," where he'd coat his finger in a slimy gob of spit and squirm it around in Barry's ear while everybody watched. On occasion, Barry had tried turning tail, but Ernest was particularly good at "the running trip." As Barry ran away, Ernest would kick out and hit his trailing foot. Next thing Barry knew, his legs were tangled, and he was sliding face first through the gravel. Making Ernest chase him down led to what happened today. Big Ern would pounce on Barry's sprawled body and hold him down with a thin loogie string dripping over his face. If Barry said "uncle" quickly enough, he could usually avoid having the snotty blob spatter his face. If there weren't many people around to see, Barry would sometimes say whatever Big Ern told him, but today, the whole thing had taken place with a group standing right there. Sarah Ridley had been standing right there, and he couldn't bring himself to give in front of her.

When he reached the corner of the Gable's lot, Barry jumped across the shallow drainage ditch and stomped into his own driveway. His family had a nice white house on Wall Street, which he proudly knew was one of the four paved roads in town. The house had a carport on the side that was empty now and would be till Barry's daddy came home from one of his two jobs. His daddy had a Chrysler dealership over in Laurel, and last year, he'd been elected mayor of Parlee.

They had a big yard, too. Barry's momma had peach trees growing on a wide terrace to the left of the house, their sagging limbs propped up on long two-by-fours. The lower yard to the right of the house was almost an acre in and of itself. Grape vines were growing on guide wires

along the edge, but Barry still had more than room enough to throw a football around. Behind, there was a full garden, a barn with garage space, an old, mobile sawmill, and on past that, his daddy had fifteen acres of wooded pasture land.

When Barry walked around to the back door, he saw Steve's shiny blue Desoto Firedome parked in the garage, and Steve was out there with his head under the hood. Steve was sixteen. While Barry's oldest brother, Eugene, was a senior at Tyson City High, Steve had chosen to attend West Polk, a more country high school in Laurel. Barry remembered that his momma had not been happy with Steve's decision, but his daddy had been glad to have Steve near the car lot in case he ever needed a hand. Steve was long and lanky, and Barry liked the way he kept his jet black hair slicked back. Outside of church, he never saw Steve wearing anything but a white t-shirt and jeans.

Steve loved cars. Barry heard him talk about cars even more than he talked about girls or money. He'd heard his daddy brag to people that Steve had been a moneymaking shade tree mechanic since he was fourteen. After a while, that bragging had made Barry jealous to the point that he'd made a few attempts to learn how to work on engines too, but he just couldn't stay interested. Cars were for riding fast. That's all Barry wanted to know about them.

"That car's brand new," Barry said, leaning on the garage door opening. "Why you always working on it?"

Steve tinkered on without looking up. "I'm just trying to wring a little more out of her. Besides. You always got to take care of the thing."

"You skip school again?"

"Nah. I went till lunch."

"You're gonna get in trouble."

“Momma’s seen me out here all day. And daddy don’t care, long as I’m working.”

Barry ran his finger along the curve of the rear fender. When Steve stood up, he had grease on his hands and sweat on his face. “You gonna wash it for me if you put your paw prints all over it,” Steve said.

“I’ll wash it if you let me drive it.”

Steve whip-snapped the grease rag at Barry and dove back under the hood. One by one, Barry ran his fingers across the wrenches spread out on the worktable. He gave the handle of the vice a nonchalant twirl, then he leaned on the fender, watching while his brother placed the cover back on the car’s air filter.

“What’s on your mind, dipstick?”

“You gonna quit school?” Barry asked.

“I don’t know. I’m thinking about it.”

“You gonna go work for daddy?”

“Nah, I’ll open my own shop. Daddy done said he’d help me get one started if I take a mind to.”

“How old you gotta be to quit?”

“How old? I don’t know that there is any certain age. If there is, I bet it’s older than ten though. Why? That boy still messing with you?”

“Hell yeah. Just about every day.”

“I told you what to do. Next time you see him, pop that sumbitch in the mouth one good time. Don’t ask no questions or wait on nothing or say nothing. Don’t even let him know it’s coming. Just pop him.”

“I’ll get in trouble.”

“Nah. Sometimes a punch in the mouth’s called for. You do whatever you have to do.”

“Shoot. I hit him, he’ll whip the tar out of me.”

Steve stood up and wiped his hands again. “Hell, ain’t no shame in that. Might gain you a little respect. Besides. An ass whipping is a damn sight better than getting spit on.”

“Why don’t you go pop him in the mouth? You’re my older brother.”

Steve opened the driver’s door and was about to reach in and start the car, but he stopped and looked at Barry over the top of the door. “I ain’t about to start a fight with a twelve-year-old kid. If you’re gonna let somebody handle it for you, you might as well tell your principal, or tell Daddy. It’s chicken shit and everybody’ll call you a fink, but if that’s all right with you then do it.”

“Nuh-uh. You ain’t grown. It ain’t snitching if I don’t tell a grown up.”

“Now you know that’s bullshit.”

Steve leaned in and turned the ignition. Under the rumble of the big V-8, Barry said to himself, “It ain’t bullshit neither.”

Later, Barry grabbed his football and walked down the street to have a toss with his buddy, Marty. They were in the middle of the road with their shirts off, running through some plays, taking turns at quarterback and receiver. Barry caught a long pass from Marty and jogged back to the two-man huddle.

“How come Ernest don’t ever mess with you like he does me?”

“I guess because I don’t mess with him,” Marty said. “I’m gonna cut right at the mailbox. Hit me by the ditch.”

“Hut.” Barry dropped back and threw a little high, sending the ball just over Marty’s fingertips. Marty retrieved the ball and came back to the huddle.

“I don’t mess with him neither,” Barry said, “but he won’t let me alone. Always sticking that spit finger in my ear.”

“You’re lucky he don’t do much more than that.” Marty said. “I wouldn’t of said nothing to him to start with. Let’s run that same one again.”

“I never did say nothing to him.”

“You called him Ernest Anna Bell.” Marty lined up.

“Well I wasn’t saying nothing to him, by God. I was talking to you when I said that. And you laughed about it too, but he don’t hock nothing your way.”

“Come on,” Marty said. “Say ‘hut.’”

“You know,” Barry said, holding the football in front, about to hike the play to a start. “I’m thinking I may punch that sumbitch a good one.”

Marty gawked up at him from his three-point stance, dropping his head to look under his arm then he just shook his head.

“I am,” Barry insisted. “You don’t think I will?”

“That big old boy’ll black your eye.”

“Probably so. But it might earn me a little respect.” Barry stuck his chin out.

“It’ll earn you a split lip. Come on. Say ‘hut.’” Marty lined up. Barry held the ball out for the hike, but he stopped again.

“If I do sock him, and he starts to whip me bad, you gonna help me? I bet the two of us could get the better of him.”

Marty came out of his stance in a huff, squinting at Barry. “That ain’t right. My daddy says it’s yeller to gang up on somebody.”

“Not really, it ain’t. He’s older than us.”

“Hell no.”

“Come on Marty. You and me’s supposed to be buddies.”

“Well, it ain’t right, and I’m scared of that big fella, and I ain’t starting no fight with him. Now come on. Say ‘hut.’”

Marty lined up again. Barry hiked the play to a start. Before Marty turned to look, Barry threw the ball hard. The wobbly spiral zipped past Marty’s head and dinged off the mailbox.

Heading home, Barry was walking in the middle of the knee-deep drainage ditch that ran along the side of the road, kicking at the occasional dirt clod. He hated that damn Ernest Anable, and he was sick of being showed up in front of everybody.

Walking along in the ditch, Barry decided he had no choice but to tell his daddy that Ernest had been bothering him. Not to get Ernest in trouble. That *was* snitching. He didn’t want to do that. In fact, he wouldn’t tell exactly what Ernest had done to him. He might not even tell Ernest’s name, come to think of it. Then, it wouldn’t really be like he was snitching at all. He just wanted some advice from his daddy. Nothing wrong with that. Boys asked their daddies for advice all the time, but Barry couldn’t well do it without telling a little something. His daddy always said he’d do whatever he could to help his family. And he would. Barry knew it.

Once within sight of the house, Barry saw his daddy’s big Chrysler parked in the carport. He ran in hoping to catch a few minutes alone with his daddy before everybody else gathered around for

supper, but he couldn't find him. Instead, he found his momma at work in the kitchen. She had pork chops sizzling and popping on one eye, okra frying on the other, and she was patting the biscuits into shape. Barry tried to pilfer a bite, but she shooed him away. He asked her where his daddy was, and she said he was in the cellar retrieving some pickled peppers. Barry knew that meant he was down there having a beer. She sent Barry to go fetch him. Supper would be ready as soon as the biscuits were done.

The cellar had concrete floors and red brick walls. The floor joists under the living room made for the cellar's low ceiling, from which hung two bare light bulbs. On shelves, they stored all the tomatoes and green beans and apple jelly and sweet pickles and peach preserves that Barry's momma canned during the year. An extra Frigidaire sat in the corner. That was where his daddy kept his High Life. Barry's momma wouldn't have alcohol in the house, so his daddy came down to the cellar whenever he needed some preserves, and while he was there, he had a beer or two. When he went back up, he usually forgot the preserves.

When Barry went around to the cellar door, he found it standing open. As he headed down the steps, he could hear his daddy talking. From the dark corner where the stairs were, Barry saw him sitting on a crate beside the Frigidaire, holding a Miller High Life. He had his tie off and his starched collar opened. Barry's oldest brother, Eugene, was pacing around the cellar while he talked and drank his own beer. Barry winced when saw Gene because he didn't want to talk about Ernest in front of him. He was embarrassed for Gene to know how Ernest had been treating him, that he was afraid of Ernest. And Gene wouldn't like Barry asking somebody else to take care of his problem. Gene would encourage Barry to try handle it himself first. He'd tell Barry to confront Ernest and hash it out like men, face to face and if necessary, fist to fist. Barry

started to walk on in and tell them about supper, but he could tell the two men were having a serious talk. He stopped where he was in the dark of the steps and listened.

“I think it would be good for me,” Eugene said. “I’d get to do some travelling—”

Barry saw that Gene looked as crisp and clean as he had when he left for school that morning. His hair was still combed across, shirt still tucked in. From this far away, Barry thought Gene looked just like younger pictures of his daddy, thick-shouldered and strong.

“Nah, Gene. That’s bad business over there,” his daddy said. “I don’t want you mixed up in nothing that dangerous.” He took a big swig of his beer.

“Daddy, they signed the armistice. The fighting’s done.”

“You know that ain’t gonna last.”

“It may not. But if they do start fighting again, I should be there. It’s a man’s duty.”

Barry was still squatting in the corner at the base of the steps, listening, staring wide-eyed at his daddy and brother. He knew about the war. About the fighting. And he realized what his brother was talking about doing.

“Bullshit son. You don’t believe that. You know I don’t like it so you’re just coming up with one reason after another to explain doing what it is you want to do.”

“Regardless of what you think, the draft is still on. Once I graduate, they’re going to call whether they’re fighting or not. If I enlist, I’ll have some choice where I go.”

“I can get you out of the draft.”

“No, Daddy. I told you. I don’t want that. It ain’t fitting and it ain’t fair. I believe I’m doing right here. You know I do.”

Barry watched on as his daddy shook his beer at Gene, extending his index finger from around the neck of the bottle to point at him. Barry thought he was going to yell at Gene, but

apparently, he decided against saying whatever he was about to say. Instead his daddy leaned forward on his crate and rubbed his five o'clock shadow. His eyes were trained on the concrete floor. Finally, he stood up. Barry heard his knees crack when he did. His daddy stared at Gene, he exhaled like he was smoking a cigarette, and he said, "Alright, son. It's alright."

After another moment of silence, Barry made some noise and came the rest of the way down the stairs. "Momma sent me to tell you supper's ready."

At first, his daddy didn't let on that he'd heard him. Barry saw him nod a couple times like he was having a silent conversation with someone. Then he woke up and tossed back the rest of his beer. "She did? You reckon it'll be any good?"

"She's got okra."

"I do love okra," his daddy said. As Gene sat his empty bottle in the box by the door, his daddy put a hand on his shoulder. He clapped Gene on the back as he headed up towards the door. "Come on, boys."

Barry stood at the base of the steps, looking after them. He wanted to give his daddy a holler and ask him to come back down a minute, but it felt like the wrong time.

Barry shoveled his food down as fast as he could. He sat listening to his two brothers talk on and on about something. He stared at his plate, using one of the tines of his fork to crush the individual grains of corn meal that marked the remains of his fried okra. Glancing up, he saw that his daddy still had half a pork chop left, and his momma seemed like she'd barely started. He knew that once his daddy finished and asked for coffee, Gene and Steve would leave the table and go about their business. But it was taking forever. Barry sat thinking about warm spit,

tobacco lips and crooked teeth, stupid selfish brothers and buddies and falling and begging and looking laughing faces and pretty little Sarah Ridley.

Barry swelled up and it burst out of him. “Daddy I got me a bully at school and I can’t get shed of him.” Everybody stopped what they were doing and looked at Barry. When he glanced over at his brothers, Gene’s head was tilted towards him, and Steve looked plumb mad.

“Damn, Barry,” Steve said.

“Don’t you swear boy,” his daddy said.

Steve wiped his mouth and threw the napkin on his plate. “Can I be excused?”

“Go on,” he said to Steve, who stood and left with a stare that made Barry look down at his plate. “Now what’s this?” his daddy asked him.

His daddy and Gene were focused on Barry from either end of the table. At the corner nearest his daddy, Barry’s momma was still eating, slowly cutting off a bite of pork chop. She glanced up when Barry didn’t start talking right away.

“Well, spit it out,” his daddy said.

And Barry did. While he talked, his momma calmly finished her meal and served coffee. Gene sat quietly and asked a few questions about specifically what and when and especially, why. Barry had no idea, he said. Maybe because we have money, he said, and Ernest is jealous. After he was through, his daddy pushed back his chair and walked towards the den.

“What are you gonna do?” Barry asked.

“I’m going to call Will Anable and see about this.”

“You reckon that’ll help?” Barry asked.

“Well,” he said. “Will Anable’s a decent man. He’ll want to see to it that his son turns out the same.” While Eugene followed into the den to listen, Barry stayed in his chair at the table and waited while his mother cleared the dishes.

A little while later, Barry’s daddy and Gene returned. The two men sat back down. Barry’s momma filled the coffee cups and resumed her seat. She worked on some knitting in her lap. In the quiet, the clicking of the needles seemed loud to Barry. His daddy raised the coffee to his lips and blew gently, looking over the edge of the cup at Barry.

“What’d he say?” Barry asked.

“Will talked to his boy. Ernest said that you were the one that started all this. That true?”

“Naw, daddy. I never. I swear.”

“He said you was making fun of his name.”

Barry’s ears flushed red. He stammered about spelling and Anna Bell and how he’d just said it that one time but not making fun and that was all. His daddy leaned back in his chair and scratched his head.

Eugene spoke up. “Barry, you can’t be doing something like that. For some people, a name’s all they have.”

“But I didn’t—”

“Now you know good and well you were trying to get a laugh,” Eugene said. “You’re always trying to get a laugh out of somebody.”

His momma put her knitting in her lap and looked at Barry. “What Barry said wasn’t right, but I don’t see that’s any call for getting thrown down and spit on. It’s not, is it Carl?”

His daddy took a test sip of his still hot coffee and set his cup back on the table. “No. I reckon that’s true. And it ain’t gonna happen no more. Will says it and I believe him.”

“What happened to Ernest?” Barry asked.

“I don’t know. And don’t you go prying or gloating. That ain’t our affair. All that matters is that his boy is going to leave you alone from here on out. That sound good?”

“Yeah, daddy. It does.”

Walking to school the next day, Barry felt light for a change. He even tried to calm the Henson mutt down enough to pet him. He figured he’d taken care of his problem. Big Ern had gotten “what for,” and now he could go about his day without worrying all the time. But as soon as he stepped within sight of the front door to the school, his stomach turned rowdy. Along with the kids Barry was used to seeing early in the morning, Ernest Anable was standing around with two of his buddies. Even when he’d been after Barry, Ernest had never waited out front for him. Barry walked close to the building, sliding his shoulder against the brick wall, hoping to turn the corner into the door without notice.

“Lookey here.” Ernest stood at the edge of the sidewalk, between Barry and the door. He was talking to his two pals and anyone else within earshot. “It’s the mayor’s boy.”

“You leave me alone. You done been told.” Barry tried to stick his chin out.

“I know I been told. Snitch-boy. I ain’t doing nothing to you.”

A few of the other kids took notice when Ernest used that term. Barry heard the blood rushing in his ears. “What’d you—I ain’t no snitch.”

“Sure you are,” Ernest said. Then, more to those standing around he said, “Your daddy didn’t just happen to call mine for no reason, did he? Snitch-boy.”

“You better shut up, Ernest. Quit calling me that and leave me alone.”

“Look at him. Rich-boy, snitch-boy.” Ernest was attracting more and more attention. “You don’t want hear it, then you can just go inside. I ain’t touching you. I’m just talking. Rich-boy, snitch-boy. Rich-boy, snitch-boy.”

As Barry shoved the door open and went in the school, he could feel the other kids around him. His face was burning and his fingernails were cutting into his palms. He hated that damn Ernest.

Barry received the same treatment all day. But, something about this was worse than before. Ernest could only trip him on the playground. Now though, even in the halls, Barry would hear whispered strains of *rich-boy, snitch-boy*. The other kids could hear it too. He knew they could. Barry could see it in their faces. Of course, the others had looked at him before. He had seen it as he drug himself from the ground and wiped spit from his face, but now it was different. Now some of them wouldn’t look at him. Now some of them actually turned away from him. They acted like *he* had done something wrong. Like he actually was a snitch. Like they believed that big, stupid bastard. All day. At morning recess on the playground, he felt it. At lunch, Marty was the only person who’d sit with Barry, and he gobbled his lunch down and hurried away to the playground without saying ten words. But it bothered Barry the most in the halls, bumping shoulders past everyone else, seeing them look away, hearing the call picked up by other students. *Rich-boy, snitch-boy*.

At afternoon recess, he saw Sarah Ridley huddled up with Ruby Mays and that Turner girl. They were whispering close, and Barry knew exactly what they were whispering about. He saw Sarah look up once towards where he was standing in the shade by the building. Her head ducked right back down into her circle. Barry decided he wasn’t going back in that school. He

didn't want to hear that damned Ernest saying *rich-boy, snitch-boy*. He didn't want to see the others look away from him. When the bell rang, he slid off around the corner of the building. For almost an hour, he sat behind the shrubs, breaking limbs off of them, kicking at the bark underneath.

When it was almost time for the last bell, Barry stood and started to run home before the other students were released, but then he stopped. That damn Ernest had made it where nobody liked him. Nobody. He was sick of "Big Ern." More than anything, Barry wanted to finally pop that sumbitch in the mouth. He decided he would wait till the bell rang, meet Ernest on the sidewalk in front of the school, and he was going to slug him, right there in front of everyone. If Ernest whipped him, he'd just get whipped, by God.

Barry was standing behind the shrubs at the corner of the building when he saw Ernest exit. Leaving the cover of the shrubbery, he marched towards the big boy. Ernest was on the sidewalk laughing and goofing with his buddies. He had his back to Barry. Walking towards Ernest, looking at him from behind, hearing him laugh, Barry's face burned again. He really wanted to show that boy something.

As he stepped within a dozen feet of Ernest, Barry noticed the bricks that lined the shrubbery bed along the building's front. Without planning it, Barry picked up one of the bricks, he took three running steps towards Ernest, and he threw it like a football, right at the back of Ernest's head. The sound was like hitting a tree with a fat, rotten limb. Ernest fell like his bones had suddenly disappeared from his body. There was a ripple through the kids as they saw or heard something that registered as wrong. Each of them took a few involuntary steps away from what they could tell was trouble.

Barry hardly paused before running over to Ernest's inert body. He flipped him over onto his back and sat on his chest. He'd show Ernest how it felt to have spit dangling in his face. From his perch, Barry looked down at Ernest. The big boy's eyes twitched under the lids. He moved his head slightly and groaned. When he did, Barry stared at his tobacco mouth. His fat stupid tobacco mouth with its stupid crooked teeth. With that green snot string swinging from it, dangling over his face. Instead of snorting back his own wad, Barry grabbed the brick from the ground beside him. Still staring at Ernest's disgusting mouth and teeth, he raised the brick and quickly bashed Ernest in the mouth. He felt something pop and give as the brick hit home. It didn't bounce off like he expected, like it would have if he'd smashed it against another stone. It just thunked in place. When Barry lifted the brick, Ernest's teeth were shattered and crumbled in the bloody ruin below his nose. He stared at the broken gums beneath the split lips. He was vaguely aware of some girl crying, and he thought he heard some adult yell his name. He was still staring at Ernest's face when he felt himself jerked up into the air.

Later, Barry found himself sitting in one of the two hard, wooden chairs in front of Principal Davis' desk, looking out the window across the room. His daddy was sitting in the chair beside him, silent. He'd loosened his tie and had his hat in his lap. In his own lap, Barry's hands were shaking. His chest shook when he exhaled. He wasn't angry anymore, and he was trying not to be scared. He hadn't done nothing but stand up for himself. That damned Ernest had been at him again, and Ernest was bigger than Barry, so he'd done what he had to. "I believe I did right," he'd told his daddy.

Barry and his daddy had been in the office for a while now. Principal Davis was running back and forth. He had checked on Barry a few times, and he'd talked to Barry's daddy some,

but he was also doing something outside. Eventually he came and sank down in the chair behind his desk like a heavy sack of flour. The principal glanced at Barry then at his daddy beside him. He wiped his mouth with his bare hand, then pulled out a handkerchief and wiped it again. “This is bad, Carl.” He had a deep voice that never failed to make Barry nervous.

“I know, Franklin. I do hate it for the boy. I hate to see anybody hurt.”

“He ain’t just hurt Carl. That boy’s going to be in the hospital. For a while maybe.”

“Well all I can say is—”

“Carl, they say they’re gonna sue you, and they’re talking to the Sheriff about Barry.”

“The Sheriff? About two boys fighting? I ain’t never heard of such foolishness.”

“Well they are. You know I hate to tell you this, but they want Barry sent to juvie for it.”

Barry’s daddy jumped up quick enough to throw his chair back. Barry flinched in his own seat at the principal’s words and his daddy’s reaction. “Over a few god damn busted teeth! I’ll see about this. Sit right there Barry.” He headed towards the door.

“Carl!” Barry saw his daddy stop when the principal yelled, but he didn’t turn around. He heard the principal take a deep breath, but he was afraid to look at him. “Carl, that boy . . . that boy’s hurt.” Barry’s hands were shaking in his lap. “His face was . . . he’s hurt bad.”

His daddy braced his hand on the doorjamb and dropped his head. Barry waited. Finally, after a long quiet, his daddy turned back to face Principal Davis. His shoulders sagged. “You tell them I’ll take care of all that boy’s medical bills. I’ll even kick in a little more. Whatever they need. I’ll make it right. But that’s it. I ain’t gonna see my boy carted off. I won’t do it.”

Barry felt himself breathe when he heard his daddy say that. He didn’t know how long he’d been holding it. Now, still anxious, he waited for Principal Davis.

“Alright, Carl. I’ll pass it along. Y’all go on home.”

Barry took another breath.

“Come on, son.”

Barry pushed out of his chair and squeezed by his daddy to walk out.

Sitting in the passenger seat of his daddy’s Chrysler, Barry could feel the big engine rumbling even though they were creeping along towards home. He felt better now. He wasn’t shaking anymore. He watched his daddy drive.

“You mad?” he asked.

His daddy didn’t look at him or answer.

“Are you?”

“No. I ain’t mad . . . but I want you to tell me something. And I want the truth.”

“Okay.”

“You said that boy was . . .” His daddy still looked straight ahead. “Were you honest to God scared he was still after you? That he was going to hurt you? Because those other kids say you jumped him.”

“He was, Daddy. He was mad I told. Before long, he was gonna get me, so I had to. That boy’s a mean sumbitch.”

“. . . Don’t you swear boy.”

“Sorry, Daddy.”

Barry watched his daddy as they drove on along Wall Street, past the Henson place and its barking dog, towards home. “It’s alright, son.”

Blazer

I was eight years old the only time I saw Blazer. It was 1978, and I was still happily making the rounds at the poker tables with my dad. He'd carry me to all the different places with him. All the different games. He considered himself a professional himself a professional poker player. And he was, I suppose. He had real jobs from time to time, but he certainly made and lost most of the money he made and lost at the poker table.

Originally, the big games were at Club 78 and The High Hat right in the middle of Tyson. Those places were sure-enough rough spots, so tough that the cops didn't even like to go in, lest they get dragged out and cuffed to their own steering wheels. I only have faint memories of those places because both joints burned down within a few weeks of each other in 1973, but long after their demise, there was still poker to be played Laurel County.

During the week, a gambler could find a game of Big Pistol in the back rooms of The Muscadine Junction or the Burger Inn. The Junction sold feed and seed out near the Alabama line, and The Burger Inn was a sit-down restaurant in Laurel, but both had bars and poker rooms in the back. If a player was really hard up for a game, there was also a rusty trailer called Limbo's, off behind where the Piggly Wiggly now sits.

Meryl's Amvet's Post #55 became the spot for the big Friday and Saturday games. I always liked Meryl's. To get in, you had to ring the bell and wait for the little spy door to slide open. An eyeball would give you the once over before opening up, like some secret club. I liked that. I also liked the fact that Meryl sounded different. He couldn't talk on his own, so he had to hold what looked like an electric razor up to his throat. It made him sound like a machine out of *Star Wars*. Whenever he saw me, he put that doo-hickey up to his throat and said in his robot

voice, “Hey there, fuck stick.” I didn’t know exactly what that meant then. I knew it was a cuss word, but he always smiled when he said it, and Dad laughed, so I figured it was okay. Besides, I just loved the way Meryl sounded.

Back then, I didn’t know that those weren’t typical places to spend a childhood. To me and my friends, they were mythic and the people that hung out there were the epitome of southern cool. My friends thought my dad was cool because he was a regular at those places, and I was cool because I went with him. Those were the kinds of joints where you might run into Lucas Doolin or Gator McKlusky or The Bandit, all of whom were just as exciting to little southern boys as Luke Skywalker or Rocky Balboa.

My favorite of Dad’s regular dives was called Whitey’s. Located just outside of Laurel, it was a plain, wooden building that didn’t pretend to be anything other than what it was. It was out in the open with a gravel parking lot, so I could hit rocks with a stick till dark, and inside there was a jukebox and a bowling game where you slid what looked like a metal hockey puck down a miniature alley trying to knock the mechanical pins up into the machine. I think I also liked the fact that the lights there were brighter than most of Dad’s other spots, but I couldn’t have told you why that mattered to me. But the main reason Whitey’s stands out so vividly is because that’s where I finally saw Blazer Blaylock.

I had heard the name of Blazer Blaylock all my life. I always thought that was a great name. It reminded me of the heroes from my comic books: Pete Parker, Clark Kent, Bruce Banner. I could picture a golden age superhero named Blazer in his own comic book, super fast with flames flying off of his feet and eyebrows and hair as he streaks into the foreground, the caption reading, “Blazing a trail for truth . . .”

He was one of those legendary guys from the old times. Back in the day, he'd made and run moonshine up and down the Alabama border. That, in and of itself, made you a hero in Laurel County. Though he did get caught once and he did a stretch of time for it, when they released him, he went right back to running. My grandad said he once saw Blazer use two billiard balls and a pool cue to whip holy hell out of four guys at Club 78. He couldn't remember what the fight was about, but he said Blazer sure lit 'em up.

I remember hearing another Blazer story at Meryl's one time. A retired Georgia State Patrolman named Kirkpatrick told about stopping Blazer for DUI one night. He said Blazer almost fell down when he stepped out of his old truck.

"Blazer. You're about drunk, ain't you?" Kirkpatrick said in that gravelly voice of his.

So Blazer answered him, "I reckon I've had a few."

"A few, my ass. Damn, Blazer. You can't even see," Kirkpatrick told him.

"Hell if I can't. I see fine."

"Yeah? How far?"

Blazer looked up at the sky and said, "I can see the moon. How fucking far is that?"

Everyone in the room laughed like hell, and when I told the story to my buddies the next day, they laughed just as hard. I don't know if I fully understood the meaning of the word "badass" then, but that was badass, and unlike Gator McKlusky or The Bandit, Blazer was real, and he was us.

So, that night in 1978, I was at Whitey's with my dad. I had my chin propped in my hand, watching the game go around. I was listening to the sounds of the cards being shuffled, the chips being thrown on top of each other in the middle of the table. I liked hearing the men cuss and joke with each other. It might have been pleasant except for the fact that Mitchell Dean

was playing. I don't think I knew the word "obnoxious" then, but if I had, I would have used it to describe Mitchell. He was loud, and he talked constantly, bragging when he won a pot, making excuses when he didn't. Somehow, he was always dressed too well for those games, and he smiled too much.

Since I was following the game, I barely noticed when a little old gnarled root of a man walked in. He sat at the bar and drank a beer without talking to anyone. After a few minutes, someone shouted over, "Hey Blazer! You want to play a few hands?"

Then I noticed everything about him. He was a thin, old man, but he seemed to move pretty well. He was drinking a Pabst Blue Ribbon beer and wearing a dirty, light blue shirt with a name patch on the chest. It was a white patch with red lettering that read, "Blaylock" instead of "Blazer," like I expected.

When Blazer sat down, the guys resumed the game as if nothing had happened. They just played, but after Blazer joined the game, I couldn't see anything but him for a while. How dark and wrinkled his skin was. How rough and cracked his hands were, especially the knuckles. One of them had a flap of skin peeled back with dried blood around the edges. Blazer didn't talk much when he played, barely making even casual conversation, and he wasn't good at fanning out the cards in his hand. That part of the night, sitting there looking at Blazer Blaylock, is like a separate memory for me, apart from the events before and after. There's no sound attached to that memory, and it moves a step slower than reality.

At some point, though, I began to wake up when I heard Mitchell Dean going on as usual. He'd just taken a big hand and made some smartass comment to Blazer. To Blazer! I froze, a little uncomfortable, wondering how Blazer would respond, but he didn't really. He barely even looked at Mitchell. That happened a few more times, but no one seemed to think anything of it,

and no one acted like it was odd when Blazer stood up and left without saying much to anyone. He just left, and he was gone, and the game went on like he'd never been there.

Sometime—I don't know how much later—Mitchell stood up to leave. As usual, he made a show of it with his loud farewells and walked out. Moments later, my childhood Spider-Sense kicked in, and I was scared. I couldn't tell what it was, but I knew something was happening outside that shouldn't be. Amid yelling and commotion, Mitchell came slamming and limping back in with his hand on his backside and blood on his pants. He shouted something about being stabbed in his fucking ass. And Blazer Blaylock was behind him with a knife in his hand.

Apparently, Blazer had, indeed, been irritated by Mitchell's harassment and had been hiding in the parking lot the entire time waiting for Mitchell to leave. He'd snuck up behind and stuck a five inch lock blade into Mitchell's right butt cheek a couple times. As he stalked back into Whitey's with that knife in his hand, he had transformed. He slapped Mitchell with his empty hand and bent him over a table. Then, in a gesture I didn't understand at the time, Blazer held the knife at his crotch and, with a thrust of his hips, he stabbed Mitchell one more time in the same general area.

“Fuck with me again, shit dick, and I'll burn you're God damned house down.” He wiped the knife on Mitchell's shirt and left.

Back then, I didn't really understand what had happened. I didn't understand Blazer doing that. Hiding. Sneaking up. Stabbing. I don't even think I knew people really did things like that. And I didn't know what was going on with Mitchell. Was he dying? I didn't know. And, for the life of me, I didn't know why my dad and his friends were laughing. I didn't even know why I was scared and crying. Back then, I just didn't know shit.

Pretty Little Things

While a couple of hired hands were out helping her older brother in the field, Sarah sat in the dirt under the shade of the magnolia tree in front of the house. Her bare feet were crossed, and she had the hem of her old blue dress pulled over her knees. In this little bowl in her lap, she had her new puppy, a black mutt her daddy called Bismarck. She rubbed the puppy's soft belly skin so it would lie still. Her sweetheart, Denny Pete, sat across from her, watching her. Denny wasn't actually her sweetheart, but Sarah knew he wanted to be. He just hadn't said it yet.

Sarah was eight years old that spring, and she was a pretty little thing. Her mother always told her. So did all her aunts and everyone at church. It made her happy to hear people say that. Of course Denny Pete hadn't told her yet, but her mother said boys just didn't like to say things that made them feel funny.

She was in the yard with Bismarck and Denny Pete when she heard her mother scream inside the house. Sarah didn't hear such sounds very often. She jumped hard enough to scare her puppy into a yelp. She ran into the house expecting to find somebody dead or dying, but when she entered the kitchen, she realized her mother wasn't screaming in pain or fear. Mother was mad. She was in the back room yelling at Sylvia.

Sylvia was her older sister by four years. Sarah loved her and looked up to her. Most of the time. Sarah thought Sylvia was beautiful, definitely prettier than she was. Her sister was already starting to look like a real woman, and she could play piano, too. Sylvia even played at church sometimes, and people always made a fuss when she did. But, Lord God, Sylvia also got into trouble.

If somebody didn't keep an eye on her, Sylvia would skip out on her chores or sneak off to a friend's house. And sometimes during the Sunday sermon, she'd whisper at Sarah until Mother had to pinch the fire out of both of them. She made some bad grades down at the school too, and a few times, when she got sassy with Mrs. Henry, she got striped with the ruler. Of course, when she did, she also got striped with a hickory when she got home. Mother may have been an old woman, but she could put a spanking on a body.

Sarah had to know what was happening with her sister. She sneaked up and lay by the crack under the door to listen in. She heard her mother say the word "vile." She recognized that word from church. Then she heard some walloping going on. Sylvia was real upset too. She kept saying she didn't do nothing, she didn't do nothing, but mother went right on yelling at her and smacking on her. When Sarah heard it quiet down and she felt her mother's footsteps on the floorboards, she ran. She didn't want to get caught spying and end up with a dose for herself.

Back outside, Denny Pete had the little puppy bouncing up and down in playful fits. He asked what all the racket was, but Sarah said she couldn't tell for sure. Sylvia had just done something.

Sarah was curious what Sylvia had gotten into, but she didn't like hearing her sister whipped, so she decided to stay outside playing for a while. Denny Pete stuck around to keep her company. He asked her if she wanted to walk up the road to her daddy's store, maybe have a Co-Cola and some peanuts. She didn't, so they chunked rocks at the tin roof of the barn until her brother called them down and said to cut it out. She loved her brother Wallace, but sometimes he thought he was the Big Top. He was seventeen and could drive, and now that daddy was letting him supervise those hands while they planted the cotton, he was prancing on his high horse. After giving him a look, Sarah and Denny Pete went back to the front of the house and

took turns swinging on the Tarzan rope that hung in the magnolia tree. After a bit, Sarah saw her daddy's Plymouth rounding the curve up by the church, a dirt cloud rising behind it. She figured it must be near suppertime.

Their store was just over the top of the hill, so her daddy usually came home for a while in the evenings to get a quick bite. When he did, he'd lock up the store, but he left the gas pump on and set out an empty can for people to put money in. It was a little store, but it was the only one in Highpoint, so he didn't want to leave somebody hard up for a gallon of gas just because he got hungry.

Sarah bounced up to her daddy while he was still pulling himself out of the car. He swung her into a hug and asked Denny Pete if he was staying to supper. Denny said he'd have to run home and check with his momma. Then Sarah said that Mother had been mad at Sylvia all day and hadn't cooked no supper. Daddy said for Denny to come on in. He'd square things with his momma, and they would scratch something up.

When they went inside, though, Sarah was surprised to find that her mother had started cooking. She'd made up a pan of biscuits, and she had just put some side meat in the skillet. Sarah loved having breakfast food for supper. Her daddy was glad of it, too. He came in smiling and asking what was this he had heard about Silly. What had she done this time? Mother was about to say something mean—Sarah could see it coming in her face—but then she saw Denny standing there, so she put on her Sunday meeting smile. It was nothing much, Mother said, but Sylvia would be having supper in her room. They'd talk about it later. She told Denny Pete she was glad to have him.

All through the meal, Sarah thought her mother was acting funny. It seemed like she talked more than usual, asked questions more than usual. She wanted to know what Sarah and

Denny Pete had done with their day, and then she quizzed Wallace about the two hired hands and wondered how they were working out. What were they like? They happen to mention where they were from? Where they were heading? Not really, he said. Just passing through. Speaking of them, Wallace reckoned he should run a biscuit or two down to the barn for them, and daddy said yeah, you probably should. Mother smiled too often and too big, and her voice went up and down too much. Sarah was used to her mother having different voices and different smiles in different places, but something about it seemed odd to her here at the dinner table when Denny Pete was the only guest.

After supper, when he came back from the barn, Wallace put on a clean shirt, grabbed his guitar, and said he was going to walk down to H.B.'s house to pick for a while. Soon as he was gone, mother scooted Sarah and Denny Pete out the door as well, telling them to walk up and mind the store till Daddy got there. Sarah lagged behind long enough to see her mother and Daddy heading back to Sylvia's room.

Outside, she tried to talk Denny Pete into sneaking around to the back of the house with her. She knew the windows were always open once it started getting hot, and she wanted to listen in and find out what Sylvia had done. Denny said no. Uh-uh. He wasn't taking no chance of getting switched, and dark was coming on so he needed to go home anyway. But when she begged him and said she really, really wanted to know what Sylvia had done, Denny Pete agreed to stay.

They snuck around the corner of the house, crept along the outside wall and crouched in the dark under the windowsill of Sylvia's room, and sure enough, they could hear like they were on the bed right next to her. The first words Sarah heard out of her daddy's mouth shocked her

to the point of fright. He told her mother that they needed to call the sheriff right away. Sarah grabbed onto Denny's arm and wondered what in the wide world had Sylvia done.

Then Mother stated in her Don't-Argue-With-Me voice that they absolutely would not call the sheriff. Absolutely not. She didn't want everybody knowing about this. It would be scandalous, and she wasn't even going to talk about it.

But Daddy said they had to do something, him a grown man and Silly just a little girl. What were they gonna do?

Mother said for him to go down to the barn and run that man off. Tonight. That fella was just hitching through here anyway. She said for Daddy to tell him to move on or they would sic the sheriff to him.

Sarah had to have a look. She peeked over the edge of the sill. Denny tried to keep her sitting down with him, but she shook him off and edged her nose up. She saw Sylvia with tears on her face, just sitting there on the bed, staring at nothing, mother standing over her, going on and on about how it wouldn't do nobody any good to bring this out for others to hear. Her daddy had his shoulders hunched and his hands on his hips, looking at the ground. He didn't raise his head, but finally, he said all right. He'd go get rid of him. He was headed towards the door when Mother stopped him. She left the room for a second, and when she came back, she had the shotgun. She told Daddy to take it with him. Daddy waved her off at first, said he wasn't shooting nobody. But mother said for him to take it. He ought to look like he meant what he said. Besides. Dealing with a man like that, he just might need it. Sarah could tell her daddy didn't want the gun, but he took it anyway. As he was leaving the room, she saw him break it open over his arm.

Sarah was about to leave and follow her daddy down to the barn when Sylvia finally looked up and said something to her Mother. Sarah heard it clearly. "I thought he was sweet." But she couldn't make sense of what happened next. Mother slapped Sylvia across the face. Hard. Then she did it again and pushed Sylvia over on the bed. She kept slapping her and hitting her while Sylvia tried to cover herself. She was smacking on Sylvia's back, on her arms, the hands covering her face, her ears. When Denny heard what was going on, he panicked and pulled at Sarah's arm, trying to make her to leave, but Sarah couldn't move, not even when Denny Pete turned tail and ran. This wasn't a spanking. Without meaning to, Sarah screamed through the window for her mother to stop.

Mother wheeled on her and Sarah froze, peaking over the edge of the windowsill, her nose touching the wood. Sarah thought Mother looked at her like she didn't recognize her. Finally Mother stood and straightened her blouse and asked Sarah how long she'd been there. Sarah said she'd come running when she heard her mother whupping on Sylvia.

Mother made sure her hair was in place and said Sylvia had been misbehaving. Haven't you, she asked Sylvia. Sarah could see welts and scratches on Sylvia's face and neck. When she didn't get an answer, her mother asked again. Haven't you? Sylvia was cowed and whispered that yes, she had. So mother said that was right, and she told Sylvia to go get in the tub. Then she said for Sarah to get her fanny inside too because they had church tomorrow.

When she came back around to the front door, Sarah stopped for a minute and looked down towards the barn, trying to see some sign of her daddy. She wanted to run down there and find out what was happening, but her mother came to the door and yelled for her to come inside.

He still wasn't back by the time she finished her bath and went to bed, but sometime later, before she fell off to sleep for the night, he came into her bedroom like he always did. He

sat there for a quiet minute on the edge of her mattress, brushing her hair from her face. When Sarah asked him what happened, he didn't say anything. Then he told her he'd been closing up the store. That was all. He kissed her goodnight and left.

The next morning, mother got everyone up and ready for church. She checked that Wallace's hair was slicked back and proper, and she made sure Sarah and Sylvia were perfect and pretty. Before they left, she pulled Sarah and Sylvia aside and told them what to say about Sylvia's marked up face, and she said for them to smile and be sweet.

When they arrived at the church, mother smiled and hugged a few necks. Daddy smiled and shook a few hands. Everybody asked, well what happened to Sylvia. How'd she get so scratched and banged up? Mother explained several times that Sylvia had decided to ride their pony by herself, and it had taken off with her through the woods. Everybody said oh dear. That was just too bad. Pretty little thing. Sylvia offered a smile at them, and when mother told her to, she went up and played the morning welcome on the piano.

While the music went on, Sarah sat on the pew beside her mother. Instead of watching her sister, she fiddled with a loose seam on her dress. Mother said for her to quit worrying that thread or she'd have the whole thing falling apart. Now, how would that look? Sarah left it alone, but then she asked if she could go back and sit with Denny Pete. Mother looked at her like she thought Sarah was up to something, but finally she said okay. You just be quiet.

Sarah eased out and went back to join Denny. She sat next to him on the pew, and then scooted closer so that her shoulder and leg were touching his. She tugged at the loose thread on her dress again and then remembered what her mother said and tried to leave it alone. She didn't want her dress to come apart.

Denny Pete leaned over and whispered to her, asking what happened last night. Did she ever find out what Sylvia did? Sarah said she didn't know. Then Denny asked what was it Sylvia said that got her whipped so bad. He'd heard her say something, but he couldn't make out what it was. Sarah told him that Sylvia had looked up at her mother and said I thought he was sweet. Denny asked her well what was wrong with that and Sarah sat there thinking about it. Then she scrunched up her face and said she didn't know. She couldn't make no sense of it either.

Joe Chandler's Wife

Standing on the sidewalk at the corner of the house, she watched the patrol car back out of the driveway. Her eighteen-year-old son was in the back seat.

The sidewalk was cold on her bare feet, and the winter wind bit through her nightgown. She stood with one hand over her mouth, the other arm wrapped across, holding herself. She was shaking, outside and in, trying to process the panic she felt for her son and the anger she felt at her husband. When the car's tail lights disappeared around the curve, she turned to go back inside, hand still covering her mouth. The overgrown holly bushes along the front of the house grabbed at her gown and pricked through to her legs. This was supposed to have been taken care of weeks ago.

Angie had come home from work thinking she would rest a bit before starting the chicken for supper. Like most evenings, her lower back and tailbone were aching and she had a knot beneath her right shoulder blade. She spent the best part of each day sitting on a stool at Honda Lock performing quality control checks on electric power steering torque sensors. Angie undid the top two buttons of her all-white Honda Lock uniform and stepped out of her matching shoes. She loosened her blonde bun of hair and plopped down in the recliner. The springs popped and clanged as she pushed the chair back and kicked her feet up.

Angie thought about turning the television on, but the remote was way over on the coffee table. Instead, she just rested and looked at all the family pictures she had hanging on the paneled wall. She started to feel some sleepy creeping in, so she rolled her head to the other side, thinking she might let herself take a quick nap. For just a moment or two. From that

position, though, she could just see into the kitchen where she was surprised to find her son. He was sitting stoop-shouldered at the table. The sag of his body and the fact that he hadn't already said hello told her that something was wrong. "Taylor? What's going on?" When he didn't answer, Angie shook her head to wake herself. With a groan, she pushed out of the recliner.

Like everything else in the house, the kitchen was cramped. The small table doubled as dining area and extra counter space. It was pushed against the wall to make more floor space, so there were only three places to eat. Taylor slumped in the chair facing the wall, hand in his shaggy blonde hair. Angie was stifling a yawn, but as she stepped closer, she could tell that he was upset and had been crying. He'd tried to hide it, but she could see the wet streak angling away from his eye. His face and ears were fiery red, which always happened when he was embarrassed or mad or upset. She felt that quick, reflexive panic that kicked in. "Taylor. What is it honey? What's wrong?"

He didn't look at her or remove the hand tangled in his hair. He just slid a short stack of mail over to her. As soon as she saw the top envelope and the form letter, she thought she knew the trouble. She'd seen them many times. An overdraft notice. Bad news, but she relaxed. She could handle bounced checks. She sighed and put a hand on his back, rubbing between his shoulder blades. She could smell the grease and oil that was still on him from the shop where he worked. "It's okay honey. We've all done it. I couldn't tell you how many I've bounced. You just have to be careful."

"I'm always careful," Taylor said. He slid the printed copy of the check out onto the table so she could see it.

The first thing that registered was the amount. For Angie, three hundred dollars was a lot of money, especially in the winter when propane was so expensive. Then she saw it was written

to Robinson's Liquor Store in town, which aggravated the piss out of her. What was her eighteen-year-old son doing in the liquor store? After all they'd been through, Taylor should have known exactly how she'd feel about—but then her own face and ears started burning. Once she really looked, it was obvious that the check was a forgery. She hadn't recognized it as such right away because, though it wasn't Taylor's, the handwriting was very familiar to her. Joe. Taylor's daddy. Her husband.

Taylor was a tender-hearted kid, without an aggressive bone in his body. He'd always been quiet. Smart. He'd kept a job of some kind and worked hard since he was fifteen years old. He'd bought that little Ford Ranger on his own, and he kept gas in it without any help. And he was so sweet. She could see him sitting there, so tense and quiet because he was feeling things that he just didn't know how to deal with. Angie crouched down beside him and tried to look into his covered face. "Honey, we'll get this taken care of. I promise you. It's not your fault." She rested her head against his forearm and listened to him breathe.

She snatched the phone from its cradle on the wall and said she was calling Joe right this very second. But Taylor said don't. "Of course I am. It's too much this time," she said.

While the phone was ringing, Taylor didn't say anything, but he walked over to her and stood there with his hand out. She couldn't resist his quiet stare. His blue eyes seemed sad but almost calm. She eased the phone over to him and he hung up. "I don't want you to say anything to him," he said. "Ya'll just gonna end up in a fight again, and I don't want you going after one another over me." Angie put up an argument, but Taylor said it was time enough for him to talk to his own daddy if he had a problem. He wanted to, and he would.

So she let him. She fixed supper, and when Joe got home that night, she went to the bedroom and let the two men talk. With her hand over her mouth, Angie listened through the

thin, hollow door. She heard some yelling, but it never turned rough, and the next day, Taylor told her that they'd worked it out. Joe had apologized even, said he just ended up short one month and couldn't stand to beg nobody. He promised to pay the debt and take care of any warrants that had been filed. Taylor was happy and proud that he'd handled it himself. Of course, Angie did have a dig at Joe a few days later, when Taylor wasn't around. That turned into a pretty bad one, and she ended up getting smacked, but she couldn't let it lay without saying something. And when she asked later, Joe said it had been handled.

She had to give it to Joe. He usually did manage to clean up his messes. That was the truth. The power had been shut off before. The phones and the cable several times. The bank had threatened to take her car once. But when they really needed it, Joe managed to scrape enough money together from somewhere. He borrowed it or collected a debt or had a good night at the poker table, but he came through.

Earlier that year, Joe had promised to send Taylor on a trip to Panama City Beach as a graduation present. Taylor was so excited. He organized a big deal, had several of his friends planning to go with him. But come the last week of school, things were looking dark. They'd just had to put a new head gasket in Joe's truck and apparently, the cards had been falling unkindly. With all of that, Angie hadn't been able to pay the water bill, so the city boys had shut it off and padlocked the meter. Angie begged Joe to go borrow the money from his own daddy. They'd done it before, but this time Joe wouldn't hear of it. He'd handle it, he said.

That night, when Joe said he was going to play cards at Whitey's, she flew into him pretty hard. But sure enough, Joe traipsed in at sunrise with a smirk on his face and a wad of money in his pocket. Over Taylor's protests, Joe forced the whole roll into his son's fist and then went and cut the lock off the water meter before breakfast. "Fuck the city," he said. "My

boy ain't going skimpy because of a god damn padlock. Shit. They's a sure enough card game tonight. Come Monday, I'll buy 'em a whole damn case of locks and they can try to shut somebody else off."

Angie had been really proud of Joe that morning. That father and son picture she'd snapped was one of her favorites. Joe definitely had his moments, and in desperation, he was usually reliable.

But not this time. Tonight, a little after 10:30, two sheriff's deputies showed up at the front door, warrants in hand. Angie had already changed into her nightgown. The deputies were polite but unwavering. She cried and pleaded with the officers to take her instead, and Joe gave them a tongue lashing, but they put the cuffs on her boy anyway. Joe grabbed the phone and said he'd see about all this while Angie went outside in her night gown and watched the patrol car leave with Taylor in the back seat.

Back inside the house, Angie heard Joe on the phone in the bedroom. She felt dazed. Her stomach was jittery. Arms crossed, she dug her fingernails into her arms to try to stop her hands from shaking. She stopped in the middle of the living room floor, no idea what to do next. No longer hearing Joe down the hall, her eyes moved randomly over one of the faux-pine paneled walls. She hated those walls. The fake black lines separating the fake wooden boards. She hated how dark they were. She'd intended to paint them so many times, but she'd never done it. And she hated those cheap little Home Interior floating shelves that she'd put up. But her pictures. She did care about her pictures. She loved her pictures. Pictures of Taylor. When he was a baby. When he was a first grader with new teeth that were too big for his head. Another in his baseball uniform the year Joe coached his team, Taylor holding on to his runner-up trophy like it was a winning lottery ticket. His new senior portrait. There were some of the

family on vacations, looking happy. At the beach. In front of a cabin in the Blue Ridge Mountains. The three of them, wet and muddy in the Jeep Joe had for a while. Joe in his army uniform, smiling and handsome. She loved the one where he was on his back, sticking his head out from under the truck after changing the oil. She'd caught him off guard looking so very Joe. There weren't as many of her because she was usually taking the pictures, but there were some from when she was younger. Prettier. All were hanging or standing in pitiful frames on those stupid shelves against those ugly walls.

She heard Joe hang up the phone. In a moment, when he came down the hall, buttoning a shirt, her eyes locked on and tracked him into the room. "That better have been your daddy," she said. Joe didn't answer. "Was that your daddy?"

"No." He barely glanced at her as he sat on the couch and started putting on his boots.

"Are you going to call him?"

He kept working on his laces as if she weren't there.

When she spoke again, she didn't make any attempt to temper the venom in her voice. "You said you took care of this."

"Lay off, alright? This ain't my fault. I went down to that store two god damn weeks ago and told Roger I'd pay it off and he said he'd cancel the warrant."

"But you didn't pay him." More venom. "And now your son is going to jail. Because of you, Joe." She moved towards the couch and stood over him. "So now what? We're not gonna let our son spend the night in jail."

"He won't. If you'll shut up and put your damn clothes on we'll go down there and sign a bond right now. We'll have him out in thirty minutes."

“Jesus Christ, Joe. We can’t sign a bond. The house is in your daddy’s name now. Remember? You almost lost the house. Remember? You did. Gambling. He bailed us out and put it in his name so you couldn’t do it again. You remember that Joe?”

He gave two final, fierce yanks to finish lacing up his boots.

“You’re gonna have to call and get him to do it, or find somebody else to sign the bond. Call him or one of your lowlife friends for—”

“We ain’t calling nobody about this. It’s our business.”

“Your son is going to jail.” She was yelling. That panic and anger were starting to swirl together. “You have to do something.”

“Would you shut the fuck up and let me figure it out!” He glared up at her from the couch, brow furrowed over his blue grey eyes.

She fired back at him. “What’s to figure out, Joe? Call your daddy and get him to sign the bond. Either that or loan you the money to pay this off. Unless you’ve got the money. The deputy said it’ll be over four hundred dollars with the fees added on. Do you have that? I don’t.” Joe continued to stare up at her. She yelled again. “Well do you?” No answer. Her anger was in charge now. She was in charge now. She wanted him to stand up and take action, but she also wanted him to feel what he’d done, to feel small for what he’d done. He deserved it. “You’ve treated me bad before, but I’m an adult. This is your son. If you don’t have the guts to swallow your pride and call your daddy for help, then I will. And I’ll tell him—”

He slapped her. Rising from the couch and lashing out in one motion. His right palm across the left side of her face, his fingers across her ear. Her head jolted and there was a sharp pain inside her ear as the drum ruptured, like someone had stabbed an ice pick into the side of her skull. Angie went wide-eyed with pain and surprise.

The next instant she realized what had happened and froze. Her hand was over her ear. Her mouth was still open, her eyes now tightened into squints against the sudden pain, tears starting to squeeze out. The second she had a sense of this, she was angry with herself for allowing him to see that on her face. She'd been hit before, but when she could help it, she didn't like to give him any satisfaction. She liked to keep her face and her eyes dead when he hit her so he didn't have the chance to see anything that he might have wanted. Most times she managed to because she could usually tell when it was coming. She had an awareness of the ebb and flow of these moments. Sometimes he had the power. Sometimes she did. When he was drunk and raging, mad because of a bad night at the poker table or because he'd lost a bet on a football game, she could sense that he had the power. She could hear it in the way he inhaled through his flared nostrils, see it in the aggressive way he moved, the way he looked at the world around him. In the way he looked at her. Sometimes, she couldn't help herself and she had a go at him, opening the door for violence. Other times, it just came. Either way, though, she could feel the violence was coming, and when it did, she went inside and tried to show him nothing. But now? Now she had the power. He was wrong. He knew he was wrong. And he was sober. Those mornings after the drunken rage, when he was sober, it was her turn to scream. At those moments, she had the power and he went inside. He sat on the bed in his boxer shorts and looked at the television instead of her, pretending he could hear anything but her, and he took it because he knew he'd been wrong and she had the power. But this time, he'd surprised her. She was furious with herself for that look of shock and fear that she had shown him.

Angie turned away and put a hand on the recliner, bracing for the next shot, but it didn't come. When she realized that he'd stopped, she snapped her eyes back on him. He was standing

up now, his own eyes fixed on hers. He shook his index finger at her, about to say something, but he stopped and exhaled the breath he'd been holding.

She pushed off the recliner and launched at him, intending to dig her fingernails into his fleshy face. He caught her right hand by the wrist and held her off by pushing his other hand into her chest. She clawed at the arm that was holding her back. He gave her a hard shove and threw her down across the coffee table, scattering the candleholders and the ashtray and all of its contents. Reflexively, she picked up the heavy ashtray and flung it at Joe. It flew by his head and hit the wall, leaving a six inch gouge in the thin paneling.

Joe made a move towards her but stopped. Holding a hand up between them, he seemed to make an effort to calm himself. "I'm not gonna let you start this," he said. "Our son is on his way to jail. I'm gonna go figure some way to get him out. If you can get your shit together, you might want to ride down there and tell him I'm on my way and I'll take care of it. Just like I always do." He left, slamming the front door behind him.

There on the floor, she had to let herself cry. For just a moment or two. Once again, she thought about leaving. She could now. Taylor was old enough, and he was out of school. Her parents had both passed away, so she didn't have to stay for them either. She didn't have to stay for anybody anymore. She might have to find a better paying job if she was going to support herself, but she could do that. It would be a lot of trouble and work and she'd have to figure out what to do next and where to go, but she could do that. She really could.

Angie stood up slowly and wiped her face. With her left hand, she was delicate, probing and testing for soreness. She stared at the ceiling, opening her mouth wide, as if it might ease the pain in her left ear. Finally, she took a long, deep breath to gather herself. As her head straightened and her eyes moved down the wall, her focus settled on the new gash she'd made

with the ashtray. It occurred to her that she would need to have that fixed sometime, or find some way to fix it herself. Maybe she could just hang a picture over it.

She didn't have time to worry about that now though. Her son was in jail. She shook herself and went to get dressed.

A Brief Explanation, As Given By Robin Trower (the Machinist, not the Guitarist)

I guess it started when I lost my job a few weeks ago. I was working at Lee Fabrications making handle bars for Harley Davidson. I been there almost three years, and even though I ain't but twenty-two, I was the best damn machinist in the place. Everybody knew it. Hell. They still know it. Of course, I understand that times is rough these days and they had to make some cuts, but I couldn't help but be a little pissed about it. I mean, what the fuck? How you gonna fire your best man? Fact is, it was all a bunch of political bullshit. Of course they kept all them old guys that been there so long. I get that, I guess. And they kept Bill Tanner because he's got his C.D.L. Alright. But they kept Tommy too. They kept him over me. And what really bugs me is that, well. I mean, he's my younger brother and all, but the fact is, he will kiss an ass, and since we started, he's been kissing Big John Lee's big ass so much that . . . I don't know. To me, kissing ass is too close to sucking dick. I just can't do it. And, say what you will, but I'm proud of that.

All that shit's a sign of the damn problem these days, ain't it? No matter what I do, it seems like I get the wet side of the bed, and it's because a man ain't judged by what matters no more. He's judged by who he knows, or what he looks like. He ain't got to walk anymore. He's just got to talk the talk.

The way I see it, everybody should have the common fucking sense to know that what really matters is what kind of person are you. You a good Christian man? A good son? You a good friend, husband, daddy? All that shit's me. Well I ain't a husband or daddy yet, but I will be. You can bet your fucking bass boat on that.

But, my brother Tommy ain't none of it. That wiry shithead drinks more than I do. He fucks around every weekend, all G.D. this and G.D. that, and don't hardly ever get to church. Well, don't nobody get on to that little son of a bitch because he's always had that boy band faggot charm, you know? He just flashes that smile and talks his way out of whatever shit he gets into. That ain't fair.

That first weekend after I got him that job at Lee's, I took him across the state line to a couple off-the-wall bars I knew he could get into. Got his ass shitty drunk and took him home to Momma at two in the morning. You know what happened? Momma laughed about it. Thought he was cute. Even made him a damn omelet in the middle of the fucking night. Man, if I'd come in drunk when I was nineteen, she'd of chewed my ass like Juicy Fruit. But not him.

Well, all that shit was already bugging me. And then, come last night, Tommy wanted to take me to the bar out at Muscadine Junction. My baby brother wanted to take *me* out. Because *he* got paid because *he's* still got a job. So I went. I figured he owes me a few beers. When we got there, it was like that son of a bitch owned the place now. He knew everybody's name. They all calling him out. Man, I been knowing that place for two years now, and I still can't name but a dozen people, but for some fucking reason, everybody loves him. It was like I was just tagging along.

So, anyway, he ordered us a couple beers and we leaned up on the bar, scoping the place out. And in walked this blonde. Good tan. Tank top. Woof. I watched her wiggle in and sit down at a table. I figured with the way things had been going, she was just the score I needed to make everything right again. Then Tommy gets up in my ear and says to me, "I'm fucking that tonight." Truth is, when it comes to girls, Tommy does have a way. But it's that same shit

again. Tommy's dumb as a box of rocks, but he's lucky enough to be born skinny and he smiles a lot. That's all that matters to them these days. So, because the world's all fucked up, my little brother's knocking the boots off every chick that walks by while I'm trying to beg it off a fat girl with gray teeth.

Well I decided he wasn't gonna get Blondie. So we both went over and sat and bullshat and bought her some beers. Like always, I was nice. Tried to talk to her and laughed at her stupid fucking jokes. But the longer it went on, the more she looked over at Tommy. Eventually, I said hell with them and went and sat at the bar. I mean, if a girl can be bought that easy, who wants her? Little while later, Tommy come up and handed me the keys. Said he'd be riding with the lady. I told him I didn't give a damn. She wasn't that good looking anyway. So he started gloating about her being the best looking girl in the place. I'm here to tell you that being the prettiest piece of ass in the Junction don't count for much, so I said, hell Tommy. You throw a nickel on a pile of shit and it's gonna shine like it's worth something. Well, he said something else and patted me on the back like I was some god damn charity case . . . so I just popped. I come up with my beer bottle and bashed it across his head. Then old Blondie run over and started screaming at me so I smacked her one in the mouth. Now, normally I wouldn't have done that, but Tommy had done pissed me off, and she should have known not to mess with a mad dog, so that's on her. And what happened to Tommy is on him. He knew I was after that girl.

So, anyway, they called the sheriff and I got arrested, if you can believe that shit. For a fucking bar fight like they have every other god damn night. Tommy got a few stitches and Blondie got a fat lip. Big deal. I bet if it had been the other way around, Tommy's ass wouldn't

be locked up. Hell no. He'd con somebody into buying him a beer and he'd tell the story like it was my fault. Probably get a blow job while he was telling it.

Shit.

Snow in Laurel

It snowed in Laurel last night. Like it hasn't snowed in a generation or more. I'm forty, and I certainly don't remember anything like it. Six, maybe seven inches lay in soft wrinkles across the ground outside my front porch when I woke up this morning. With a quilt around my shoulders, I stood just inside my screen door at seven a.m. and drank coffee as long as I could stand it, just looking, listening to the quiet.

It didn't look or sound like anyone was going to make it in to work. Or could for that matter. Snow or ice of any sort shuts down the schools, but this shut everything down. Laurel is a small town, and snow is such a rarity, we can't afford to buy the equipment to handle this sort of weather so we just make do with what we have. Some wait it out at home, hoping the power and cable keep working. Of course, some suppose they can get out and drive around in it. Some of those with four-wheel drives can. Some can't and end up having run-ins with ditches, curbs, poles, or other cars belonging to like-minded individuals who also thought they could drive around as if nothing had changed. I decided I needed to give the little town a look, so I dug out my heavy coat and boots and took a walk, meandering around the neighborhood as I covered the mile into town.

At first, I stuck to the sidewalk. From the prints, someone had been out before me walking a dog, but those were the only marks on my side of the road. I found myself stepping so as not to disturb the clearly defined paw prints. My feet crunching the snow made the only sound.

Just down from my house, I saw an elderly lady trying to sweep the snow from the three steps in front of her porch. It occurred to me that I didn't know her. I knew an elderly person

lived in the house, but I rarely saw her out and I'd never talked to her beyond a passing hey, how are you.

“Hello, ma'am. How are you doing today?” I asked.

She kept sweeping but looked up and smiled at me. She was a frail looking little thing, wearing an old green sweater and a knitted toboggan. “I'm doing just fine young man. How about this weather?”

“It's something else, isn't it?” I started to wave and keep walking, but I stopped. “You staying plenty warm in there? Have everything you need?”

“Oh yes. I've got my heaters burning and my daughter is walking over for breakfast. I just wanted to get these steps clear for her.”

“Let me give you a hand.”

The snow was a bit thick for sweeping, so she brought me her dustpan and I scraped the steps relatively clean for her. She asked me if I was Patricia Barnett's boy, and I said I was. She knew my momma, and she'd been friends with my grandma. My grandma sure could play the piano, she told me. I was embarrassed by the fact that I didn't know her name, so I didn't ask. She assured me she had everything she needed, we exchanged some more pleasantries, and I walked on.

There was no traffic so I jumped the curb and walked down the middle of the road. I had to move a few times to let the rare vehicle pass, but mostly, the road was mine. After a quarter of a mile, I came to the intersection at our community center. It was one of three intersections in our town busy enough to warrant a traffic light. I stood right in the middle, just under the light. Everything was so still and quiet I could hear a tiny hum from the transformer on the corner power pole. I kept expecting to hear a click when the light changed, but I realized

that there were weight sensors under the road; nothing would happen unless a car stopped at one of the red lights. Checking all four directions, there wasn't a car in sight.

When I passed the First Methodist Church, I saw a woman and little girl sliding down the small hill in front. The girl couldn't have been more than six or seven. The hill is only ten feet or so, but they were taking turns scooting down it on what looked like a piece of vinyl siding. The girl laughed every time. When I got closer, I recognized the mother. When we'd gone to school together, her name had been Julie Martin, but I didn't know who she'd married.

"Hey ladies," I said.

I could tell from her glance that Julie had seen someone approaching, but when I spoke, she actually looked and saw me. "Oh, hey Tim. How are you?"

"I'm good. Just got a case of the look-arounds. I see you two are having a time."

"Yeah, she's never had enough snow to really play in before." Julie threw a small snowball at her little girl.

"How old is Little Bit, there?" I asked.

"She's six now," Julie said, raising her hand to block the return fire from her little girl. "And mean as a snake." They both abandoned snowballs and started flinging handfuls of snow at one another, laughing.

"You ladies have a good morning."

"You too."

On my way into town, I saw a couple more groups playing, sliding down hills in or on various inventions. One gentleman had dismantled wheelbarrow and made a fine sled from the tub. A group of boys was playing football in the elementary school playground, slipping around, tackling each other with huge splashes of snow.

Despite how still my walk had been, I was surprised when I arrived in the town proper. The only vehicle I saw for the first ten minutes was a teenager spinning around the town square on a four-wheeler. Technically, it's against the law to ride a four-wheeler on the main roads, but he was doing laps, sliding and racing around the square, spinning doughnuts in front of Souder's department store. I had a few fellow onlookers there, and we all seemed to get a kick out of the time that young fellow was having.

Looking across the square, I noticed that the Try My Grill was open, so I walked over to get another cup of coffee. It was warm inside, and a few people were sitting with their breakfasts, watching the morning through the big front windows. I hadn't planned to eat, but when Sidney saw me come in, he threw a grilled cheese sandwich on the griddle. I'd been eating Sidney's grilled cheese sandwiches since I was a boy, headed out to the golf course with my dad. We passed some pleasantries. He asked about my mom. I asked about his grandkids. It was nice. When the sandwich was done, he wrapped it in wax paper and stuck it in a brown paper bag, just like usual. Today, though, I decided not to take my breakfast and leave, as I'd gotten in the habit of doing. I sat on a stool at the counter and ate and chatted with Sidney about the old days in Laurel. He told me his story about the last time we'd had weather like this, when he got snowed in at the American Legion post that used to be down by the lake. He was eighteen years old attending his first Legion dance party. It ended up lasting three days.

I finished my breakfast and then stayed until we finished our conversation. Then I refilled my coffee, bundled up again and headed back out into the morning.

In front of Hildebrand's drug store, I wiped the snow from a bench and took a seat. More people were out and about by that time. There were a few more cars motoring around, but most of the people were walking. They were looking. At their world. At each other. They were

playing. They were talking. From my bench I spoke to several people I hadn't seen in too many days. It occurred to me that commerce wasn't driving this day. Curiosity was, perhaps. Celebration for some. It felt like I imagine the old days might have felt. Of course, I know I was being a bit simplistic with my outlook, but that's how it seemed to me at that moment, sitting on that bench, drinking my coffee in the snow.

D.C. Girl

Wanda Causey sits at the back table in the break room stirring two ice cubes into her morning coffee, trying to cool it enough to drink before her shift begins. She's dragging and needs the caffeine. It's Thursday, four days into the week, so her back is already aching before she's pulled her first bill. Watching the ice swirl away in her styrofoam cup, she hopes for a good day, just enough to get her over the hump to Friday. Pay day. Weekend. Rest.

Rick is in front of the whiteboard giving his morning pep talk. He's the day shift manager at Lowes Regional Distribution Center #0945. Wanda never exactly listens to him, but she does keep an ear out for certain cues that tell her how far along he is. He's already told his joke. He's doled out the warm fuzzies for yesterday's numbers. She's trying to remember if he's made the safety speech when she's hears him say, "Another day another dollar. Let's get to it." *Christ.*

A roomful of chairs scrape back from rows of white tables, and a roomful of blue Lowe's shirts gradually inflate and rise as steel-toed boots shuffle towards the door. She gives the coffee a test sip, but it's still too hot. Standing, Wanda pushes her fists into her kidneys and arches her back until it cracks.

"Hell yeah, girl. Stick them titties on out." Phillip Ross is ogling her from the back of the wad of blue shirts. He's a dried up stick with a bulging Adam's apple and a nasty Crimson Tide hat that he wears every single day. "Now shake that frizzy hair for me too."

Wanda generally ignores Phillip's crudeness, but today she's more tired than she remembers being, so when Phillip licks his fingers and rubs his nipples as she's seen him do so many times, it crawls on her last nerve. She flings her coffee at his boots, splashing him from

the knees down. “God damn, you stupid bitch,” Phillip yells, trying to pull his jeans away from his skin while dancing a quick step towards the bathroom. “What the fuck?” She kicks the styrofoam cup after him.

The remaining blue shirts laugh on their way out of the break room but the commotion barely interferes with their momentum. Wanda notices a body shouldering towards her through the last of the men, and she exhales when she sees her friend Peggy instead of her supervisor. Peggy is a short, chubby, fifty-year-old with thin red hair and matching cheeks. She works on the Quality Control crew, checking the racks that bill pullers like Wanda deliver to the loading bays. “You alright, sweetie?”

“Yeah,” Wanda says, taking some napkins from the nearest table to clean up the coffee mess. “It’s just Phillip.”

“He put his hands on you?”

“No,” Wanda says. “Normal Phillip. I’m just tired. I kind of lost it.”

“Good for you.” Peggy grunts when she kneels to help wipe the floor. “Those shitheads make being pretty a curse for little things like you.”

“Pretty, my foot. I feel like dammit today.” Wanda is sitting on her haunches on the checkered blue and white tile floor. She blows strings of dark hair from her face and pushes up to throw the sappy napkins into the trash.

“Are you getting sick, honey?” Peggy asks.

“No. My window unit died Sunday and I can’t sleep in this heat.”

“You know we get ten percent off down at the store.”

“Yeah,” Wanda says, “but that’s ten percent off more than I can afford right now. Sandy’s cheerleading camp is coming up.” She stands in front of a framed Lowe’s Team

motivational picture and checks her reflection in the glass. She tries to smooth the puffy under her eyes and pulls her hair back in a thick, kinky ponytail.

“Well,” Peggy says, giving Wanda a one-armed hug. “Even tired and broke, you’re the prettiest thing in the D.C. I’m just tired and broke.” Wanda smiles and pecks her friend on the temple.

When Wanda makes it to the control booth, she cusses herself for throwing that cup of coffee. The other bill pullers are already out. Being late means she’ll end up with some shit tickets, maybe for the rest of the day. Bill pullers take electric pallet jacks through the rows and rows of stock in the warehouse and put together orders to be loaded on the trucks that deliver to Lowe’s stores all over the region. It’s a tedious job, rolling a four-by-ten metal pallet through the canyons of floor-to-ceiling racks, ducking into the shoulder-high bins to grab a dozen of this, forty of that, a hundred of something else. If you get in line early, which she usually does, you might get a bill calling for a full pallet of sodium security lights or Troy-Built leaf blowers, which barely weigh anything and boost your all-important cubic inches per hour number. But when you’re late, like she is now, you end up pulling five hundred separate little plumbing pieces, which kills your cube rating, or you get a bill of nail and tile orders, which kills your back.

“Tile? Come on, John. It’s too early for tile. Please?” Wanda is resting her chin on the edge of the high, sliding window of the control booth. Bill Man John hands her a sheaf of pages. He’s almost sixty, with wrinkles etched deep into leathery skin. Before coming to Lowe’s for the insurance, Bill Man John was John the Roofer. Wanda sometimes skips coffee and spends her morning break chatting with John in his booth. He’s friendly then, with a gravelly laugh, but he’s all business when it’s time to work.

“Good a shape as you’re in, you can handle it. Go on. Clock’s ticking.” Wanda takes the pages and Bill Man John slides the window closed. The last gust of air conditioning from the room already feels good.

At the distribution center, the pallet jacks are called “walkie-riders.” They’re essentially motorized, walk-behind forklifts. Along the front edge of the electrical motor that drives it, there is a four-inch lip. Always in a rush, bill pullers balance there as they hurry from one stop to the next, hopping off and running the walkie to a stop in front of the next bin on their pull list. At first, Wanda thought the walkies were fun, balancing on the lip, pointing the handle where she wanted to go, sliding to a stop. But today, every seam in the concrete floor shoots a jarring bolt through the hard rubber wheels right into her ankles, knees, and hips. The metal clangs that come with each bump and crack go right to her temples.

With a pallet in tow behind her, Wanda stops at the beginning of the nail and tile aisle. She’s looking down two rows of steel bunk beds stacked one over the next, thirty feet high, running the length of the warehouse, each separate bin housing product. If she squints, the rows disappear at a spot in the distance. At least there’ll be some decent music today, she thinks. Thursday is classic rock day on the warehouse radio. It’s not country, but it’s better than that pop shit.

She makes her first pull two bins down. Eighteen boxes of twelve inch, Snapstone Crème ceramic tile. She’s careful when she ducks into the bin. There is a thick steel beam along the top. They call it the headknocker. Knots on the forehead or the curve at the back of the skull are common at the D.C. Everyone has done it at one time or another. Having to bend over and lean into the bin makes it tough to “use your legs,” as signs all over the warehouse remind Wanda to do. The first box of tile isn’t too bad but they get heavier, as they always seem to do.

By the time she's half way down the aisle, half way through the bill, Wanda starts to feel pressed. I'm taking too long, she thinks. I should be moving faster, she thinks. But then she chastises herself. She said she'd never let them program her like they try to do. I'm not a wrench, she thinks. Hell with them. I'll do the best I can.

She tries to settle in and disappear into the work. It happens sometimes. She looks at the product numbers on her list. Finds the same numbers on the bin. Duck in. Grab the box. Grab another. Another. Look at the list. Match the numbers. Duck in. Grab the box. Another. When she can fade into it, it's almost like time travel. Then, without noticing, three bills are pulled and it's break time. But right now she can't do it. She wants it too much and the work is too hard. With each box of tile, she sees the cords strain on the backs of her hands. Pulling one box closer, she slides her finger along the edge of the cardboard and paper cuts her index finger and she knows it will sting all day. The golf ball starts to form where her back meets her left hip.

When she finishes the bill, she hangs at the waist and holds on to the end of her steel-toed boots for a full minute. She steps up onto the lip of the walkie-rider and drives it to the loading bay where square, open doors run the entire length of the building. Each door has a transfer trailer backed to it. Quality Control checkers with clipboards and electronic scanners poke through each pallet to make sure each store receives the product it needs. Men with black, elastic support straps around their midsections move the product from the pallets to the trucks. Wanda doesn't worry about the Q.C. checkers because she knows she never pulls bad product.

Back at the control booth, Bill Man John is purposefully looking at his watch when she approaches. She snatches the bill from him and heads back out. Ceiling fans. Door knobs and lock sets. Air filters. There's nothing particularly heavy, but no big numbers of any one item

either, which means she'll be running all over the building. It won't do anything for her cube rating, but it's better than tile.

The aisles between racks work just like the highway. Keep your walkie-rider on the right side. Oncoming riders to the left. Watch for traffic before you step out. Let faster pullers by. Always let faster pullers by.

"Where you been, Wan?" Don Wyatt asks, approaching on his own rider from the other direction. "You get here late?" He's a friendly guy, and Wanda knows he only means it to be passing small talk.

"Just giving you fellas a head start," she says. Wanda has picked up the back and forth that goes on between workers when they don't really have time or need to talk. "What's up?" you ask. "Rent and taxes," they answer. "I hear a cold beer calling," they say. "You and me both." No one's really saying anything, but it's like when you're sitting in a traffic jam and you see the guy in the next car singing the same song you're hearing on the radio. You're both part of this thing. Wanda likes it. Some of her co-workers have a special knack for making those routine exchanges clever or new, and she looks forward to passing them. Don, in fact, is known for his seemingly endless collection of sweaty comments on the heat.

"How's it going, Donny?" someone asks.

"Man," he says, "I'm sweating like the devil's nutsack . . . I'm sweating like a two dollar whore on nickel night . . . I'm sweating like two rats fucking in a wool sock . . . like a priest in a playground . . . like a fat girl at the disco."

As he passes this time, Wanda can't resist. "Is it hot enough yet?"

"Girl, I'm already sweating like a Saudi snatch."

"Good god, Donny." She laughs despite herself.

Wanda finishes the bill, and then another, and she starts to settle in when she notices ten o'clock coming around. She hurries with her fifth bill of the morning so that she's dropping it at the loading bay when the horn sounds for break.

The break room is only half full. The others are out front smoking or grabbing a powernap on a pallet. Wanda has a Diet Coke and a quiet corner on her mind. She gets the Coke and the corner, but quiet isn't going to happen. A table is gathered around Lee Jones as he delivers a piece of bad news.

"Yeah, man. Fruity's dead," Lee says. "He OD'ed on Oxycontin." Most of the guys lean in. One of them sits back, his shoulders sagging. Clare Farmer leaves for the bathroom, upset. Wanda is surprised by the news. She hasn't talked to Fruity much since she's been at the D.C., but she knew him well back in the day.

"You sure?" one of the guys asks. "I heard Fruity OD'ed a couple months ago and died but they brought him back. I thought he'd cleaned up since then."

"Nah, man," says Lee. "Fruity OD'ed twice."

"Twice?"

"No shit. And the second time took."

They grow quiet for a moment while the news sinks in, but then they start sharing the stories they know about the man. Wanda takes a drink of her Diet Coke and stares into her own thoughts. At some point, she realizes Lee is talking to her. "Wasn't you?" he asks.

"Do what?" Wanda says, sitting up straight.

"You was good friends with Fruity, wasn't you?"

"My ex was. I mean, I was too, but it's been a long time. We all played basketball back in high school. Me and Fruity both signed scholarships at Renton the same year."

“Fruity played college ball?” one of the older men asks.

“Hell yeah,” Lee says. “He only played a year but he was good. Son of bitch could shoot the eyes out of it. Couldn’t he, Wanda?”

Wanda has almost drifted out of the conversation again. “Um, yeah,” she says, coming back. “He could. He was fast too. Really fast.”

As Lee takes up the storytelling again, Wanda pushes up from the table and slides out of the room, dropping her half-finished drink in the trash. When the horn ends break, she’s already back on her walkie-rider heading for the control booth.

Her next few bills aren’t too bad. A full pallet of Troy-Built push mowers. Heavy but big. Excellent for a cube boost. Lots of lighting fixtures and curtain rods on another. Then she’s off to the plumbing aisle for a slow piecemeal bill. But through these bills, she’s barely present. Her mind is back in the day.

While she is pulling mowers, she’s remembering Robert “Fruity” Greene on their high school basketball court. At 5’10”, he was the best player on the team. The best on the guys’ team anyway. The boy was fast, with an ankle-turning crossover and a good jump shot. If he’d been a few inches taller, he might’ve signed with a big school. He might’ve gotten away from his so-called friends and his shit-ass family.

While Wanda is laying curtain rods flat across the bottom of the pallet, she’s thinking about their second year at Renton. Fruity was already in trouble for missing the last few summer workouts. When he showed up in the fall, he was obviously strung out and in pitiful shape. He quit before the end of the first month back.

Those thoughts blend into memories of her own second year of college ball. She had moved up to second string guard. Everybody said she was fast as hell too. Good at drawing

fouls. A terrific passer. But that year was harder. On the court, it was tougher to keep focused, to stay interested. In the classroom, she was studying to be an accountant, but the work was more difficult. And Shawn was having a tough time with her being so busy. They were engaged then, but with all she was doing and with Shawn working full-time, they barely got to see each other. She couldn't find traction anywhere. At the end of the season, when she quit, it seemed like she was doing the right thing. It was a relief. They happily married that next summer, and she was pregnant soon after, which thrilled her mom to death. Wanda didn't go back at all for her third year. She didn't mind. She was anxious to get on with being a wife and mother.

By the time Wanda is picking her way through the plumbing aisle, counting out small bags of PVC fittings, she's sixteen months divorced, her daughter, Sandy, is fourteen years old, Shawn's trucking company is bankrupt, and there's no child support coming in.

When lunch comes around, Wanda plans to skip it, but while she is going to get another Diet Coke, she bumps in to Peggy.

"No, you can't skip lunch," Peggy says, leading her by the elbow. Sweat makes her thin red hair look thinner. "You already said you're wore out. You'll end up sick if you don't eat."

"Ohhh. I just want to find a flat bin and lay down in it for a half hour," Wanda whines.

"Nope. You sit and I'll go get us a couple trays."

Lunch is a cafeteria chicken sandwich and heat lamp fries. Wanda nibbles and starts to realize she is hungry. She squeezes a mayonnaise packet onto her perfectly round patty and sticks her pickles into place. For the first few minutes, there isn't much in the way of lively conversation, but once people get seated and make dents in their meals, the chatter picks up.

Wanda is half way through her sandwich when Phillip Ross comes in loud talking about someone making him late for lunch and nudges into a seat across the aisle. He turns the bill of

his Crimson Tide hat to the back as if it might get in the way of him eating. Wanda ignores him. She has her left foot in the seat with her and is hugging her knee, trying to keep her attention on some complaint Peggy is making, but Phillip leans over and says for everyone's benefit, "I hope Miss Wanda has calmed her ass down now."

Wanda cuts her eyes. A few strands of dark, curly hair have worked loose and hang in her face. "I do have a plate of ketchup in front of me."

"Phillip Ross," Peggy says, shaking a fry at him. "You leave her alone."

"Leave her alone?" he asks, wide-eyed, shoulders back. "Did you see what that crazy wench did to me this morning?" He looks around to explain to the others at the table. "Threw hot fucking coffee all over my god damn legs."

"You were being an asshole," Wanda says. She flicks a half-eaten fry in his direction.

"I was fucking joking around and you go all ape-shit. Burned the hell out of my leg. If you was a dude I might've popped you in the mouth."

The horn sounds to end lunch. Peggy leans across Wanda and points. "Phillip Ross. If you're gonna be such a dickhead you're gonna have to learn to suck it up when it comes back on you."

"Shit, I can handle it," Phillip says. "She's the one too god damn soft to take a joke."

Phillip raises his fist to the middle of the table. "Life be tough up in the D.C." Two of the guys across from him bump knuckles in reply. Wanda thinks of a few sharp smart ass replies to fire back at Phillip. She knows she could leave him stewing. She thinks about dumping her tray on him. Instead, she just sighs and takes the rest of her lunch to the trash. Phillip's a dumb redneck, she thinks, and I'm too f'ing tired.

After lunch, Wanda doesn't want to think about thrown coffee or Fruity or cheer camp or air conditioners or Phillip or anything else. She just wants to work. At some point, she does manage to disappear into the chore for a while. Either Bill Man John is looking out for her or her luck starts to swing, but she ends up with a few decent bills. Boxes of fluorescent light bulbs. Stainless steel oven hoods. They're easy items in fairly large numbers. She barely has to think about what she's doing. Time starts to pass a tiny bit more quickly. In a short while, she starts to find herself feeling better. Afternoon break is just around the corner. A couple more hours after that and she'll be on her way home. While she's counting and stacking twenty Broan white 110 CFM bath fans onto her pallet, she starts to notice the radio and enjoys the music for the first time today.

Her luck turns again with her next bill. It sends her for lawn and gardening materials. Among other things, it calls for fertilizer, lots of three and five pound bags of grass seed, and a dozen forty pound bags of potting soil. It's hard, but she finds a good rhythm stacking bags of Pennington Perennial Rye Grass to *Thunder Island*. She's in a full, dripping sweat by the time she starts on the heavy bags of soil, but it's okay. She leans into the bin, puts both hands along the back of the bag and heaves to pull it towards her, sliding its dead weight to the edge. From there, it's relatively easy to wrestle it onto her pallet.

In between bags, she finds her hips bouncing to an old Beatles song. "*Don't pass me by, don't make me cry, don't make me blue, 'cause darling I love only you,*" one of them sings. The song has a heavy, odd sort of heartbeat with what sounds like an out of tune piano and there's a fun bit of fiddle strung throughout. She hears Don on the next aisle belting out the words, and sees him sliding his feet like he's on a sawdust floor in a country dance hall as he jukes along

beside his rider. Looking across the bags of potting soil into the other adjacent aisle, she sees lanky Jeremy Teal bobbing his head like some goony bird with the music. Wanda is smiling.

She pushes her fists into her kidneys to give her back a crack, wipes the sweat from her face and leans in for the next bag. She curls her hands around the back side and pulls hard towards her. Her fingers are wet with sweat, and they slip from the plastic. She springs backwards and her head slams into the beam across the top of the bin. Her vision flashes white and her teeth clack. Her ears are ringing. She falls face first into the bin, holding the back of her head, holding her breath then crying. It feels like a railroad spike has been driven through her temples, scrambling the matter behind her eyes and forehead. The ache in the back of her skull makes her queasy. She lies face down on the bags of dirt, squeezing tears through seized eyelids, trying not to throw up.

After several minutes, she crawls upright and sits with her feet on the concrete floor, holding her head with both hands as if trying to keep it in one piece. She tests the back of her skull and finds a tender knot already taking shape, just above her ponytail. As bad as that feels, though, it's her throbbing forehead that keeps her eyes closed.

"Hey Wanda. Did your walkie break down?" Her supervisor, Rick, is walking towards her, clipboard in hand, blue Lowe's shirt still perfectly tucked into his khakis, brown hair still perfectly parted.

Wanda slides her hands down her face to peak over the tops of her fingers. She blows out a heavy breath. "No. It's okay. I just need a minute." She sees Rick hesitate when he steps close enough to tell something is wrong. He checks his clipboard and looks over her pallet.

"Potting soil, huh? That's some heavy stuff. I've pulled my share of it."

“Yeah,” Wanda says. “I’ll get back to it in just a second.” She rubs her hands up her forehead and back to the throbbing knot.

Rick looks at his clipboard again and smooths the hair on each side of his part. “Okay. Yeah. Okay. I was just going to mention to you, though, that your cube . . . you know it’s pretty low today, right?”

“Rick.” Wanda wants to tell him that she doesn’t give a shit. To leave her the hell alone. To go the fuck away. After the days she’s had, she wants to tell him that she quits. But she can’t do that and she knows it. “Can you just leave me alone for a minute?” She uses her hand to shield her eyes from the overhead lights. They feel brighter than she knows they really are. “I, uh . . . I’ll get on track tomorrow.”

Rick looks at her and hesitates again. He marks something on his clipboard and clicks his pen closed against his chest. “Yeah. I’ll have to write down that we talked about it. Don’t want you to make it a habit, but yeah, okay. We all have a bad day now and again. Stick with it.” He folds the clipboard under his arm and leaves.

Wanda sits where she is, eyes closed. Her head still hurts, but she stays there because she doesn’t know what else to do. She wants no part of what’s next, but it’s next just the same. Standing up means feeling sick at her stomach, head throbbing with every step. More bills to pull. To pay. Cheer camp. Broken god damn air conditioner. When she hears a forklift motoring into the aisle and smells the rotten egg odor of the propane, some part of her knows who’s driving without opening her eyes. She waits. The engine shuts off but she still says nothing.

“Did he good cop or bad cop you?” Phillip Ross says.

Wanda creaks her eyes open. Phillip is sitting in the seat of his forklift wearing his nasty ass Tide hat. His lower lip is bulging with a dip of tobacco. There's no prickle to his voice or his eyes.

“. . . Good cop,” she says, her eyelids heavy. She tests the back of her head again and grimaces.

“Ah. Headknocker,” Phillip says. Wanda answers with a crooked nod. Phillip unscrews the lid from a plastic Coke bottle and spits. He replaces the lid, hops down from his forklift, and turns his hat backwards. He picks up the sheaf of bill pages from where Wanda dropped them and reads through it. He leans behind Wanda, drags a bag of potting soil to him and with a grunt, he tosses it onto her pallet. “God damn potting soil,” he says. “Shit's worse than tile.” He moves seven more to finish her dozen and reads through the bill again. “Rest of it don't look too bad. I'll let you have it.” He lays the bill on the corner of her pallet and hops back into his seat on the forklift. With his hand on the key, he pauses. “You gonna make it?”

Wanda manages a weak smile. “I'm hanging in like a loose tooth.”

“You and me both,” Phillip says. He cranks his forklift and wheels away.

Wanda finally pushes herself up, careful not to hit the steel beam again. Standing beside her pallet, she gives her head a rub, and her back a crack. She redoes her thick, kinky ponytail, cleaning up the strands that have fallen into her face. She shakes her head at the neatly stacked bags of potting soil, and with a deep breath, she picks up the bill to find the next item. Wanda steps onto the lip of her rider and heads on down the aisle. Almost Friday, she thinks.

The Wonder Boy of Boulevard

In the South, in July, the heat is heavy. It weighs on a body and clings like a wet sweater. The humidity has a physical presence, an extra layer of atmosphere that increases the drag of gravity and friction. People move when they have to, only as much as they have to, skittering from shade to shade when possible. And when they can get still, they want to stay still, handkerchief or hat in hand, chin raised, hoping to catch the faint whisper of a breeze across the bare skin.

Despite the heat, there was a flash of movement across the railroad tracks and onto the pavement leading into the Laurel town square. Ten-year-old Jackson Souder was running down the sidewalk, his elbows swinging, head rocking from side to side, and Chuck Taylors barely touching the concrete. When he rounded the corner, he almost knocked old Mrs. Littlefield over as she was leaving Hildebrandt's Pharmacy. He stumbled and spun and waved an apology back to her wagging finger, but he kept going. He crossed the street when he got to the pool hall, just as he was supposed to do. When he passed The Grand Theater, he slowed long enough to grab the new circular paper from the rack so he'd have the schedule for the month. He jammed it in his back pocket and ran on. He had to get to his Grandma's store because his package was supposed to come in the mail.

Souder's Department Store didn't necessarily fit the city definition of a department store, but it served as *the* place in Laurel. It was located in one corner of the town square, at the end of a row of buildings, its side wall exposed to the town and painted with the store's name in cursive letters fifteen feet tall. At Souder's, one could find everything from saddle shoes to hoop cheese to cornstarch. They had frilly dresses for the ladies and little girls, overalls and blazers for the men, and jeans or slacks for the boys. One could purchase uncut fabric and patterns, umbrellas,

galoshes, wrist watches, belts, and if you whispered your undergarment needs quietly into Ruby Souder's ear, she would go to the back and discreetly wrap a small package for you to tuck under your arm as you left.

Jackson yanked the screen doors open and ran through, leaving them to slam shut behind him. He thundered across the hardwood floors and slammed into the counter to stop. He raised up on his tip-toes to look over but saw no one managing the register.

“Grandma!” His voice echoed in the space, but all Jackson heard at first was the hum of the fans suspended from the sixteen-foot ceiling. Then he heard the floorboards popping with someone's approach.

Ruby Souder crossed over from the shoe department carrying a small box. Despite the heat, she wore a long-sleeved blouse and didn't seem to have a bead of sweat on her. Her glasses hung on a chain around her neck and her gray hair was up in a tight bun. She was leading a woman and teenage girl that Jackson recognized but couldn't name. As his Grandma approached, she held her glasses up in front of her eyes without putting them on, looking through them just long enough to identify the small shape at the counter. “Young man. What have I told you about slamming the screen door?”

“Sorry Grandma, but did my—”

His Grandma silenced him with a raised eyebrow and a single bony finger. Then, smiling back to her customer, she said, “Sorry, Rebecca. Boys.” Jackson stood there, hands on the counter, bouncing on his heels, looking through the glass at the leather wallets, listening to the two ladies talk and talk and talk, waiting for his Grandma to hurry up and take the money and wrap the package and finish so that he could just ask her one little bitty—“Now what is so

important?” she finally asked as the screen door closed again. She began straightening the already clean counter.

“Did my books come in today?” His grandma didn’t answer. She was holding a small stack of receipts close to her face and flipping through them. “Grandma. Did they come today? My books?”

“What books are those?” She seemed to be asking the handful of receipts.

“My . . . you know. The magazines that I—that we ordered from Atlanta.”

Grandma Ruby raised her glasses and held them in front of her eyes again, focused on Jackson. His crew cut was perfectly high and tight, as always, but his face and white t-shirt were dirty. As he stood there, his brown eyes beaming up at her, he was bouncing on his toes and drumming his fingers like mad. “What is it you want, Jackson? What are you asking me?”

Jackson stammered to remind her about last month when they had all driven to Atlanta for the appointment with her heart doctor. While she was waiting, he and his Grandpa Spencer had walked down to Peachtree Street and found a little shop that sold all sorts of books and magazines. Jackson had never seen the likes of which sat on those shelves and in those racks. Books with spacemen and rocket ships on the covers. Comic magazines with monsters and ghouls and other terrors. They were so much more exciting than the normal books Jackson could check out from the tiny library at the rear of the courthouse back in Laurel. They had titles like *Amazing Fantasy* and *Weird Tales*. While his Grandpa smoked a cigarette and had a Coke with peanuts, Jackson asked the man behind the counter question after question about those science fiction magazines and about EC comic books called *Tales from the Crypt* and *Vault of Horror*. The images on those covers and within those pages made him vibrate. Jackson asked the man how he could get those books for himself way out in Laurel, Georgia.

“Well, some of ’em, you can subscribe to and get ’em in the mail. Others you just have to pick up when they show up. You can get ’em anywhere that carries weekly rags and such.”

“Nobody back home sells anything like this,” Jackson said. “I’ve heard about them, but we don’t get them.” The man seemed to enjoy the pleasure Jackson took in the pages, and eventually he mentioned that he might be willing to work something out with Jackson’s Grandpa. As with any question of decision or permission, his Grandpa deferred to Grandma Ruby and sent Jackson running back to the doctor’s office. Jackson put on his sweetest face and begged and begged for his Grandma’s okay. He was nervous about what she would say if she actually saw those scary comic books and fanciful magazines. She didn’t like for him to think about such things. His Grandma preferred that he not waste his time with hooey that she just couldn’t see the sense in. He was afraid she’d say *I don’t think so Jackson*, and once she said that, that was it. But, luckily, she was busy with the doctor and didn’t want to be bothered, so she said okay, okay and told him to go away. He went back and he and his Grandpa made an arrangement. Once a month, if Jackson was a good boy, his grandparents would send the Book Man some money, and in return, he would box up a stack of books to mail out to Laurel.

“And we sent him some money, and he was supposed to mail the books to me on the first of the month and I thought they were gonna get here yesterday, but they didn’t so—”

His Grandma was still staring at him through the glasses she held out in front of her face. “You need to sit tight and be patient. They might come any day this week. Or it might be next week for that matter. Why do we have to order you something from Atlanta, anyway? You can’t read what we’ve got here? *Boy’s Life*? Something normal?”

“Aw, Grandma. That stuff’s okay, but these are . . . well they’re extra good.”

She lowered her glasses and yelled towards the back of the store. “Spencer. Spencer!” Slowly, Jackson’s Grandpa stuck his bald head out from the storage room. He was tugging a bite from a piece of beef jerky. “Did you order those books for Jackson?”

“I told him I did.”

“That’s not what I asked you. Did you order them? And pay for them?”

“I wouldn’t have told him I did if I didn’t.” He turned to go back to the storage room where he had a worn out chair within arm’s reach of a radio.

“Well where’d you have them sent? Here or the house?”

“The house,” he answered, the sound muffled by the closing door.

Jackson started running for the street. “Jackson Souder!” Grandma said, calling him to a hesitant stop.

“Ma’am?”

“You make sure you remember the rules,” she said. “Don’t you talk to that mailman. You let Tessa get ’em or you wait till he’s good and gone before you go out there.”

The screen door was already slamming shut behind him when Jackson yelled “Yes ma’am,” back over his shoulder.

Jackson lived with his grandparents in a white, two-story Victorian house that had wraparound porches along the front and sides on both floors. Scrolling brackets and gingerbread decorated the corners and eaves. The house was located on Laurel’s main street, simply called Boulevard. The parade street, some called it. Boulevard crossed highway 12 in the town square and ran under the arching limbs of old oak trees. Some of the nicest houses in town faced Boulevard and hid from the worst of the heat in the shade of those oaks.

Jackson was in the front parlor looking out of the window towards the street. He was on his knees on the sofa with his elbows propped on the back, and he was using the windowsill for a desk. He had the circular from *The Grand* spread opened in front of him. He went to the picture show almost every Saturday anyway, but Jackson always went through the month's line-up with a pencil and circled the ones he was especially looking forward to. As usual, there were a couple of westerns playing but Jackson barely even noted the titles. He wasn't a fan of the cowboy movies and he hated that whole weeks were wasted on them. He once said as much to Mr. Timms, the owner of *The Grand*.

"Well, my young friend," Mr. Timms had said. "I'll allow that there are more interesting pictures out there, but the folks here in town still like their westerns and they still come see them, so I still have to show them. But you just keep your eyes open, and I promise I'll pique your interests every now and again too. I always run something different from time to time."

Just as promised, Jackson saw that something different was coming soon. There, right at the beginning of the month's line-up, in black and white newsprint, one of the small movie posters promised "the ultimate dimension in terror." A picture called *House of Wax* would be starting a one-week run in just a few days. Jackson saw that it starred Vincent Price, it had something called stereophonic sound, and most importantly, it was filmed in Natural Vision 3-D. Last year, Mr. Timms told Jackson about a picture called *Bwana Devil* and he explained what 3-D meant, but he hadn't been able to get a print to show at *The Grand*. But now, a 3-D movie was most definitely coming to Laurel. Jackson had to see it. His grandma didn't usually let him go to the scary movies, and that worried him. But maybe. This time. It was 3-D after all. He circled the picture and began drawing little stick figure men all around, dancing and shooting lightning bolts towards the circle.

He was still drawing on the page when Tessa called from the kitchen. “Jackson. Come help me get these clothes in off the line.”

“I can’t,” Jackson called back. “I’m watching for the mailman.”

Tessa stepped into the doorway wiping sweat from her face with a handkerchief. She was a strong black woman, thick shouldered and very dark-skinned. She wore a light green gingham dress with a white apron. When she finished mopping her face, she tucked the handkerchief into her apron pocket. “Child, that mailman’s gonna come and go about his business whether you’re sitting there or not. You can come help me a minute. I got to get the ironing done so I can have supper ready when your grandmama comes home.”

Jackson finished drawing one last lightning bolt, folded up his paper and jumped from the couch.

Outside, Jackson was standing at one end of a set of parallel clothes lines with his face turned up to the midmorning sun, eyes squinted tight against its glare. He was trying to see how long he could stand it, fighting the urge to look away. He could hear Tessa humming a song a few feet away. Church music by the rhythm of it.

“Child, what are you doing?” Tessa said. “Hurry up and get them towels down so we can get out of this hot.”

“I’m a turtle,” he said. “I like it hot.” Still facing the sky, Jackson could feel sweat run down his forehead, some pooling at the inside corner of his left eye. He bent over quickly and let the sweat drip from the tip of his nose. While he was hunched, hands on his knees, reaching with his tongue to try and taste a drop, something occurred to him. “Hey, Miss Tessa?”

She had the clothes from her side of the line in the basket and was coming back towards Jackson, taking down a sheet while scooting the basket along with her foot.

“Miss Tessa? What if I was to walk down the street to meet the mailman?” Tessa paused what she was doing for just a moment. Then she nudged the basket again as she dropped an armful of sheet into it.

“Jackson, child. Of all things. You know you’re not supposed to be messing with that man.”

“I know that, but I want to go check on my books. I can’t wait.”

“Sure you can, honey. You just think about your grandmama taking a switch to you. She’d have a fit, and you know it.”

“He ain’t gonna hurt me. He may be a no-good, but he is my daddy.”

“Well that’s not the point,” Tessa said.

“And it ain’t like he could steal me away. Everybody knows where he lives over on Stemper Street. That little house don’t even have a cellar.”

Tessa stopped with a towel dangling over the basket. “How do you know where he lives?”

Jackson paused, thinking he might have stepped into trouble, but he trusted Tessa. He knew she wouldn’t tell on him unless he really deserved it, and he decided that this time, he didn’t. “Well,” he said. “A few weeks ago, I followed him around one day.” The look Tessa shot him made Jackson consider that he might have miscalculated. “I didn’t talk to him. That’s the rules. I can’t talk to him.”

“Your grandmama says you’re not to have anything to do with him.”

“I didn’t. I just went for a walk. Pretty much. I saw him carrying the mail one day, and I just sort of fell in and spied on him. But I was away off. He never even knew I was there.”

Tessa finally dropped the towel in the basket and crossed her arms. “And? What did you see?”

“Nothing really. He walks a little funny, but he just went around delivering the mail. He didn’t even really talk to anybody much except for Mr. Milton at the car lot. He stayed there a while, and . . . well, I think they drank a beer. And after a bit he went home to that little house, and that was it. Honest.”

“Jackson, you’ve known about that fella for years now, and you’ve seen him walking about one day after the next. Why you want to go looking at him then?”

“I don’t know. I saw him and got to thinking about him being my daddy, and I just thought to wonder what kind of no-good he was.”

“Just let something be, child. You always wondering about everything from this to that.”

“I can’t help it, Miss Tessa. I just wonder about stuff.”

Tessa gave a little laugh. “I know you do, child. Your momma’s the same. All full of wonder and wander. It got her many a spanking too. You just remember that.”

“I am a lot like her. Everybody says it. I got her nose.” Jackson put his finger on the end of his nose. He thumped it and sent a bead of sweat flying, then tried to do it again. “When I get big, I’m gonna go away to school like she did. I’m gonna work with a scientist.”

“I don’t doubt that a bit.” Tessa finished gathering the clothes and set the basket heavily in Jackson’s arms.

“So,” Jackson said. “What about that mailman?”

“Child, I think you’d best be patient with those books. I can’t tell you it’s all right to talk to your—to that mailman. You could ask your grandmama, but you know how she gets when you start asking at her. Especially if it be about him.” Tucking the wicker clothesbasket under

one arm, she wiped her free hand across Jackson's forehead and flicked his sweat from her fingertips. "Let's go get us a cold drink."

No books came with the mail that day. Later, at the dinner table, while he was thinking about his missing package, Jackson had considered asking his grandma if he could go to the Post Office in the morning to check on it. Or if he could talk to the mailman about it. Or would she go check on it. He'd finished eating and was waiting to be dismissed, busying himself by using one of the tines of his fork to crush the tiny crumbs of cornmeal left over from his fried okra. He felt like Miss Tessa was right, that Grandma wouldn't take kindly to his asking, so instead, he brought up the movie he wanted to see. As she didn't trust the personal tastes of Mr. Timms, she wanted to know more about the movie and she wanted to see the paper for herself.

"What does 3-D mean?" Grandma Ruby asked, examining the circular from the movie theater.

"Well . . . it's the third dimension, you know? It's like . . . when they point at you or something sticks at you from the screen it's like it *really* sticks out at you."

Grandma Ruby held her eyeglasses up in front of her expressionless face and looked through them at Jackson. From his seat, he had his pointer finger extended toward her, moving it back and forth towards her nose. "Like that. Three. D."

"Boy. What in the world are you talking about? It sounds bizarre. And I don't like the looks of this advertisement," she said, looking back to the paper.

"It's not bizarre, Grandma. Mr. Timms says it's just new."

"August Timms," she said, letting the glasses drop on their chain and turning back to the paper. "That man has been the oddest bird for the longest time." She said it like she was talking

to Grandpa Spencer across the table, though he never looked up from the cup of coffee he was blowing. “Spending his family’s fortune on that silly picture show that I’m sure has never made a dime. Especially when he keeps showing these strange little movies that no one wants to see.”

“I do. I really want to see *House of Wax*. I think it’ll be—”

“The hand is at your throat?” she read from the paper, the pitch of her voice rising at the end. “The horror that chills the spine? And this picture of a half-naked girl? Nothing about this seems fit for a twelve year-old boy. I don’t think so, Jackson.”

“Aww, but Grandma—”

Grandma Ruby raised a single bony finger in front of her face. “You may be dismissed.” Jackson slid his chair back and put his napkin on his plate. He was very careful not to stomp his feet as he left the dining room, but as soon as he was outside, he took off running. He headed south on the sidewalk beside Boulevard, beating his feet towards town. By the time he got to the railroad tracks, the mad was out of his system. On the walk back home, he just felt bad.

The next morning, Jackson was still frustrated. On top of that, he was impatient waiting around the house for the mailman to come by, so he headed up the street to look out for him. He’d walked several blocks when he saw the uniformed man stepping off of a porch ahead of him. Jackson ducked behind the Richards’ azalea bushes and waited.

The man passed within a few feet of Jackson and turned up the Richards’ sidewalk. He double-checked an envelope before sliding it through the slot in the box beside the Richards’ front door. He carried a big, brown leather bag over his shoulder, and a flat, short-billed hat sat forward over jet-black hair. Jackson cringed, thinking he was caught when the mailman turned

back towards him and stepped off the porch. Already absorbed in his next batch of envelopes though, the man kept on his way without noticing the young boy crouching beside the bushes.

From a distance, Jackson followed along, skipping behind trees, crossing to the sidewalk on the other side of the street, watching the mailman work. He recognized that same odd step to the man's walk. He'd take several normal strides, then he'd take a long step, or sometimes he'd take a couple of short stutter-steps. Jackson found himself mimicking the walk, trying to understand what the man was doing. Looking at his own feet, he wondered if the man was trying to avoid the cracks in the sidewalk. *Step on a crack, you break your mother's back.*

Jackson noticed the size of the satchel hanging from the mailman's shoulder and he started to feel discouraged. He didn't think it was big enough to hold all the mail for the neighborhood and his package of books too, but he kept following along, edging closer and closer as they neared his own house. When the mailman headed up the Souder's sidewalk, Jackson ran across the street, and by the time the man turned from the mailbox, Jackson was standing just ten feet away, hands on his hips. The mailman stopped in his tracks, looking down at the boy.

"You got a package for me?" Jackson asked.

The mailman opened his bag and rummaged inside. "Nope. I don't see one." The man had a prominent Adam's apple and a very thin face with sunken cheeks. Skeleton-looking, Jackson thought.

"Well I'm expecting one any day now. It's a box of books."

"Books, huh. What sort of books?" The man took off his hat and wiped his face with a handkerchief. His hair was greased back slick.

“Comics and some story books about monsters and outer space. Stuff like that. You can’t get ’em around here.”

“You don’t say? Well, I’ll keep an eye out for ’em.” He put his hat back on with a nod and stepped around Jackson as he headed on his way.

When he neared the end of the Souder’s walk, Jackson yelled after him. “You know, I ain’t supposed to talk to you.”

The man stopped and half-turned back towards Jackson. “Well, I ain’t supposed to talk to you neither.”

“You know how come?” Jackson asked.

“Do you?”

“I reckon it’s because you’re my daddy and they’re afraid you’re gonna hurt me or something. They say you’re a no-good.”

“They? You mean your Grandma Ruby I guess. She’d be the one said that.”

“Grandpa Spencer too,” Jackson said.

“I’m sure he did, if your Grandma Ruby said it first.”

“Well are you?” Jackson asked.

“Am I your daddy?”

“Nah. I know you’re my daddy. Are you a no-good?”

“Well, by some lights, I reckon I am. Guess it depends on who you ask,” The mailman said. He slung his pouch firmly onto his shoulder and resumed his walk down the sidewalk, away from the boy.

“Your name’s Jim Doyle,” Jackson yelled, still standing on the sidewalk in front of his house. The man didn’t answer. Jackson ran to catch up with him. He stayed well off to the side but followed as the mailman walked along. “I know your name. It’s Jim Doyle.”

“So it is. And they call you Jackson Souder.”

“Most boys got the same name as their daddy. How come I don’t?”

Jim Doyle hesitated then casually flipped through the next few envelopes. “That’s something you’ll have to ask your Grandma about.”

“I can’t. She’ll get mad at me,” Jackson said.

“I don’t doubt that a damn bit,” Doyle said, slipping an envelope through the neighbor’s door slot.

“Grandma don’t like cussing neither. She says low people and no-goods do that.”

“Well, young man. Your Grandma don’t know everything.” He kept walking, looking through his envelopes.

Jackson followed along on the grass. As he walked, he pulled up stems of white clover and plucked the petals. “Ain’t you ever felt bad, not having your boy around?”

Doyle stopped again and looked over at him. Jackson tossed a small handful of the clover petals into the air and watched the breeze take them. “What about you?” Doyle asked.

“Ain’t you never felt bad, not having a daddy around?”

“Well, Tessa says I’ve never missed having a monkey, have I?” Jackson answered, matter of fact, still tossing pieces of clover and grass into the air.

“What does that mean?”

“I never had a monkey, so I’ve got no know-how about missing one, do I? Besides, why would I want a no-good hanging around anyway?”

“I don’t reckon you would,” Doyle answered. Then he turned and went on his way. Jackson watched him a moment, then ran to catch up again.

“Hey Mr. Doyle? You gonna keep a look out for my package?”

The uniformed man kept walking. “Young ‘un. I done said I’ll let you know when I see a box for you. But now you’re gonna have to let me be. I got work to do.”

“If my Grandma finds out I talked to you, I’ll get in some kind of trouble,” Jackson said, stopping.

“You and me both.” The mailman yelled back and waved over his shoulder as he kept going.

Jackson scrunched his eyebrows again as he watched the mailman walk on with his odd stride towards the next house. “Shoot,” he said. He’d forgotten to ask Mr. Doyle why he walked so funny, but he didn’t feel like taking up the chase again. Instead, he turned and walked in the other direction, towards town. He was thinking about his books again. And then *House of Wax* again. In 3-D.

The truth was, aside from his recent passing interest in the mystery of the man, Jackson rarely wondered about his daddy anymore. It simply wasn’t something he thought about. For one, he wasn’t the only fatherless kid in town. Some had lost daddies in the fighting, either World War II or Korea. And others, like his buddy Billy Evans, were like him and had no-goods that just weren’t around. Either way, nobody talked about it much.

When he was younger, Jackson had been glad people didn’t bring it up because the idea of his own daddy had been something of a boogey man to him. He grew up hearing his Grandma Ruby and his Grandpa and his Aunt Eunice and several other relatives telling what a sorry, low-life, no-good his daddy really was. Years ago, Grandma Ruby even told Jackson that, on his

second birthday, his daddy, Mr. Jim Doyle, brought him a cake and left it for a present. When she cut a piece, she found that he'd baked shards of glass into it, hoping to maim or kill his boy. "Your daddy," she'd told him, "is a no-good, and you never want to have anything to do with him."

So, for a time, before Jackson quit thinking about it, Jackson had feared the very idea of his daddy, even though he didn't have a face attached to that idea. There had been many nights when Jackson heard scratching at his bedroom window, and he'd known with absolute certainty that his daddy had come to steal him away in the dark. Those nights, he'd buried his head in his pillow to hide. But then came another night when he heard the familiar scratching. That night, instead of hiding, Jackson wondered what the foul man looked like. That night, he jumped from his bed and threw his curtains back, and he realized that, all that time, the scratching had been nothing but the familiar old oak tree right outside his bedroom window.

Now, walking along Boulevard beneath other familiar old oak trees, Jackson's thoughts circled back around to wonder once again about Jim Doyle. It wasn't the sort of swollen wonder he'd felt when he first threw back those curtains or when he first saw the books in that store on Peachtree Street in downtown Atlanta. It was more along the lines of wondering why a body would want to sit and watch a cowboy movie. He just didn't see what all the fuss was about.

Before he realized it, Jackson found that he'd walked right past the door to the pool hall without crossing the street, and he was standing in front of The Grand Theater. There it was, in red block letters across the Now Playing marquee. *House of Wax in 3-D!* A new movie meant that it was Friday already. And tomorrow was Saturday, his picture show day. But not this Saturday. Not this week. Not this picture. He felt like he'd swallowed a mouthful of tobacco spit.

Jackson spent the day trying to come up with some way to convince his Grandma to let him go see the movie, but he knew nothing would work. She always told him, “Once I say a thing, it stays said.” And he knew from experience that the more he asked about a thing, the more said it stayed.

Nevertheless, at dinner that night, Jackson asked her again. He had planned on waiting until after he’d eaten, but as he sat there feeling discouraged, it just came out. Tessa was bringing the Friday night roast to the table when Jackson said, “That 3-D movie starts at the picture show tonight.”

When Tessa placed the dish at the center of the table, Grandma Ruby snapped her chin down and closed her eyes, indicating it was time for the blessing. She spoke a few words of thanks and spooned a helping of yellow squash onto Jackson’s plate and then onto hers before passing it around to Grandpa Spencer. “Did you hear me Grandma?” Jackson said. “That 3-D picture I asked you about is playing now.”

“I believe we’ve already discussed that,” she said without looking at him. Jackson opened his mouth to say something, but she added, “and I’ve already said no.”

Jackson sat staring at his plate with his hands in his lap. Out of sight, he was squeezing his napkin tightly. His grandma stopped serving and stared at him, head tilted, lips pressed together. Jackson could feel her waiting for him to start eating. Instead, he said, “I’m not hungry. May I be excused?”

“No, you may not,” she said.

Jackson looked over to his Grandpa Spencer, but he knew he wouldn’t get any help there. His grandpa would grumble under his breath about Grandma Ruby, and he might crack a joke

about her when Jackson was off fishing with him, but in the room with her, under her glare, he rarely spoke against anything she did or said. Now, the elderly man took a bite of biscuit while he read a day old newspaper.

Grandma Ruby said, “Honestly, Jackson. You know I can’t have you pout because you didn’t get your way. Eating or not, you can sit at the dinner table as a civilized young man is supposed to do.”

Jackson sat, head down, hands in his lap. He could hear his Grandma’s knife scraping the plate as she cut her roast, and he could hear her teeth clack together as she chewed. Every bite made him more and more angry. He had the thought to put his fingers in his ears and start humming to drown her out and make her mad. Instead he said, “I talked to Jim Doyle today.”

Jackson looked over to his grandpa first. He’d stopped mid-chew, hunched over his plate. Slowly, he closed his mouth and went for his napkin. Jackson heard his grandma’s silverware clang as she slammed her knife and fork into her plate.

“What?” Grandma Ruby asked.

“The mailman. I talked to Jim Doyle today.”

Grandma Ruby slapped the table with her open hand, like a judge with his gavel. Jackson looked and saw her sitting erect in her chair, straight as an ironing board. Over her shoulder, in the kitchen, he saw Tessa at the sink. She had her back to them, but she’d frozen with her face turned to the side, listening. “Why in heaven’s name would you do such as that? After all you know about him, after I’ve told you and told you—what in the world were you thinking?”

Jackson didn’t answer. He glanced back to his grandpa for an instant, but in reply, the elderly man raised his eyebrows to echo Grandma Ruby.

Jackson jumped when she smacked the table again and said, “I asked you a question young man.”

In the kitchen, Tessa had her head down and was wiping her hands on her apron. Jackson looked his grandma in the face. “I just wondered about something so I asked him.”

“You wondered about something? That is the most ridiculous excuse for . . .” Her lips were pressed into a line. She looked to Grandpa Spencer, around the room, then back to Jackson. Her voice was shaking when she spoke again. “I have a good mind to spank your little fanny right this very instant. Of all the . . . what did he say to you?”

Jackson didn’t answer. He had his head cowed, and the look she gave him made him feel like he should look away, but he fought the urge and stared back into her eyes. He felt uncomfortable, and the silence pricked at him, but he kept staring back at her.

Finally, it was Grandma Ruby who broke contact as she picked up her napkin and wiped her mouth. “I told you that man is a no-good and he is . . . I’ve a mind to . . . What do you mean disobeying me and speaking to that lout. Well? Answer me.”

“I was asking him to keep an eye out for my books,” Jackson said.

“Oh you were? That’s what you wondered about? You thought that was worth it?. Well. I guess you’ll learn not to wonder, won’t you? You can forget those books. I’ll tell you that this very instant. If they ever do come, they’ll go straight into the furnace, and that is a promise.”

At that, Jackson sat up straight and put his hands on the table. “But that’s not fair.” Jackson looked to his grandpa, but he’d resumed his meal. “You can’t—”

Grandma Ruby snapped back to her own meal as well and said, “You may be dismissed.”

“But that’s not fair.”

“You are dismissed from this table.” Jackson watched her go back to cutting her roast. After another moment, he got up from the table and headed towards the front door. “You will not go outside,” Grandma Ruby said. “Straight to your room. You can go to bed and think about this.” Jackson looked back to her and to his grandpa, but both of them were eating as if he were no longer there. Jackson walked back through the dining room and headed upstairs to his room.

For hours, Jackson lay in his bed with the light off. He had the covers pulled up to his chin. He was sweaty hot, but he didn’t care. He was angry. Frustrated. Sad. But at some point, he looked over to his open window and saw the old oak tree outside. He watched its twisted fingers scratch against the window sash. He saw a face in its trunk. He saw several faces there. His mind wandered, and he thought. He imagined stories and possibilities and futures, and he began to feel better. He kicked the covers off and the night air-dried his sweat, and he slept.

The next morning, Jackson woke up early as always, but he didn’t come downstairs until he’d heard his grandparents leave for the store.

When he finally came to the kitchen, Tessa had biscuits in the warming oven, and she began scrambling a couple eggs in a small cast iron skillet. As Jackson watched her silently making his breakfast, in a frightening flash it occurred to him that what he’d done at dinner last night might have gotten Miss Tessa in a mess. It was her job to watch over him and keep him out of trouble. “Did they bawl you out because of what I done, Miss Tessa?”

She brought the skillet of sizzling eggs to the table and scraped them onto his plate. She smiled and sat at the corner of the table beside him while he ate. “No, honey. I guess it ain’t crossed your grandmama’s mind that I could stop you from doing anything you do.”

“I was so mad I didn’t even think,” Jackson said. He could see Tessa start to say something. Instead she just sighed and smiled at him as she stood and turned to the dishes.

“You think I was wrong, talking to that fella?”

“I don’t know, child.” She came back to the table and sat again, leaning towards him.

“No. Come to think of it, I don’t.”

“What happened with Grandma Ruby and Jim Doyle? And my momma?”

“I don’t know all that story. It wouldn’t be my place to say, but if I did know, honey, I’d tell you. I want you to believe that. Do you? You believe I’d tell you if I knew?”

“I always believe you.”

She patted him on the back of the hand and leaned back in her chair, looking tired. “I do know your momma used to run around some with Mr. Doyle. I mean, they were good friends.

He was real sweet with your momma.”

“But he didn’t marry her, did he? Or I’d have his name.”

“Not that I know of, he didn’t.”

“So that’s why Momma really run off, isn’t it? Because she had a baby but he didn’t marry her. It wasn’t for college like they told me.”

Tessa sighed again and looked at Jackson. “Well. First your momma went off to a hospital while she was pregnant with you. I do know that. They thought it best she not stay here through all that. And then after you were born, it’s like they say. She moved off for college and work. But you’re right. That was part of it, I think. But I can’t say for sure, baby. And I don’t know what was happening with your daddy. I wish I did so I could tell you. I want you to try to believe that your grandparents think they’re doing right by you. They love you fierce. They just . . . they got ideas about how things are supposed to be, and that’s how they’re used to them

being. You just got a different kind of spark, and they don't know what to do with you sometimes. I don't either sometimes, so I can't blame 'em for that. But listen here. I just don't want you to get all mixed up in your own head, fretting about your momma or your daddy or any of that business. Regardless of them, you're a good boy and I don't want none of that to weigh you down.

"I don't fret about it, Miss Tessa. Honest. All that's stuff's done happened. I ain't even real mad at Grandma Ruby no more. I just like to know."

"That's good."

"I was thinking last night, and you know what? If she does burn my books up, I'm gonna open up my allowance bank and buy my own. I can get a bus ticket and go to that store myself. I still have where I wrote down the address. While I'm there, I might even go see me a movie at one of those big fancy theaters with the curtains."

Tessa gave a laugh as she went back to the dishes, and Jackson could tell that she didn't believe him, but he meant it.

When he finished breakfast, he told Tessa he was going out, and he walked off towards town. He kicked stones and jingled the change in his pocket as he walked. A couple blocks up the road, he saw Jim Doyle on his route, coming towards him with his odd stride. When they met each other on the sidewalk, Jim Doyle gave a little wave to the boy as he sifted through his fistful of envelopes. As the man stepped around the boy on the sidewalk, Jackson stopped and yelled after him. "Hey, Mr. Doyle. I want to ask you something."

The man stopped and pushed his hat back on his head. He seemed to be sizing the boy up, deciding if he wanted to hear the question. "All right," he said. "What you want to know?"

“How come you walk so funny going down the sidewalk? You stepping over the cracks?”

“Well. You know what they say. Step on a crack, you break your momma’s back.” He gave Jackson a wink.

“Huh,” Jackson said. “That ain’t true, you know.”

“Says who?”

“I did it once. I stepped on one and got scared, so I wrote my momma a letter but she wrote me back and said I never hurt her none. So it ain’t true.”

Jim Doyle wiped his face with his handkerchief, and tucked it in his back pocket. “Is that a fact?” he said. Then he gave a little wave and headed off on his way.

Jackson watched him go. Despite what he’d said, the man kept on with his odd steps. Finally Jackson shrugged, turned, and headed back towards town. As he went, he walked faster and faster. In just a minute, he was running full on down the sidewalk, Chuck Taylor’s barely touching the concrete. He was excited and happy, looking forward to his afternoon at the picture show.

The Deacon's Daughter

To be honest, school wasn't always important to me. Not like it is now. I never tried very hard when it came to grades. I don't guess I can change how I was before, but the new school year starts tomorrow and I'm really looking forward to getting back because now, as cheesy as this may sound, I realize that high school is the key to my future. Unfortunately, I have a lot of work to do because . . . well. I'm a little bit behind. I missed half of the last school year because I was pregnant.

Yeah. I had a baby. It wouldn't be that big of a deal except for the fact that I'm sixteen. Preggo at fifteen. Baby at sixteen. Blah blah. Whatever. I've heard it all and I've figured out that when it comes to having a baby, what people think and how they look at you really depends on your age. You get pregnant in your twenties, early thirties? Awesome. It's God's blessing. Women squeal and men nod their heads, giving you this proud look like all is right with the world. You get pregnant in your late thirties or early forties, it's basically the same except there's a *but* in there that nobody likes to talk about. Everybody's glad you're giving it a go, *but* since you're so old, they're worried you're going to have a fucked up retard or something. You get pregnant at fifteen though? Well. You can count on getting called a slut or a bitch by the kids who don't like you, which kind of sucks, but at least you know where you stand with them. It's a hell of a lot better than the pity peeks or holier-than-thou stink-eyes you see from most of the other assholes you meet. Especially the grown-ups. They're the worst. They don't say much, but you can sure as shit see it in their faces. Used to be I didn't cuss as much as I do now, but . . . you know.

My name is Brittany Gann. My baby's daddy is a guy named Cody Roberts. He'll be a senior this year. My own daddy hates that term, *baby daddy*. He gets on to me every time I say it. He won't explain why, but I figure he thinks of it as something black people say. He's that way. But that's all Cody is ever going to be because he sucks and I'm sure as hell not marrying him. We started dating when I was in the ninth grade. I was a cheerleader and Cody was a sophomore linebacker for the JV football team. He was funny. Nice looking. And everybody liked him, so at some point, we started going out.

"Going out" is a stupid name for it, of course. At first, our dates were nothing but Cody coming over to my house a couple nights a week to eat supper and watch television. *American Idol* and beef stroganoff turned into a regular thing. After a while, I started asking if we could go up to my room to watch. At first, everybody acted like that was a big deal, especially my Grandma Bea who lives across the street from us. She was mortified. Said in her day nothing like that ever happened. But, you know. Things aren't like they were, so daddy eventually eased up and let us, and soon enough, it was just normal.

Of course, once me and Cody got some alone time, we started messing around. Cody was always wanting to do something and then a little more something. And, whether it makes me a whore or not, I was curious too. Everybody's always talking about sex. Taylor Hobbs and my other friends were asking me had we done it, had we done it, and Cody was getting ready to pop, so you know. If we were going to keep dating, it was either sex or a blow job, and I'm sorry. A guy pees through his thing. I ain't putting it in my mouth. So, one night with mom and daddy downstairs watching one of their shows, we did it right quick. It was—I don't know. It wasn't like in the movies. I can tell you that for sure. At the time, I suppose it seemed sweet and

I know I wasn't as bitchy about it then as I sound now, but things are different, so . . . Anyway, over the next two weeks, we did it three more times. Apparently, one of them took.

Now, I've already heard all the lectures about condoms and birth control pills and blah blah blah. Whatever. Okay? I didn't use them, obviously. Condoms seem gross if you want to know the truth, and there was no fucking way I was going to ask my mom about birth control pills. *Hey mom. Let's go pick up some B.C. pills so I can get me some dick.* I wouldn't have put it that way, of course, but you can bet that's what she would've heard. Besides, someone told me there are really only a couple days a month a girl can actually get pregnant, so you know. I didn't think about it, okay?. That's all there is to it.

I was pretty sure for a couple weeks before I said anything about it. Naturally, I told Cody first. One morning after first period I tugged him away from the lockers. He was still looking over my shoulder talking to someone else while I was trying to get his attention. I kept saying, "Cody. Cody, listen." Somehow, at that very second, I wasn't nervous. Not exactly. I guess I was pretending he might actually be happy about the news. It may sound stupid, but people do that, you know. They trick themselves into believing whatever they want. Happens all the time. Anyway, when Cody finally looked at me, I just dropped it. "I'm pregnant." He stared for a second, trying to figure out if I was telling the truth, I guess. And then he literally gagged. I can still see his tongue poking out. If I'd told him after lunch period, he probably would've puked into his locker. I wish I had waited. Now, when I look back, I'm kind of embarrassed by how his reaction made me cry.

Once the word was out, I knew I had to tell Mom and Daddy. I bailed on my biology class trying to figure out what to do. Finally, right before history, I caved and sent Mom a text. *Don't know how to tell you. I'm pregnant. Don't be mad.* I turned my phone off and went to

class. Even on a good day, I have trouble getting into history. It's not that I'm dumb or anything. I'm not at all. I just don't like it. You know? All those dates and places and pictures of people looked all stiff and bored and boring. Who can keep all that shit straight? So, you can imagine what it was like that day, trying not to look at anyone, especially Cody, sitting just one desk away. Mr. Lewis' voice sounded like when I listen to the radio in the bathtub, with my ears under the water. I remember sitting there forever with my face feeling all hot and throbbly, and then somebody called over the intercom saying "Brittany Gann needs to report to the attendance office to check out." At that second, my stomach was tumbling so bad it's a wonder the baby survived.

When I got to the office door, I peeked in through the long slit of a window and I saw my mom doing her talky-smiley thing with the secretary. Except for her *mother hairstyle* and a few extra pounds, my mom's a pretty lady. She dresses nice, and she could make a living in hair and make-up. I mean, really. Hers is always perfect. She can even line her lips without a mirror. Watching her chat with Mrs. Adams, you'd have thought we were checking out for an orthodontist appointment and a pedicure. Unless, that is, you knew to look for that little ripple she gets along her jaw when she's squeezing her smile too tight. But there it was. And when I opened the door, I saw that quick little darty business she does with her eyes, like she doesn't want to get caught looking at me. Mom's always doing shit with her face and her eyes, giving herself away, and she don't even know it. As soon as she saw me, she looked down and started digging in her purse for her keys. Then she gave Mrs. Adams a twinkle-eye smile and said we had to get going. Before she ever really looked at me, she had the car cranked and her seatbelt buckled. As soon as she did look, though, she started crying, and I felt my own chin knotting up again. I hate crying.

We told Daddy a couple days later, after we'd gone to the doctor to make sure I really was pregnant. He was pretty much disgusted. Of course, he didn't say that. In fact, for a few days he wouldn't talk to me much at all beyond "go to your room" or "turn off your cell phone." Then we went through the part where he started blaming "that boy," wanting to know if Cody had pressured me into having sex with him. He really wanted me to say "Yes Daddy. I never wanted to do it," but I couldn't. So then, when it couldn't be anyone else's fault but mine, he started in with the lectures and the yelling. One night when he was going on at me, I remember thinking, I'm sorry daddy. I should have just sucked his dick. Can you imagine his face if I'd said that out loud? I started laughing at the thought of it, and boy, did that set him off. That whole period was pretty horrible, if you want to know the truth, but none of it was worse than the night our families got together to "talk this thing through." Oh my God. I can't even say. There's no way in hell I'm telling about it. In fact, for the rest of my life, I'm going to do my best to forget that night ever happened.

School sucked too. If it was possible, I'd have to say that school sucked more. At home, at least I had my room. At school, the only place where someone didn't stare at me was in a bathroom stall. Don't get me wrong. At Laurel County High School, we have all kinds of pregnant girls. Usually, it's just a thing. "Hey girl. You pregnant? When's it due?" But I was the popular pregnant cheerleader. The popular pregnant cheerleader in gym. The pregnant cheerleader in history class. The pregnant cheerleader with the church deacon daddy. My daddy wasn't actually a church deacon, but you can't count on anybody to get their fucking facts straight. They just want to talk shit, and they did talk it. All the time.

Despite all that, I managed for a while. I might have kept on managing, but Cody couldn't handle the attention that came with dating that kind of celebrity. It was weird. I was a

slut, but he was just the father of my child, doing the honorable thing. I got called a whore. His buddies just picked on him. It all came to a head one day when I was feeling pretty shitty with my belly showing and me looking fat and ugly as sin. Cody had gotten to where he'd stand next to me, he'd answer if I said something, and if I took his hand, he'd leave it there until he needed to scratch or check his cell phone. I wouldn't admit it then, but I could tell he wasn't feeling it. That day, I was upset about something. On top of all those weeks of shit, somebody had either said something or looked at me funny, or I'd just thought they said something or looked at me funny. Whatever it was, we were standing at his locker and Cody had his arm around me. Then a couple of his friends from the football team walked up and David Martell said, "Hey, leggo my preggo."

They all laughed. It was a dumb little high school boy thing to say, but that was it for Cody. That was the last bit of picking he could stand. He dropped his arm and said we'd talk later. We did. Right before biology class, he said he was breaking up with me.

"I'll do right by our baby," he said. "But we don't have to stay together for me to do that. I mean, you didn't really want to get married, did you?"

I just stood there looking at his my hand on his belt buckle. My throat was aching and I knew I'd cry if I tried to say anything.

"Hell," he said. "More than half the marriages in the whole country end up in divorce. You may not get that because your parents are still together, but my dad's on his second, and that ain't nothing to do to a kid. You want to go through all that?"

I finally squeaked out something like, "No, but we might not . . ." And then, of course, I did start to cry. He hugged me, but it was a different sort of hug and I could feel it, which made me cry even harder.

Now, looking back from this end of things, I realize how pathetic all that sounds. It would be easy for me to sit here and tell you that Cody breaking up with me was no big deal. Hell. I could even tell you I broke up with him for that matter. I got tired of his immature ways and decided I'd wait for someone who deserved me. Maybe I will tell it like that one day. But, the honest truth is that it tore me up. I ran to the bathroom, shut myself up in the last stall to sob as quietly as I could, and once again, I skipped biology trying to get my shit together.

I started to text my mom and check out of school, but something happened. Sometime during my snot and slobber fest, I started to get pissed off. Of course, it wasn't all about Cody, but at that moment, it felt like it was. I thought about how I didn't need him and I sure as hell wasn't going to let him think he'd hurt me or chased me off. So, just like the day I'd told Cody the big news, I collected myself enough to go to history class.

I handled myself pretty well at first. I actually took notes and focused on Mr. Lewis when he spoke. I turned to the page he was reading from. I pretended not to notice the fact that Cody didn't even try to catch my eye, and I ignored that blond bitch Taylor Hobbs giggling and scribbling something on the corner of his notebook. At one point though, I was writing some such and such about a war with Mexico, and I said something in a normal tone of voice. Something like, "You sure aren't wasting any time."

Everyone heard it. Mr. Lewis looked back like he thought I was asking him a question. The other students gave me a quick look, but they didn't hear any drama in my voice, so they went back to their own business and Mr. Lewis took up his lecture again. Cody and Taylor kept staring back at me though. Finally Taylor scrunched her pretty little bitch face and said something like, "We're just joking around. You two aren't together anymore anyway."

Cody said, "Just chill, Britt."

I went on copying notes from the board, not really looking at either one of them. Keeping a conversational tone of voice, I said, “You should definitely stay on the birth control pills. He may not stick around, but we sure as hell know he’s fertile.”

Taylor poked out her lower jaw and gave me an *eat shit* look while cutting her eyes to see if anyone else was paying attention. The students around us definitely were.

Cody said, “Jesus.” Then he whispered to Taylor, “I guess being pregnant does that to you.”

“Shut the fuck up Cody.” I couldn’t help myself and I couldn’t control my voice any longer. The whole class froze and stared back at me.

Mr. Lewis took off his glasses, looking all appalled and said, “Brittany!”

“What?” I practically shouted back at him.

“I’m not sure what’s going on, but you know you can’t talk like that in class.”

“Well, you need to tell Cody to shut his dick sucker.”

“Brittany!”

I stood up and yelled at Taylor’s mortified face, “And you better keep yours shut too.” I slapped my history book off the desk, grabbed my purse and marched out of the class. I barely kept myself from giving Taylor’s hair a good yank as I passed. Mr. Lewis said something after me, but I was already texting my mom to come get me.

That was the last day of my sophomore year. Technically, I didn’t quit. The next morning, I made Mom carry me to my doctor and told him how school was freaking me out and how walking around was making my back hurt and blah blah, so he helped me get approved for homebound schooling. Of course, I didn’t do any of the work that my teachers sent home, so if I’m honest, I guess I sort of did quit.

After that, the only shit I had to put up with came from my family, but by then, that wasn't too bad anymore. Gradually, they had changed their tune or been replaced by Facebook aliens or something. Mom and Daddy had both stayed pretty cold to me for those first several weeks after they found out, but once my little package became public knowledge, I'd notice Daddy posting status updates on Facebook, saying shit he never said at home about God working in mysterious ways or going on about how excited he was to be a granddad. I'd read that online, but at home, he'd still look down his nose at me and say, "Turn off your cell phone." On the way to church, he and Mom would sit in the front seat looking out the windshield, but once we got in, they turned into *happy people*. They were all smiles and handshakes and praise the lord. Then, at some point—I didn't even really notice when—it was like they changed into those *happy people* and forgot to change back. They were just okay with everything, excited even. Sometimes, it creeped me out if you want to know the truth. I suppose I should've been like *you two are so full of shit blah blah blah*. But honestly, it was just easier to let it be and pretend right along with them.

The only person who didn't change or pretend anything was my grandma Bea. After I quit going to school, Mom made me stay with her during the day. Grandma Bea didn't talk around it all. She'd shake her head and say "Of all things . . ." or "I simply cannot believe . . ." Strangely enough, I didn't really mind. It wasn't like she was at me every second, and when she was, it wasn't like she was mean about it. I know that sounds weird. How can someone say "My, your face sure is getting fat," and it not be mean? She'd have her hands in some biscuit dough and say, "I never did like those skimpy little cheerleading outfits. If nothing else, I don't guess we'll have to worry about you wearing those anymore." Somehow, it just seemed like she

was telling me like it was in her old person way, but with her, I never felt like she didn't love me anymore.

One day we were sitting on the porch and Grandma Bea was trying to show me how to knit. I wasn't working too hard to pick it up because really. Who knits anymore? She was making some orange something, her needles clicking away, and she started telling me how I was actually lucky that the world was in such sorry shape and that I had such understanding parents. "Back in my time," she said, "people weren't so used to such things. If a young lady found herself in your condition, she'd be packed off."

"Packed off? What does that mean?"

"She'd be sent away. To Chicago or some other where. They had special homes for such women. A young girl would come to be with child and she'd up and disappear for a few months. Off visiting relatives, people would say, or maybe she went away to school for a while. Then one day she was home again."

"What about the baby?"

"Adopted. Orphanage maybe. It was all very tragic."

You go where no one knows you? You come back home and hit the reset button? I thought it sounded pretty damn good. See, when all my shit started, I was worried about telling people I was pregnant, and then I fretted over the drama around being pregnant, but by that day with Grandma Bea, I was pretty far along and I had finally started worrying about the fact that I was actually going to have a baby, and I have to tell you. I wasn't excited. I'd mention that to Mom and she'd say, "Oh, you will be. You just wait and see." But I wasn't feeling it. Then we found out the baby was going to be a boy, and I still wasn't. Fact is, I didn't want a kid and I didn't want any of the stuff that went with having one and I didn't want to miss any of the living

that having a kid would make me miss, so that day was the first time it seriously occurred to me that I might not have to keep it.

Now I realize that might sound silly. In this day and age, how can a girl not be aware of her options? Abortion? Adoption? Well. You ain't me. In my world, we didn't consider things like that any more than we consider eating dogs or cats.

So, I took a couple days to think about it and work up my nerve. Then, one night over dinner I told Mom and Daddy that I wanted to put my baby up for adoption. Mom just rolled her eyes and took another drink of her sweet tea. Daddy stared at me and said, "What?"

"I want to put him up for adoption. Somewhere else."

"Don't be silly," he said.

"I'm serious."

"No," he said, and went back to cutting his meat.

Mother reached over and put a hand on me and said, "Sweetie, I know you're scared, but you're going to love this baby. You'll see his little face and you'll just love him like you won't believe. You'll learn what to do and how to take care of him. And we'll be there too, honey. We're going to help you blah blah blah."

That talk went on a bit longer, and there were a couple more besides, but you get the picture.

So, of course, I had the kid. Water broke. Spinal. Push push. Plop. Yeah, that's simplifying a little bit, but to be honest, that's about all I care to remember of the whole process. The details involve my mom aggravating the absolute shit out of me and staying in the god damn room no matter how many times I asked her to leave. Daddy got a glimpse of my cooch, which

was awesome. And to top it off, Cody got to see me looking as abso-fucking-ugly as I'll ever look in my life. Also awesome.

And I finally saw my kid. I named him Ben, by the way. That was my grandpa's name. I don't remember him, but Grandma Bea loved him, and it's better than Matthew or Mark, which were the two names my mom was pushing on me. Seeing the kid that first time was . . . I don't know. He was soft and wrinkled and . . . I feel like I'm supposed to say *cute*. I think I remember the moment as *cute*, but that might be pushing it because he was really wrinkled and at first, his head was shaped kind of funny. I do remember feeling like I was holding somebody's wedding cake. *Holy shit, holy shit, don't drop it.* I didn't cry for a change. I remember that for sure.

That was all three months ago. I spent this last summer being a mom, and it was really fucking hard. Cleaning, feeding, waking up, being there every second—all the stuff you've always heard about. That part sucks. Changing dirty diapers and wiping up puke is the worst. Everybody always said I wouldn't mind when it was my own kid, but I do. It's gross. Luckily, my mom seems to get a kick out of the whole thing, even the diapers. She coos away with that baby talk while wiping up all sorts of nastiness. She loves having a baby around the house. It's like she's a whole new person now with something important to do every second of the day. A couple weeks ago, she cut her hours way back at work so that she can be around to watch Ben even more. And I'm thankful for that. I am. It's because of her and Daddy that I'm able to go back to school.

Don't get me wrong. I love Ben. He's great, and I don't want to come across sounding like a shit or anything. But I don't know if this is for me. Not now. I mean, I know I got pregnant and had a baby and one day, maybe I'll be a good mom, but right now, I'm still way young. I still have a lot of living to do myself. Things I don't want to miss out on, you know? I

have to figure out what I want to do with my own life, who I'm going to be. Fall in love, for real. Get married. Find a career. If nothing else, I just want to get away from all this for a while, and I've realized that the best way to do that is to go to college. Daddy's even excited about the idea of me being interested in college. And the first step on that road is getting through high school. I have all this time ahead of me and I can't spend it worrying about what's behind me. I can't let one rough year hold me back. So, my future starts again tomorrow. I'm going back to school and I'm not going to waste my time or worry about the other kids and their bullshit drama. I'm going to work and study and this time, I'm going to kick ass.

Sheriff

As much as possible, you walk along the tree line, just in case. It's high enough to give a good view of the pasture rolling out below. You move out onto the new spring fescue grass to peek over into a swale when needed. You kick at the tufts of onion weed, dragging the shovel behind in your left hand. Likely, this time of the morning, Marlon will either be in his garden or already out watching his still. He shouldn't have any cause to be out in the pasture. But, you try to stay close to the trees. In your right hand, you carry your 30/30 rifle by the stock, just in case.

You're looking for a patch of green that's greener than it should be yet. Taller than it should be yet. Not one of a hundred small bunches fed by individual piles of manure but one the size of a patchwork quilt. You don't even half expect to find anything. Marlon could've buried him anywhere. Or thrown him in the river. Or a well. But it's been five months and ain't nothing turned up or stuck under a bridge or hung on a bank. It's been five whole god damn months of nothing and there's not much else you can do, so you're set to walk as much of Marlon Buttram's land as you can, just in case.

Already this morning, you've dug into three thick patches. One grew on sloped earth where a hole would've been more work, but you dug just the same and you found the remains of an old heifer. The other got your blood up when you saw it, a rug in the middle of a gentle dip in open pasture. You went four feet down but found nothing. Both times you dug quickly, eyes scanning out and around for Marlon or his people, eyes down looking for cloth or bone. Both times, you tried to hide your work after you were done.

Now, with the sun climbing past morning, you prop your spade against a pine. It's a pleasant spring day, but the work and the walk and the worry have you tired and wet and dirty.

You push your handkerchief underneath your straw hat to swab the sweat from your balding crown. You unbutton your shirt to mid-belly and wipe the sweat from your chest as well. Fifty-eight year old knees crack as you squat to rest. You've skirted the trees until you're near the end of your cover. You've looked over about as much pasture as you can without coming within sight of Marlon's house or walking too far out in the open. Just ahead of you, the rusty barbed wire leaves the pines and turns sharply to the right, following the dirt road that leads to his house. Scanning the wire along its run, you notice it's loose on a post or two and sags in places.

Near the far corner of this arm of pasture, maybe a hundred yards away, your sight falls on a metal swing gate. From the gate, you casually trace the flattest line into the pasture, the easiest path for anyone driving a truck or a car. To the left of the gate, there's a terrace. A truck could climb it, but a fella would have to want to climb it. If it were you driving in, you would want to bend right after entering the gate towards the flattest part of the swale. It looked to be easier driving there. Following that line to the center of the shallow valley, just at the base of the rise you're standing on, you're fairly certain you see the remains of the path Marlon or his boys probably took every few days last year while going to throw hay to the cows. Only sparse growth has pushed up through the packed ground. And there, maybe seventy-five yards away, just a short walk off of that path, you see it. A patch of grass greener than the green around it, about the size of a ragged blanket rolled out for a picnic. Now, you're half certain of exactly what you're going to find.

Roger Bates went missing the night before Halloween last year. He'd gone to Millsap's to play poker and he hasn't been seen since. Little more than a well-built wooden shack, Millsap's was a so-called men's club by the river. Years back, the whiskey council met there for business matters, but since they tended to gather at one another's houses now, it's turned into a

place for members and friends of members to gamble and drink. Officially, no one owns it or profits from it, but everybody knows it's Marlon Buttram's place.

Marlon's daddy was a whiskey man, and whiskey men usually made sure them and theirs toed the line to avoid attention, but Marlon has always been a bold one with a downright mean streak and the family now follows his lead. You don't like him or his kin, but in all these years, you've never been able to hang anything on him. You know Marlon's the one that cut Wally Treat so bad some of his guts were poking through, but Wally wouldn't say it. You know lots of wrong on Marlon Buttram, but you've never found anyone that would say it to a judge and jury, and honestly, you don't blame them.

When Ramey Bates came to you about his son, you were afraid he'd gone afoul at Millsap's, but Marlon and seven other men swore Roger left there whole and hearty that night with a pocketful of poker winnings, and they've sworn to it every since.

In December, you locked up Byron Goodwin for Public Drunkenness. In the drunk tank, Byron started crying and rambling about that boy getting killed at Millsap's and you knew then what you'd suspected before, but you still couldn't do anything about it. The next day Byron denied what he'd said and begged you not to tell a word. He begged you. He still ain't right in his head. That business at Millsap's, whatever he saw, it did something to him. Seeing a man killed can do something to you.

Now, squatting in Marlon Buttram's pasture, you pull up a handful of new fescue and toss the pieces to the breeze in front of you, deciding what to do next. If Marlon knew you might hang a murder on him, he'd kill you graveyard dead. No question. You could tramp back to the car. This far towards the county line, you're five miles outside of the radio's range, but really. You ain't been seen, so there's no hurry. Which deputy came on duty this morning? Johnny

Vinson, most likely. You could go call him. Or, you could pull whichever city badge was on duty in Laurel and deputize him. Both would be a good idea. For that matter, you could go fetch Herman, who you trust above all men. He ain't a deputy, but he's as tough as a coffin nail. That wouldn't be a bad idea either.

Or you could walk your ass right out there in the open and put your shovel in that new patch of green and see if Ramey Bates' boy is rotting there. You think about the two conversations you've had with Marlon about Roger. Both of them went the way Marlon wanted. He had his boys close and you didn't. He relaxed and you couldn't. And the fact is that you were afraid and he wasn't. He knew it. And so did you. You've taken the floor in front of the whiskey council and told them what the arrangements would be. You've arrested Pete Shooks and wrestled him into the jail even though your handcuffs wouldn't fit around his wrists. But the fact is, every time a line's been drawn, you were afraid to cross Marlon Buttram because you feared he'd shoot you through your kitchen window.

You pry on the lever of your rifle to make sure there's a bullet in the chamber, and you cock the hammer with your right thumb. Standing up with an inadvertent grunt, you swing the shovel onto your left shoulder, and you leave the cover of the trees.

Walking down the slope, the grade is steep enough that you feel the extra weight in your knees forcing you take longer, heavier steps to keep up with your momentum. As the ground flattens, you stutter step to a stop and kneel down. The patch of grass in front of you is just as green and thick as it looked from the trees. You rub your hand across the new growth like you're petting your dog, and you put an ear out and an eye on the road. With the trees uphill to your left and the terrace on your right, you figure it's just that one-lane dirt road you'll have to be wary of, so you watch and you dig.

The bottomland dirt is soft from the spring rains. You slide your shovel underneath and scalp sheets of grass to hide your work with afterwards, then you put your boot to it and start on a three foot square. It's a good sound, that metal spade sinking in. An old sound. And the soil you turn up is heavy and black. This would be a fine place to plant.

You're just past knee deep when you put your heel to the shovel's back edge and feel the blade hit six inches further down. With your weight, you hear a dull snap and the shovel glances off something hard. You rake the dirt with the shovel's point and uncover a dirty, yellow-white line. Dropping into the hole, you use your hands to wipe and dig the dirt from the edges of the line and in a frantic minute you uncover two rounded lengths of bone. It's a man's forearm. It's slick from what you figure must be the bare remains of skin and muscle. The smaller of the two arm bones has been cut in two by your shovel. When you find the tiny, hard pieces of the hand, you probe around with your index finger until the thighbone laying beside it starts to take shape. Uncovering what were more fleshy parts of the body, the familiar smell rises, but after five months, it's tolerable.

Your heart is thundering away and for the first time, you feel like someone is watching you. From your knees in the hole, you peak up like a groundhog and look about. There's nothing to see but the empty pasture and a bare stretch of road and nothing to hear but pines whispering and creaking in the wind.

You take up your shovel and start moving the edge of your hole towards where the man's head must be. You're in such a rush that you throw the dirt back onto the bones you've just uncovered. When your scraping cleans off a right shoulder blade, you realize this man is face down in his shallow grave. Carefully, you keep moving dirt away. When you're close, rather than risk doing any more damage, you use your pocketknife and hands to reveal the curved dome

of the back of the skull. It confirms what didn't really need confirming. It's shattered. Gunshot. Crowbar. Something.

You sit on the edge of your hole and look at the dirty white ruin caked in black earth. You figure it must be Roger Bates. There are probably a few others it could be, but Roger seems most likely. It's then you hear a vehicle in the distance. You scramble for your rifle and throw your body flat across the hole, raising up just enough to train your sights along the barbed-wire beside the road, maybe fifty yards away.

As soon as you can place the direction of the rumbling engine, you aim to the left and draw a bead on the point where the road clears the tree line. In a few seconds, an old, familiar blue pick-up leads a dust cloud up the road towards the house. That'll be Marlon's oldest boy, Jacob. With your rifle's front sight, you follow the truck from the time it leaves the trees till it disappears around the bend on the right. You never saw the truck hitch or the boy's head move, but you keep your rifle trained where the truck left your sight, just in case.

After a full minute, you sit backwards against the other side of the hole and widen your focus so you can watch the road and the terrace that hides you from the sight of Marlon's house. Jacob could come back any minute, and you might not be so lucky next time, so you have to make another decision about what to do next. By the book, you should go to the office, call the judge for a warrant, and hustle back here with some deputies to arrest Marlon Buttram. It's cut and dried. But the whole thing plays out in your head in just a few seconds.

Say you do arrest Marlon and take him in. He'll claim he didn't do it, and he'll have that alibi with a passel of witnesses lined up behind him. You'll know they're lying, but there they'll be. He'll say he don't know who those bones in his pasture belong to and he don't know how they got there. He won't even try to act sincere about it. In fact, he'll likely rub his watermelon

belly and smile when he tells it, but you won't be able to prove otherwise. But say you actually put him on trial for once. Can you tie him to Roger's bones? Hell. Truth is, you wonder if you can even prove it's Roger laying in this hole with you, and you'd have to. But even if you could do all that, do you think a jury of his peers is going to convict Marlon Buttram? If you put Marlon away, his mean ass boys and his firebug brother and the rest of his people will still be out and about and they'll know the names and faces of every man who voted to lock Marlon away. With the black clouds around the Buttram name, there still ain't a soul in the county who'd convict Marlon and you know it.

You think how right and wrong ought to be simple things. Justice ought to be a simple thing. But so much has changed. It's all come to be so complicated. So many opinions. So many rules to follow. So many holes to hide sins in. So much has come to be about somebody's big words written on some page in some book. It's that instead of the simple right and wrong of a thing. That instead of the simple truth of a thing. With all the words and rules and opinions these days, the truth gets buried. And it'll get buried this time too.

But you're the sheriff. It's your job to see that right gets done. You could put a bullet in Marlon and end the whole matter. Shoot him through his kitchen window or take him alone out in his field. Maybe you should have done it years ago. You've certainly thought about it, but that ain't just and you're the sheriff. So how do you make justice out of this? A boy killed and buried in a pasture. A father losing his son. It don't take long for you to realize it ain't really that complicated. Sitting with your back against the edge of a shallow grave with the bones of Roger Bates, it don't take but a few seconds for you to figure out what ought to be done. It's clear as day. You climb out of the hole and rake the dirt back in as quick as you can. After placing the grass back across the top, you listen hard while you catch your breath, and when

you're sure it's clear, you take your rifle and shovel and start the long walk back towards your car.

“You'll find him in that hollow, like I said. You'll see where I dug. And I am sorry about that broke arm, but I was in a hurry.”

Ramey Bates is sitting on his haunches out back of his house. He's a tall, thin man, but you know him to be strong, made of tough wires and cords. He scoops up a handful of dust and tosses it at a chicken that's come pecking nearby. He looks over to his youngest son who's been standing by the well listening quietly. The boy looks to be no more than thirteen, but you think he's handled himself like a man. He's built in his daddy's image. Then Ramey stands and wipes the remaining dust on his pants before extending his right hand to you. His face is lined and cracked from sun and work, and the hand you shake is leather and callused, the grip firm and true.

“This is a kindness you're doing,” Ramey says. “For me and my family.” He calls his youngest over and tells him to shake your hand. His hand is smaller and a little softer, but the grip is coming along. With his hands on the boy's shoulders Ramey says he don't know how to repay you.

“Just keep your word,” you tell him. Nobody but Marlon. No message. No sign. Nobody else. Catching him alone at his still shouldn't be a problem. Ramey swears to you it'll be that or nothing, so help him God.

It's two Saturday's on before you hear that Marlon Buttram has gone missing. Went to work on his still one day and never came home. It's all the talk at church the Sunday after. Over

cigarettes before service, the fellas want to know what you've found or what you've heard. Maybe he just up and left, you say. But knowing Marlon and the company he's kept, like as not, you figure he's in a hole somewhere. The fellas nod, and one of them says it couldn't happen to a better man. Everybody chuckles. You think to yourself how you'd be willing to bet you knew exactly what hole Marlon was residing in. That would be just. While the piano starts up, you step on your cigarette and turn to head inside, telling the stragglers you'll keep your eyes and ears out, just in case something turns up. You take off your hat and go on in, feeling right and clean and fresh as the morning.

Vita

The author was born in Carrollton, Georgia in 1969. He obtained Bachelor's degrees in English and Film from Georgia State University in 1998. He has been a high school literature teacher since 1999. In 2009, he joined the Low Residency MFA program at the University of New Orleans and began working towards his degree in Creative Writing.