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It's Never Perfect

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It's Never Perfect

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
Creative Writing

by

Caroline H. Goetze

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Acknowledgments

The germ of these stories came from a road trip along Interstate 10, where radio is even more local than it is where I live in rural Michigan. So thank you, Rosey Bud Florists of Sonora, Texas for putting your small-town ads on the airwaves and helping this particular cast of characters begin to populate my mind.

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RosieBud Florists

Bud Nolan's legs didn't fit right. Not the one for street wear with its black leather oxford and corset laces that kept the knee hinge steady. Not the one for around the house that wore only a sock and was held on with a two-buckle strap. He hated the grooves that were meant to suggest toes and the sheer half sock that reminded him of women's stockings. Hated the fancy perforations along the edges of the shoe's toe and heel caps.

In the mornings, he used a crutch to steady him on his hop from the bedroom to the yellow and white kitchen. He didn't take the place at the head of the scrubbed oak table that was

his grandmother's wedding gift to him and Rosie. Instead he chose a chair to the side, where he could watch Rosie at the sink and see her African violets on the windowsill.

Rosie seemed lusher since he was home from the hospital. There were small furrows around the waist of her flannel gown. The faded fabric strained some where it hiked up over her hips. Watching her glide from sink to stove readying their breakfast stirred him. He fingered the ridge of his amputation scar. The stirring stopped.

She brought his coffee on her way to the door to fetch the cream she ordered from the milkman who delivered twice a week. When she returned, a chill seeped in behind her boiled wool slippers, and snowflakes dissolved in her dark hair. She set the cream bottle on the table.

He ignored it and wrapped both hands around the thick mug, leaning close to let the steam from the coffee coat his face. His missing leg pulsed with phantom pain and cold.

At the hospital in Japan, the Navy doctor had told Bud that lying on the truck waiting for evacuation probably saved his life.

Brutal Korean cold may have prevented sepsis in his stomach wound, but in the warm hospital, his frostbite festered. The first operation took everything below his ankle. By the time the medical transport landed in Battle Creek, the infection in his tibia was so advanced that they took him lights and siren from the airport to surgery.

During one of her weekly visits, Rosie sat by his hospital bed, head bent over her embroidery hoop. "You still have your knee," she'd said. "We're lucky."

Bud didn't trust luck. He couldn't forget the dead Marines sprawled beside him in the back of the deuce and a half at Hagaru.

The first time Bud saw Rosie Calhoun was at the Methodist Church Strawberry Social. On that summer day, it was her laugh he noticed first, the way it shook her shoulders. The way it

chopped through the air, louder than her girlfriend's. It wasn't until the end of their second date, sharing a root beer after dancing all night at the Arcadia Ballroom, that he noticed the daisies on her straw hat matched the ones embroidered near the wrists of her white cotton gloves.

For their wedding Bud picked a bouquet of daisies for Rosie to carry. His slow recuperation had altered their plans. Instead of a big church wedding, they'd had a small ceremony, with only close family for attendants. Still, Rosie had looked lovely in the gown her mother made.

"I need at least one picture," Bud's grandmother said, shoos them through the rectory door.

On the sidewalk in front of them, a 1949 Cadillac crouched like a titanic cat. As soon as the shutter snapped, Bud's new father-in law slipped him the keys to the car and an envelope with a hundred dollars in it, and Rosie and Bud escaped for a weekend at Niagara Falls. In the black and white photo, no one would be able to tell that the color of Rosie's going away suit clashed with the car's horizon blue paint.

Bacon sizzled in Rosie's cast iron skillet. "The milkman says his route's getting to be more than he can handle."

Bud lightened his coffee with a dollop of cream and finally took a sip.

"He's looking for a helper," Rosie said, putting the bacon on a Scott towel to drain.

"You know I can't."

She whipped raw eggs with a fork. "I don't know that." She dumped the eggs into the skillet, and hot grease spit onto the stovetop and her sleeve, igniting the fabric.

Before Bud could figure out how he'd travelled to the stove, he was there, beating out flames with the shirt he'd ripped off. He smeared butter onto her burned hand and stared at her singed eyebrows.

"Aren't we a pair to draw to?" she said.

Bud couldn't deliver milk or sell the shining cars lined up on his father-in-law's lot. Any time spent in the cold, even a few minutes, made his limbs tingle and burn. As a boy, he'd been nearly heedless of the weather. On winter days, he'd hunted rabbits until he couldn't feel his fingers. Now while Rosie worked days in the finance office at her father's dealership, Bud stoked the wood stove in the living room and hunched over seed catalogs or *Successful Farming* magazine.

After work one evening, Rosie hung a new coat on one of the hooks behind the kitchen door. It was blush pink and styled like nothing Bud had ever seen her wear before, swingy, with pleats in the back.

"My old coat is too small," she said.

"It looked fine when you left this morning."

"Mother bought it for me."

"What we can afford on my veteran's disability and your paycheck from your dad isn't good enough?" he said. "You'll have to take it back."

Rosie took the coat off the hook and folded it over her arm. She stroked the sable brown, velvet collar. "We're going to have a baby."

"What's that got to do with a coat?"

She hung the coat back on the hook and tied on her apron. "Absolutely nothing."

Bud watched the coat sway until it stopped. He got up and rubbed the fine, soft wool between his finger and thumb. "You'll look chrome plated in this."

She slammed the refrigerator door shut. "It's maternity styled, loose. I'll look like potatoes in a sack."

He stumped up behind her and slipped his arms around her waist. "I ordered seeds today. Some flowers. Tomatoes. We'll be doing a lot of growing."

* * *

Even though Peaslee's Funeral Home is just down the block, Bud and Rosie fill the back of their second-hand delivery sedan with flowers. The vehicle sat on the lot for months, but when Rosie's father sold it to them, he'd acted like it was some big favor, saying he only charged them what it had cost him.

First Bud loads a cross-shaped casket spray of white carnations. Next he places two large wreaths of pink roses, one from the Ladies Aid Society and another with a wide, white ribbon. *Mother*. There are so many smaller bouquets and arrangements that he hands two to Rosie to balance on her lap.

He closes the passenger door and takes a moment to admire the brilliant green lettering, so graceful against the car's white bulk. Ralph down at the dealership has added a single, red rosebud on a curved stem without charging extra. *RosieBud Florists*. Bud gives the new logo a pat.

"Got to admit, the car looks nicer with the name on it. More professional," Bud says, putting the car in gear.

"I still think it could have waited. Weren't you going to use the prom sales money to buy that encyclopedia of floristry?"

"The book's what can wait. You've got to spend money to make money."

"We should be millionaires, then," Rosie says. "Is there anything left over to pay Daddy?"

Bud makes a left turn into the funeral home's parking lot. "A little. Of all people, he'd understand what starting a business is like."

"It's just, with the new baby, and the note for the shop, and the car on top of it. I . . ."

* * *

For a long while, Bud's garden was the only place he felt intact. During the first spring of his marriage, he sat in the cool, dark dirt and scooted along dropping seeds into the furrows. As the soil warmed, his crop germinated. He made lists of the food and flowers he'd bring to the table.

Soon the garden was thriving, and Rosie had to buy more canning jars. He carried baskets of produce to church with him on Sundays, and neighbors stopped by the house to see if he might have extra.

Andy watched Bud work methodically along each row of his garden, scuffling the soil with his hoe. He trod naturally on his good foot, then held the implement tight to his thigh and

planted the hoe head hard in the dirt. He used the garden tool as if it were another foot, the way his doctors had told him to use the crutch, but he still hadn't gotten the hang of.

"Your gladiolas sure are pretty." Andy had been Bud's friend since childhood and was one of the few people in town who didn't seem to mind seeing him with an empty pant leg.

"They're Rosie's favorite. The tomatoes are coming on," Bud said. "Want some lemonade?"

"I'd appreciate it."

Andy followed Bud to the porch and sat down on one of two red metal rockers. Bud went into the house and returned with two sweating glasses. Andy removed his hat and snugged it onto his knee.

Andy sipped and rocked his chair back and forth. "Good lemonade. Is that your mint in there?"

"I cleaned up the patch near the old well this spring."

"I came to ask a favor. You know the Stanleys' girl, Carrie?"

"Sure," Bud said. "Mousey little thing."

"Yes, well." Andy cleared his throat. "I'm marrying her and her fiancé in two weeks. It's a rush job, and they don't have much money. You have such nice flowers. Would you consider doing the arrangements?"

Bud's chin went up, and his teeth worried a raw spot on the inside of his cheek. If it hadn't been Andy asking, he'd have said no.

When Rosie heard about the wedding, she called the library to get suggestions, and then she drove all the way to Saginaw to pick up florist supplies and a book about corsage making.

"Are you sure every flower has to be wired?" Bud asked.

Rosie licked her middle finger and flipped pages. "That's what it says." She held the corsage book open toward Bud and tapped the page. "Right here."

"Put that down and help me, or we'll never finish," Bud said.

If some of the flowers in the altar arrangements drooped or jutted at odd angles, Carrie and her new husband hadn't mentioned it. Everyone said the bride's bouquet was nice.

After that, Bud brought flowers from his garden for Saint Brigid's altar every Sunday. Soon other brides asked him to provide the arrangements for their weddings. And they paid. Their little brothers ordered corsages for high school formals. Their dates wanted boutonnieres. Bud had to fetch flowers from the wholesale market in Saginaw, sixty miles away.

Buckets took up residence in the kitchen. Rosie helped Bud position them so there was a path from the back door to the sink, the bathroom, and the living room, but he was still clumsy on his artificial leg. Every time he brushed by a bunch of blooms, petals bruised, and some fell to the floor.

"What we need is a cooler," he said.

"Where would you put it?"

He looked up from the white rose he was de-thorning for an elaborate wrist corsage.

"Would you put a heater in the garage, so you can work next to this hypothetical new cooler all winter? Or maybe we'll just move the stove, so I can cook out there," Rosie said.

She rubbed her spine with one hand and stirred a pot of beef stew with the other. The leather of her shoes had begun to cut into the tops of her swollen feet. She kept her back to Bud.

"I've been thinking of opening a shop," he said. "Would your dad lend us the money?"

She stopped stirring and turned to face him. "Now, Bud? With the baby coming?"

"I'm starting to make real money, and we can't live like this anymore. There's space in the old hotel down the street from the funeral home, and it's close by the school."

Rosie dropped the spoon she was stirring with alongside the pot and pushed her bangs off her forehead with the back of her hand. "I guess we'll have to ask him."

Sharon was born the month after Rosie Bud Florists held its grand opening. In the evenings, after the shop closed, Bud rearranged the flowers he couldn't sell during the day to disguise their wilt and missing petals. He wrapped these bouquets in crisp white paper, tied them with wide ribbons, and brought them home with him, his extra effort a token of his gratitude for the perfect folds on Sharon's knuckles and way her little body compressed with his gentle squeezes, for the comfort of her silky hair under his chin while he dozed with her in his easy chair after supper.

In those first months after the florist shop opened, he sometimes came home to Rosie still in her nightclothes, lying in bed with Sharon asleep at her side.

At these times he would ask her what she did all day.

And she would say, "I watched the baby."

* * *

Bud leaves Rosie sitting in the car and starts unloading flowers. He stumps up and down the back steps to the funeral home, depositing bouquets and arrangements just inside the service porch. He

and Rosie have delivered like this before, and he knows the funeral directors will want to place the flowers themselves. As if a professional florist wouldn't do it better.

Sharon still isn't sleeping through the night. He lets Rosie doze while he retrieves the two arrangements from her lap.

He lays his palm against her cheek and leans in to kiss her forehead. "You rest, while I finish up."

All that's left now is the casket spray. This is one arrangement the funeral directors want him to place. Heavy and wet, it's easy to break. The Peaslees won't risk it. He lugs it to the viewing room.

He likes the long hallway that leads to the front parlors. It's dark and paneled with warm, golden oak, and the deep carpeting swallows sound, so he can't hear his false footfalls.

What he can hear is a woman's voice ahead of him. He stops short. There must be family; mourners come to pay their respects.

" . . . so generous to our Carrie," the woman says.

He grins. Gladys Stanley has been his best customer since her daughter, Carrie's, wedding.

He knocks an elbow against the wall, clears his throat, and waits a moment. Then he enters the parlor and goes about his business—placing the casket spray, pinching wilted blooms, and twisting stems until each arrangement looks just right.

Rosie doesn't wake when he opens the driver's side door. He tugs up his pant leg and unbuckles his prosthetic, wedges it between the seat and the door. The end of his stump is painfully swollen. He has already finished the centerpieces and altarpieces for both of tomorrow's weddings, but there are still two brides' bouquets to do.

Rosie's right ear rests on her shoulder; her face is gentle in repose. He places the flat of his palm tenderly against his amputation scar to ease the ache, and watches her pulse steady and regular under the thin skin near her collarbone.

Small and Quiet

Bud wakes in the dark. He needs time to remember that this isn't home. The lumpy mattress helps, as does the sound of the other boys' deep, dull breathing. For a while he watches skewed squares of light under the bare windows on the floor of the school's dormitory.

He pulls the single, thin blanket from his bed, wraps it around his shoulders like a cape, and tiptoes down the long passage between the cots, staying in the shadows, trailing his blanket behind him on the brown linoleum to shush his footfalls. He passes through the tall, double doors at the end of the dorm and creeps down a long, chilly hallway, reaching up with his free hand to hold the chair rail that tops the gouged wainscoting.

At each doorway he pauses and peers around the jamb. He whispers into the dark rooms, sure that if he can find the right one, his mama will be there.

His mama has never left him anywhere before, and he made her promise she would not be gone long.

"Gram and Big Daddy will come get you every weekend, and I'll visit you at their house," she whispered against his ear.

"You'll be close?"

"It's just until I get settled," she said. "I'll be right here."

But she has not been in any of the rooms he has checked so far.

The hallway comes to a *T*, and he turns left, so he can keep the comfort of the chair rail. This hall is short and ends at a door topped with a leaded glass transom.

He needs most of his weight to shove the heavy door open enough to squeeze into the chapel. Other than the trip with Big Daddy to say goodbye to Papa at Union Station, Bud has never been anywhere like this room, where the ceiling is arched, and the patterns cast by the streetlights through the windows are pointed and colored like the fairies' wings in the books his grandmother reads to him.

Like the benches in the railroad waiting room, the pews here are arranged with a center aisle. He follows it to the front of the empty chapel. The wall behind the high, dark altar table is bare, marked only by the shadow of a cross, a reminder of the school's past.

At each corner of the table are carvings, and he moves closer to discover a strange, distorted creature, its stretched snout level with Bud's own nose. Its tongue lolls, and its teeth are long. Bud grips his blanket tight to his chest with one hand and gathers the trailing end in the

other. But it's the emptiness in the gargoyle's bulging eyes, not the sharpness of its fangs, that makes Bud want to run.

For a drawn-out moment he cannot flee, almost cannot breathe. And then something, maybe a night bird or a bat, flutters through the streetlight, creating a ripple over the terrifying carving. He breaks for the door, which his slight weight had been enough to push, but now cannot pull, open.

Miss Stephanie discovers him huddled there in the morning, his face to the crack below the door, blanket and pajama bottoms wet with urine. She says that because he wanders, he must be tied to his cot at night. He is six years old, the littlest boy at Little Peppers School.

Miss Stephanie tells him that his night restraints won't be removed until he promises to stop roving.

"And no water after supper," she says.

* * *

The radiators work hard against the dreary day. Bud's tongue sticks to his back teeth, and his nose whistles when he breathes.

"I'm thirsty," he says.

Green Hornet blares from the big radio in the corner of the common room, and the big boys shush him.

The night nurse won't give him a drink. But he offers Robin, who only goes home for holidays, one of the goodies his grandmother sends back to school with him each week. Robin slips Bud his cup when no one is looking.

Worried the other boys will hear his metal cot rattling and wake up, Bud shifts slowly to relieve the pressure on his bladder. Over the past month, he's cozened the night nurse into tying his bindings more loosely. She knows by now exactly how much rope to give him.

He turns his face toward the windows and counts the light squares on the floor, six on each side of the room, forward and backward. Reaching into his pants, he pinches, bending himself. It's too late. The dribble of urine over his fingers becomes a gush.

He slides as far toward the edge of the mattress as his ties will let him.

* * *

Saturday is the best day of the week. His gram parks her grey sedan in front of the school's vast lawn while he sits at one of the long benches in the cafeteria pretending to eat gluey oatmeal. There will be a still-warm muffin or slice of quickbread wrapped in a cloth napkin waiting for him on the wide front seat when he is finally released with the other boys. Once she brought him an apple, and he asked her to core and peel it for him like his mama does. She has never brought another apple.

She leans against the driver's side door of her Oldsmobile and waves her hanky at him.

Her muffins are sweet and crumbly. They don't have skin that sticks between his teeth or make her squish up her face and say she's not like his mama.

"Don't expect her," Gram says on this particular Saturday. "She's off gallivanting."

He tears a piece from the muffin, pops it into his mouth, and watches the road ahead. The air is soft and clean from last night's rain. No matter what his gram says, he's sure his mama will come to visit this weekend. When she does, he will hug her around her knees, and she will bend down to him, so he can stroke her hair and tell her she is pretty. This always makes her happy.

In the driveway at his gram's house, his grandfather scoops Bud out of the car and onto his shoulders. One of Big Daddy's hands undulates in the air in front of him. The other clamps the waistband at the back of Bud's short pants.

"Barrroooooo," Big Daddy says. "I'm an elephant."

Bud has never heard a real elephant. When Big Daddy took him to the zoo, the elephants were silent. Zoo keepers came with long, hooked sticks and fed the elephants leafy branches. Big Daddy told him that elephants were from India, where they worked for people clearing forests and building roads. He said boys not much older than Bud rode on the elephants' necks and steered them, that the boys were called mahouts, and they whispered in their elephants' ears to get them to do what they wanted. Bud doesn't think he would make a good mahout because he hates the idea of being up high on an elephant's neck.

Gram is a large woman. Bud heard his mama say this during fights when they still lived with his papa, and he knows it's true because when he gets in trouble, his gram's hand feels bigger than his backside. But if his gram is large, his grandfather is a giant.

He clenches his eyes shut and clutches the shoulders of Big Daddy's shirt. "I'm a mahout." He forces a giggle to make Big Daddy put him down.

On Sunday, while his gram makes dinner, he helps Big Daddy pick apples. With his grandfather standing behind him, he climbs the three-step ladder. Big Daddy keeps his hands on the rails, arms guarding Bud even though the trees are pruned back low, so low that he can keep his eyes open.

Apples with little black holes or ends that look pushed in have worms in them, he learns. The ones that are ready to pick come right off in your hand when you grab them.

"Your papa and I used to do this together," Big Daddy says.

Bud wonders if his papa liked being a mahout.

His mama doesn't visit.

* * *

Bud's birthday falls on a Tuesday. That afternoon the teacher motions to him, and he slips a tin of cookies from his desk to be passed around. His gram has sent one for each of the boys in class.

For his party, the boys fold pirate hats from sheets of newsprint. Some wolf their cookies down. Others slide them under their papers, nibbling small bits, savoring the treat. Finished folding and munching, they swashbuckle around the room.

Later they go to bed wearing their pirate hats. For the first time in weeks Bud wakes to a dry bed.

"What a good boy," Miss Stephanie says.

It's Friday evening when she tells the night nurse not to tie him to the cot, and he wanders again.

In his dreams he has flown down the hallways to the chapel, where the gargoyle's nightmare eyes deepen over and over again into giant whirlpools that suck him in. Still, as soon as he's free of his restraints it draws him, the big room with its vaulted ceilings, and its impression of space.

This time he folds his blanket and uses it to prop the door open. He chooses a pew near the back, where he can see the play of color from the infrequent sweep of headlights against the ceiling. When he finally feels ready for sleep, he returns to bed.

The next morning his gram's Olds sits in its regular spot on the school's circle drive. It seems stuck in the low fog. The car's windows are rolled up, and she isn't waving her handkerchief. She sits with her arms crossed high on her chest. There's nothing for him on the passenger seat.

"After all this time she shows up," Grams says and starts the car.

The heat is on low, so he undoes his jacket. He counts the houses they pass and twiddles his coat buttons.

"Stop fidgeting," Grams says, her face turned toward him. "I know you want to see her."

He wants her to watch the road, to drive faster.

At the house, he lunges from the car and runs to where his mama stands beside Big Daddy on the front step. His mama's hair looks different. It's longer than he remembers and pulled off her face with a clip. There are soft waves around her shoulders. He is taller than the last time he hugged her. His arms go around her hips instead of her legs.

She holds his face between her palms, runs her thumb over his eyebrow. "Goodness, you're practically grown." She stands up, straightens her hem, and says to Gram, "Is there anything I can do to help?"

"Your being here is quite enough," Gram says and heads for the house. She tells Bud to bring his bag inside.

"I'll get it," Big Daddy says.

Bud's mama pats him on the head and follows Big Daddy to the car. Bud trails them as quietly as he can.

"I don't know why she has to be like that," Mama says. "I've been sending money regular, and I'm not the one who up and left."

Big Daddy pulls Bud's bag out of the car. It swings through the air, and his mama steps back to avoid it, her high heel coming down hard on Bud's toe. The pain is shocking. His mouth slams open, gulping air.

Big Daddy tucks the bag close to his body. "Looks a little different from where we sit. We got him into that school, pay most of his tuition, take care of him every weekend."

"Have you talked to your son about how it looks?" Mama asks.

Bud begins a high-pitched whine. He holds out his arms.

"Oh, honey." Mama briefly pulls his head against her hip. "Are you cold? Go on inside."

In the center of the yellow kitchen with the sky-blue ceiling, where it is quiet except for the refrigerator hum, his gram's rocking chair rests empty. Bud finds her next to the enameled stove in the sitting room. She pats her lap, and he climbs up, stepping onto the needlepoint footstool with his unhurt foot, and nestles against her chest.

"Where were we?" Gram asks and picks up *Treasure Island* from the lamp table. She pulls her reading glasses down from on top of her head and adjusts them on her nose.

"Chapter Four, 'The Sea Chest.' I lost no time, of course, in telling my mother all that I knew, and perhaps should have told her long before, and we saw ourselves at once in a difficult and dangerous position." She closes the book. "Are you hungry, honey? I didn't bring your muffin this morning."

"Could you keep reading?"

"Or I could make you a sandwich. It's hours 'til dinner."

"No, thank you," he says and slides out of her lap.

For dinner she has made his favorites. He helps himself to pork chops, mashed potatoes, and warm, chunky applesauce.

His mama plops green beans onto his plate. Some fall into his potatoes.

His gram scoops them up and moves them to her own plate.

"Just for today, he doesn't have to eat what he doesn't like," Big Daddy says.

His mama looks like she has a mouthful of something bad. "You used to eat green beans, sugar. I always made them just like this."

Bud can't remember ever liking green beans. They make him gag, and his gram hardly ever cooks them. When she does he only has to take a no-thank-you helping, two tiny bites. He chews and chews those bites until the beans are a slimy paste in his mouth, and he can wash it down with noisy gulps of water. Big Daddy says it's better to get it over with, just swallow those beans like medicine. Says Bud's way is like torture. His gram says not to gulp, to sip his water politely. He does his best, but beans are hard to swallow.

"Seemed like you and your papa used to eat bushels of them," Mama says.

"You hush, girl," Big Daddy says.

The food sits on Bud's plate while the adults eat, scraping their forks and knives back and forth.

He only takes three bites of the baked custard his gram brings for dessert. He can't make it to the brown sugar she always hides at the bottom.

He had a bath at school the night before, but he does as his mama says and goes upstairs to take another. He sits in the tub long after he's tired of winding up the paddle wheel on the rubber band boat Big Daddy made him.

The adults' voices are loud in his gram's sitting room below him. He knows they're having the same quarrel they have whenever his mama visits. Gram says Mama's neglecting Bud, and Mama says she's working hard, so he can come and stay with her. Big Daddy's voice is low-pitched, like rumbling, making peace. Gram always says she and Big Daddy love Bud, but they've already raised their son, and then Mama always says something about what a great job they did, but she doesn't ever sound like she means it. Next is the crying, and that's how he knows they're at the part where his papa got on the train to live with another woman who isn't his mama.

His fingers and toes prune. It's time to climb out of the tub, and he pulls a towel off the rack. His gram calls the bathroom a Jack and Jill. It connects his room and another one that Big Daddy told him was supposed to be for if his papa ever had a sister or brother, but like him, his papa turned out to be an only child.

He leaves small, wet footprints on the bedroom rug. People used to say he looked like his mama, but he doesn't hear that much anymore. He sits on his bed and looks at the framed photo

of his papa when he was a boy living in this room. He lifts the mirrored tray from the top of the nightstand and studies his face.

"There you are," Mama says from the bathroom doorway. "Let's get you dressed."

He lifts his feet toward her and spreads his toes, so she can dry between them. He is old enough to do this himself, but his mama hums while she rubs his calves dry. His gram has laid his pajamas on the bed. He pretends he needs help to work the buttons.

His mama tugs the front of his pajama shirt together and begins buttoning it from the bottom up. "I have work tomorrow, honey. I've got to go."

Water drops onto his neck from his hair. He reaches back to wipe it with his sleeve.

She hands him his damp towel, but the drips are already dry. "Here, use this."

He takes the towel and swipes at his neck anyway.

"When can I stay with you?" he asks.

She takes the towel and roughs his hair. "Honey, I don't have room for you yet. I'm working on getting us something better than a room in a boarding house."

"I'm small," he says. "And I can be quiet."

"I promise it'll just be a little while longer, sugar. Be patient."

She tries to tuck him into bed, but he squirms. It's still light, not yet his bedtime.

"I want to kiss you goodbye," he says.

His gram won't come with them to the front door, but Big Daddy helps his mama into her coat, and Bud carries her handbag.

"Don't be such a stranger," Big Daddy says.

"I'm trying," she says. "Don't think I don't appreciate what you're doing." She rests her hand on Bud's damp hair. "I just didn't know how hard . . ."

"We know, Mamie," Big Daddy says. "We both know." He pulls Bud toward him, arms crisscrossed over Bud's chest, holding him tight.

She opens the door and gives a shaky little wave, trudges down the steps. At the end of the driveway, beyond his gram's grey Olds, a man stands near the open passenger door of a big car. She hugs the man and offers him her cheek to kiss.

As the car rolls away from the curb, Bud tows Big Daddy outside.

"I'm a mahout," Bud says.

The sky is vast compared to the ceiling of the school chapel, and as night falls, it mutes all of the sunset's colors. A few stars emerge from the darkness, separated by the enormity of the open sky.

From atop Big Daddy's shoulders, Bud watches the car's taillights until they turn toward town. He props his chin against the top of Big Daddy's head. "Do you think she'll be back?"

Time to Figure Things Out

Rosie unlaced her fingers, steadied her breath, and slid her left hand across the Studebaker's wide back seat toward Bud. Ahead of them, a green Nash wagon with a missing rear fender inched forward to take its turn at the drive-in's ticket hut. Bud simply rested his hand on top of hers, and she relaxed against the car door.

At the Heron Inn before the movie, he had ordered two vanilla malts and an order of onion rings for them to share. Across the table from them, her best friend Marjory and Bud's pal Andy stuffed shoestring fries into each other's mouths. They were practically sitting on top of each other.

Rosie picked bread from the limp, stringy onions and jiggled her foot.

Bud patted her leg to still it, snagged one of the fries, and tossed it. "Couple of closet cases."

The fry bounced off of Andy's cheek, and Marjory squeaked.

Andy kicked Bud under the table. "Knock it off, fathead."

Rosie bumped her shoulder into Bud's and offered him an onion ring.

When they reached the ticket hut, Andy paid the thirty-five cent admission fee and followed the line of cars nosing into parking slots fronting a giant screen that loomed over the surrounding farm fields. He wrestled with the speaker box, while Marjory groped inside her handbag.

* * *

Andy and Bud attended the Catholic school at Saint Brigid's, thirteen miles south of Heron Bog. Rosie and Marjory had met Bud and Andy a month ago at the Methodist Church Strawberry Social. On that day, the Ladies Aid Society settled tables around the trunk of an enormous oak behind the church; tables bent under the weight of food and inherited linens unearthed from chests and dresser drawers.

Having woven their way across the lawn filled with picnicking families, Rosie and Marjory found places to sit on the swing set. They balanced plates on their knees and tried to steady themselves.

An insistent breeze tugged at Marjory's dress, and it billowed up to cover her plate. She twisted, and her food fell to the dirt.

Rosie's laugh cut through the crowd, and people turned to look. Marjory punched her arm.

"I can't help it," Rosie said. "You look darling."

Marjory pulled the end of her ponytail from the swing's chain with one hand and pressed the hem of her dress to her plump knees with the other. She pushed her toe down onto the ruined paper plate. "Hardly put a dent in it."

"How about some dessert?" Rosie said.

They considered the crush of people around the oak tree and decided to wait.

"Get a load of that," Marjory said, lifting her chin toward the parking lot.

A boy vaulted over the passenger door of a Studebaker convertible edging onto the gravel. He shook the wrinkles out of his trousers. The driver jogged up behind him.

"I wouldn't mind a ride with him," Marjory said.

Marjory was boy-crazy. Whenever she visited Rosie's house, she made a beeline for the stack of movie magazines Rosie's mother kept under her mending basket on the bottom shelf of the parlor table. Rosie generally ignored Marjory while she sighed and made eyes over Montgomery Clift and Rock Hudson. But if it went on too long, Rosie put on a record, pulled her friend off the sofa, and danced with her until they both needed a rest.

The driver was definitely more Marjory's type, but Rosie supposed both boys were handsome enough.

"It's clearing out some," Marjory said after a while. "Let's take our chances."

The front of the passenger's sandy blonde hair had been slicked down, but near the crown a sprig of hay stuck out of his cowlick. Rosie, in line for shortcake, watched that sprig play in the breeze and waited for it to drop. When the boys passed her looking for a place to sit, the sprig was still there. She snatched it and accidentally acquired some hair in the bargain.

The boy spun toward her, dribbling macaroni salad onto the dirt.

She reached out to steady his plate. "Careful."

He pulled back. "I expect rough treatment from this guy." He jerked his thumb toward his friend. "But I don't even know you."

The boys introduced themselves, and she explained about the hay. Bud hadn't waited long after that to ask Rosie out.

Marjory said she'd known right away that she and Andy were meant for each other. "Fate," she'd said. "We both have birthdays in January." She'd told Rosie that when Andy kissed her on their first date, her skin had prickled, and she'd let him touch her through her blouse.

Rosie tried to imagine going that far with Bud, but rubbing her own nipples through her nightgown felt practically the same as when her clothes brushed against her while she dressed or undressed. Pretending her fingers were Bud's had made no difference at all.

She wanted to feel about him the way Marjory did about Andy. Bud didn't crowd her like other boys did. What was wrong with her that she couldn't get excited about a boy as fun as Bud?

Her parents liked him, and though her mother slipped Rosie the same two-dollar bill from her handbag every time she went on a date, this evening she'd grinned when she called it mad money, as though the idea of being mad at Bud were some sort of joke.

* * *

Rosie had folded the bill into a square and slid it under the elastic band of her bra near her armpit, so it wouldn't shift and fall out. It sat there now, rigid edges cutting into her skin.

As the newsreel music started, Andy winked at Bud and threw his arm around Marjory.

Bud slid closer to Rosie and placed his arm over her shoulders. She shivered.

"Cold?"

Her cardigan was buttoned to the neck. "No. I need to powder my nose."

Marjory bounced out of the car. "I'll go with you, and let's get some candy."

Although the feature hadn't started, some couples half-reclined against doors or armrests, joined so closely they reminded Rosie of the jarred, two-headed kitten on the shelf in the biology lab. Rosie and her lab partner had dissected a feral cat the year before. For weeks after the practicum, she'd kept her hands in her pockets because no matter how often she washed, whenever she brought her hands near her face, the lingering smell of formaldehyde turned her stomach.

The line for snacks wasn't long. Rosie exhaled and leaned against Marjory.

"Feeling okay?" Marjory asked.

Rosie straightened up. "Sure."

Marjory pulled a quarter from her change purse, and Rosie waited near the corner of the concessions window, while the clerk brought box after box of candy to Marjory, who kept saying

she liked them all, and it was too hard to choose. In the stiffening breeze, dust churned up from the drive and pelted Rosie's face.

She covered her eyes. "Just pick something."

Marjory sighed. "Jujubes, I guess."

They ducked their heads against the wind and walked around back to the ladies room. Marjory hardly waited for the door to swing shut before raising her skirt and tugging down her half-slip.

Water dripped down the center of an oblong rust stain under the tap. With the flat of her palm, Rosie pressed upwards on the soap dispenser's silver plunger. Rough pink powder trickled out, and she sprinkled it onto the blemish. For the life of her, she couldn't understand why people let things get ruined, when it was so much easier to just take care of them right off. She scraped at the rust with her fingernails and rubbed the soap in with her fingertips. No good. The drip had been let go for too long. She turned the taps and let the water run over her hands, sluicing suds from the basin and digging pink slime from under her nails. She splashed water onto her face.

Marjory gave the slip a final yank, shimmied her hips, and let the pale rayon puddle around her feet. "Darned thing rides up something awful." She crumpled it and stuffed it in her handbag. "Wouldn't you rather go without?"

Rosie turned the roller towel but couldn't find a spot clean enough to blot her face with. She wiped her hands on her skirt and rubbed her cheeks dry with her palms. "What if someone noticed?"

"I hope Andy does. He's fun."

Rosie smoothed her hair. "He makes me nervous."

"That's excitement, silly. Don't you feel it when Bud's around?" She placed her fingertips below Rosie's ribcage. "A rush when he touches you?"

"He's nice, but—"

"Give him half a chance, why don't you?"

"It's only our third date," Rosie said.

The door swung closed behind Marjory, and Rosie stood there, palms pressed against her stomach, trying to remember whether she'd felt anything in particular when Bud kissed her on the cheek after their second date.

Marjory was waiting for her when she gave up and went outside. The wind had picked up, and they ran together, fists screwed over their eyes like goggles.

By the time they got back to the car, the newsreel was over, and cartoon animals cavorted on the screen.

Marjory jumped up onto her knees on the front seat and leaned both elbows onto the seat back. She offered Bud a choice of either the box of jujubes or a dented flask.

"Liquor's quicker," she said and bent her neck toward Andy. "Better get some before greedy there hogs it all."

Bud opened the flask, tipped it up, and swallowed twice before passing it to Rosie, who gave the flask back without drinking.

A lion flashed onto the big screen, its roar through the speaker out of sync with its snarl. Andy and Marjory tilted their heads together so they met in an upside-down V. Marjory put a jujube in her mouth, and rolled it around. She stuck her tongue out with the sweet on it and hooked a finger at Andy. He pushed forward, lips parted, and she flicked the jujube into her own mouth. Thrusting it back out with her tongue, she let Andy take it.

Rosie hoped Bud wouldn't expect her to do anything like that. She scooted close to him, so close their shoulders touched, and took his hand in hers. While Marjory and Andy necked, sinking lower and lower until Rosie couldn't see them anymore over the seat back, she and Bud watched the movie

The car shivered on its springs, and Andy groaned. "C'mon."

"No way," Marjory said. "Too public."

Andy straightened in his seat and fired up the car's engine. He forced open the window and hooked the speaker back on its pole. "Let's get out of here."

"But it's Betty Grable," Rosie said.

"Even she can't save this movie," Marjory said.

"Didn't notice you watching it," Rosie said.

Andy pulled the car into the drive-in's exit lane. He half-turned to Bud. "Aren't your grandparents on vacation?"

Bud clutched the seat with both hands. "Yeah. What's—"

"Perfect," Marjory said.

"We can't," Rosie said.

"They'll never know we were there." Andy took one hand off the steering wheel and held it up. "Scout's honor."

Bud shook his head. "No way. My grandparents practically raised me in that house."

"Explains why you're such a geezer," Andy said, grinning at him.

Bud sat back and crossed his arms. "Only if you stay in the living room and keep out of Big Daddy's liquor cabinet."

"Cross my heart," Andy said. Gusts rocked the car as he turned onto the pavement.

Rosie took hold of Bud's arm. "If anything goes wrong, I'll help you fix it."

He bent toward her, slanting his head. She held her breath and loosened her grip on him. His closed mouth, lips firm and dry, crisscrossed hers. His were closed and out of focus, the lashes fluttering. When he finished, she pressed the back of her hand to her mouth and waited for the rush, for her skin to prickle the way Marjory said hers did.

"Did I do something wrong?" Bud asked.

Her fingertips were dry and tight from the soap powder and from scrubbing. She rubbed her thumb over them. She would ask Marjory if she had some hand lotion a little later.

"It's not you," Rosie said.

She squeezed her eyes shut. Movie kissing looked pleasant. The boy wanted to. The girl let him. Sometimes the boy got slapped when the girl pretended not to like it, the way Rosie's mother playfully swatted her father's hands away when he snuck up behind her in the kitchen. Marjory seemed to like what happened in the front seat. She had even giggled over the jujube. Was that real, or was she acting?

The pavement ended at the base of a long incline, and Andy sped uphill.

Wind pummeled the car, clanging gravel against guards and fenders. The rear end hit a soft spot and fishtailed, shoving the car onto the ridge of the high-crowned road.

Bud's left arm shot out and pressed across Rosie's chest, pinning her. With each swing of the car's rear end, his arm pressed against her harder, until she couldn't catch her breath.

Near the crest of the hill, the car left the road, and they were lifted from their seats. Bud removed his arm from Rosie's chest to grab the seat back with both hands. For a moment she was weightless, clinging to her armrest, butterflies in her stomach.

With a loud crunch, the car landed astride the ditch, its nose snubbed a tall cedar tree. Rosie ached. Bud's head depressed the door handle, and one of his legs lay across her lap. She sat up and poked him with her index finger.

He heaved himself up. "Everyone okay?"

Shards dangled from the windshield frame like broken teeth. Rosie peered over the seatback into the front seat. Slumped over, Andy had one arm tucked beneath him, the other tangled in the steering wheel. His head hovered a few inches above the upholstery, rising and falling with each breath.

"Where's Marjory?" Rosie asked.

No one answered.

Bud's head rested against the upholstery. His eyes were closed. Rosie ran the back of her hand down his arm, and he startled like her father did when he snored too loudly, looking around as though the world were new.

"Okay?" Bud said.

Rosie pushed both feet against the door to force it open. She leaned out. Starlight glittered on the water at the bottom of the drainage ditch.

She crouched on the seat and jumped, landing halfway up the slope. Loose dirt ran out beneath her, and she scrabbled to the top, where she smoothed her palms against the front of her skirt and looked around.

In the pale light from the crescent moon, she couldn't see past where the Studebaker's sharp hood ornament touched tree bark.

The engine ticked.

"Marjory?"

She put her palm against the car's flank and took short, cautious steps, using the steel body to guide her forward in the dark. After a long moment of hesitation near the broken headlights, she finally let go, both hands groping the air ahead of her. The wind had slowed, with just an occasional gust to remind her of its earlier force.

Long grass stroked her calves above her bobby socks, and glass crunched underfoot. She stepped on something soft and jumped back. Tucking her skirt around her knees, she sank to the ground, patting wheat stubble in nervous circles until she encountered hair, stickiness, and then Marjory's angora sweater.

Rosie shook Marjory's shoulder, but her friend lay still. She leaned forward until her cheek was above Marjory's lips. Warily she probed with the tips of her fingers, feeling for broken skin, broken bones. Marjory's chest moved.

Rosie pitched back onto her heels. "Stay here." She tried to think of something less stupid to say. "I'll bring help."

Back at the car, she leaned across the seat, and bumped Bud's leg. "I found her."

He let his head drop toward her. "What?"

"Get up. She needs our help."

He pulled himself across the seat and fell into the ditch. She braced herself and gave him a hand up.

"Over here." She pulled him forward.

They kneeled together, and she guided his hands in the dark.

He snatched them back. "She's bleeding."

"Can we get her to the car?"

Bud slipped his arms under Marjory's shoulders, and Rosie hooked one elbow under each of Marjory's knees.

They got her across the ditch and situated on the back seat. Rosie straightened her rucked-up skirt, pulling it down over her friend's bare knees. Andy stirred and cradled his injured arm.

Bud squeezed his forehead. "One of us should go for help." He started toward the edge of the field.

Rosie caught the tail of his shirt. "You're hurt. Why don't you stay with them and let me go?"

He spun toward her and lost his balance.

She pulled his arm around her waist to support him, helping him back to the car and settling him on the seat beside Andy.

"Keep an eye on them," she said and climbed out of the ditch on her hands and knees.

She ran all the way to the fence line before she crossed to the road and looked back. The car was a blur against the trees. She walked as fast as she could toward the farmer's yard light that shone down the mile. She panted with the effort, but the ache from the crash had begun to ease, more a reminder now of what she could do than of what had gone wrong.

Comes Love

For the first few weeks of Rosie's social work internship at St. Philomena's home for unwed mothers, no matter how often her professors or the nuns tried to reassure her she was doing a good thing, when she went to bed at night, the poor girls' faces hung over her in the dark. Closing her eyes couldn't make them disappear. Then Anita showed up, and things got easier.

One morning about halfway through the semester, they huddled together against a wall at the bottom of the garden, where they went on their breaks to hide from the nuns and smoke.

Anita waved her hand at the brick building that served as both home and maternity hospital, cigarette smoke garlanding her head. "What's to stop these girls ending up right back here, in trouble all over again?"

The topic wasn't new. They'd discussed to death what happened at the home, that it didn't make sense. It wasn't as if the nuns provided any medical information, and most of the girls wouldn't have any support at all when they got back to their own families.

"I still don't see what we can do about it," Rosie said.

Anita, eyes closed, took a slow drag, and passed the cigarette to Rosie. The end was cool and still damp from Anita's lips when Rosie inhaled. Anita took it back for the last few puffs and then pinched and stripped it, her tapered fingers gracefully tucking the filter into her coat pocket.

"We have to start giving them rubbers," she said.

* * *

The nuns had a rule that adoptions could only happen on days when two babies were ready to go. They said it helped if the mothers didn't have to face giving up their newborns alone, but sometimes only one baby was old enough to go home.

On that afternoon, the first cool day of fall, the furnace hadn't been fired up yet. In the nursery, Rosie shivered despite her sweater, and one mother held her tiny son snug against her

chest. No matter what Rosie said, she wouldn't give up her baby, so Rosie couldn't take him to the room where Anita waited with his new parents.

Sister Faustina tried. She stood right up next to the girl, with her hands tucked into the sleeves of her habit and whispered, while the girl gathered the blanket tighter around her baby and moved her head back and forth, back and forth.

They stood like that for so long that Anita came to see what was wrong.

"Sugar," she said, approaching the girl, "there's nothing to be done about it." She nuzzled the top of the baby's head and lifted him from his mother's arms.

After work Rosie and Anita walked down to the corner cafe, but a cup of coffee and a shared slice of pie didn't help them feel ready to go back to the dorms, so they decided to go ice-skating at Palmer Park.

They rented skates at a kiosk near the wrought-iron gate. Anita had never skated before, but Rosie held her arm, and they clumped across the rutted grass together.

It was dusk, and the sky above them was clear. In the distance snow showers swayed from the clouds and reminded Rosie of the way Anita's hair swung when she walked. Some stars winked on.

Rosie let go of Anita to push off from the pond's edge and glided forward, the hem of her coat floating out behind her. Anita hesitated at the verge but finally stepped out and immediately thumped down onto the ice. She chuckled, and it struck Rosie that she'd never heard Anita laugh before. Rosie bent down to help her up and slipped. They ended up on their backsides on the ice, hooting together like loons.

They struggled up and shuffled around the tiny lighthouse at the center of the pond for a while, Anita leaning on Rosie and learning, bit by bit, how to thrust off to the side with one skate

and glide on the other. The snow caught them, and they whooshed along side by side in the flurry, fingertips touching.

Afterward, breathless, they sat together on a bench unlacing their skates. Rosie longed to brush away the snowflakes that melted and trickled on the tips of Anita's lashes and sparkled on the shoulders of her coat.

Anita ran her hand down Rosie's back. "Ready to go home now?"

* * *

Rosie had told her parents about moving out of the dorm, that she'd be staying in the city after her graduation from Wayne University, at least until Bud made it home. Even if the village council did plan to change the name from Heron Bog to Big Cedar, it would never be big enough for a lady social worker.

Telling Bud about her plans was a different matter. His letters practically begged for guarantees that everything at home was still the same as when he left for the war. She would go on the three interviews that the university's placement office had scheduled for her: one with the state's department of social welfare and the other two with local agencies. Once she got a job and had some good news to share, that would be the time to write him about her move.

Her job interviews were arranged back-to-back over a three-day period. First she interviewed with the state and learned what they really wanted was seven or eight office girls to type and file reports for the men who did the actual consultations and field work.

She could have spit on the interviewer's shiny shoes when she was offered the position. Instead she picked up her things, said, "No thank you," and walked out. She wanted to kick something, but when she shoved open the plate-glass door, there was Anita sitting on the hood of her car.

Anita tilted her head to one side and held out her hands as if she weighed something in each one.

Rosie shook her head. "I was so cool to her, I bet she's still shivering in her pearl-buttoned twinset."

Anita applauded. "I turned them down flat in my interview, too."

They rode the ferry to Belle Isle and wandered around the botanical garden. The Four Aces had a concert scheduled at the band shell that evening, so they stayed for that. The band played all their hits.

After the heat of the day, the night air cooled Rosie's skin. She kicked off her stiff interview shoes and lay back beside Anita on their blanket spread on the grass amidst dozens of others. After a while people began to dance, and Anita pulled Rosie to her feet to sway along with the music. The set closed with "It's No Sin," and the crowd took its time breaking up. Rosie and Anita lingered, pinky fingers linked in the dark.

Rosie's second interview was at an unwed mothers' home. The Mother Superior asked about Saint Philomena's. Rosie tried to describe the basics of what she'd done there, but her voice got swallowed up in all the pictures of babies and the books that lined the Mother Superior's office walls. Her throat squeezed shut, and she covered her eyes.

The Mother Superior pushed a box of tissues across her desk and took Rosie's hand. "Based on your previous experience, we were ready to offer you the job, but that doesn't seem like the best idea." She pushed her chair back and stood. "I'm sorry, dear."

The stairs leading to the apartment seemed to have grown since Rosie left that morning, and she twice dragged the toe of her pump against the risers, abrading the leather. She put her key in the lock upside down and almost jammed it but was able to jiggle it out. She stood there, forehead against the door casing, staring at the scratches on the toes of her shoes. Anita would be home any minute, and Rosie would tell her everything.

The sound of Anita's tread on the stairs made Rosie straighten up and try her key in the lock again. She pushed the door open as Anita arrived at the landing.

"How'd it go?" she asked.

Rosie went inside, dropped her things by the door, and headed straight for the kitchen. She opened two beers.

Anita followed. "That good." She took the beers away and set them on the counter. She pulled Rosie to her. "Want to talk about it?"

Anita hugged hard. Her warmth soaked into Rosie.

She rolled her head back and forth against Anita's collarbone. "No."

"Okay." Anita grabbed the beers and steered her toward the sofa.

They sat and drank for a while before Rosie lay down with her head in Anita's lap, and Anita began to stroke her hair.

"You were the only good thing about Saint Philomena's." There was more Rosie wanted to say, but her throat was squeezing shut again.

Rosie stopped at her postal box on the way to the bus stop for her third interview. She flipped through the pile of mail. An invitation to her friend Marjory's bridal shower she slid into her purse to *RSVP* later. She skimmed her mother's short, gossipy note that asked her to come home for a visit soon.

Bud's letter was weightier than usual. Maybe the forwarding address label stuck to the front was what made it bulkier than most of his letters from Korea, or maybe it was the fact that this was regular white stationery instead of the flimsy airmail paper he normally used. The postmark was smeared, but she could make out Battle Creek, not the Fleet Post Office in San Francisco.

Skid row, when Rosie got off the bus, was littered with men, men who wore misshapen coats and had five-day beards. She was the only woman in sight. A pair of beat cops stared her down as if she were the one who wasn't well groomed.

When she finally arrived at the mission, she almost collided with a man who towered over her in the doorway.

"You must be Rosie," he said, stepping down to street level. "I'm John Warren. Call me Jack."

His body was wasted and his eyes so shadowed that she'd mistaken him for a resident. She stripped off her glove and shook his hand.

He practically pulled her through the front door. "Let me show you around," he said and launched into a long explanation about the changes in the neighborhood since the city bulldozed Black Bottom. "People have few places to live, and bar owners exploit the men's weakness, soaking up most of their wages." He outlined his plans to start Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, said that the twelve steps were already working for

supposedly incurable drunks all over the country. He made quote marks in the air with his fingers when he said the word incurable. "Sure, the Salvation Army has its own program, but what do those bible thumpers have to offer men, especially veterans, who've lost all faith?"

He talked and walked so quickly, pointing out rooms in the building and explaining what they were used for, that she had trouble keeping up with him.

She reached into her handbag and clutched Bud's letter. "My fiancé is with the Marines in Korea."

Jack turned to her. "Then you understand." His arm swept up to indicate the whole building, the entire neighborhood. "These men have the capacity to be good. They have a disease, and it's our duty to help them get well, to overcome their disability. If you think you can do that, then I'll see you tomorrow. If not, thanks for coming by." He showed her the door.

She looked west on her walk back to the bus stop. The empty fields would have looked a lot like home, if home had high rises in the distance. All along 12th Street were pawnshops whose signs advertised loans, but people's abandoned belongings sat inside the gritty windows.

Seated on the bus, Rosie took Bud's letter out of her purse. He'd taped it shut, and she couldn't fit her fingernail under the envelope's flap. Frustrated, she gave up and tore open one of the side seams.

At the top right of the page, black, block letterhead said, Percy Jones Army Hospital. He wrote that the doctors and nurses were doing all they could for him, and he

was being fitted for a prosthetic leg. That if she gave him a little time, he'd be the same Bud she remembered from before.

She refolded the letter, stuffed it back inside the torn envelope, and set it on the seat beside her. One of the thumb latches on the window was jammed, and she could only get it open a sliver. She knelt on the seat to push the corner of the letter through the open slot and felt the paper begin to vibrate in the wind.

"Sit down, Miss," the bus driver said.

The other passengers stared.

Rosie pulled the letter back through the window and sat down. She folded it in half and in half again until she didn't have the strength to fold it another time, and then she put it back into her purse.

At the stop near the grocery, she got off the bus. Cooking for Anita was hard because her family owned a catering business, and she was used to good food, but she loved Rosie's lasagna. Rosie ran through a list of ingredients in her head. She picked out a bottle of wine that she couldn't really afford and put it in her basket. She would start the sauce as soon as she got home. She wanted it to be perfect for Anita.

Wedding Days

When word came that Bud was wounded, Rosie asked her girlfriend, Anita, for a ride to the Greyhound bus station. While Anita slipped into wrinkled slacks and took her time fixing tea, Rosie loaded her things into the trunk of Anita's car.

They left early in the morning, so Rosie could make the bus, but Anita zoomed right past the Howard Street exit.

Rosie shifted in her seat. "What are you doing? Big Cedar's three hours from here."

"Move your visor," Anita said. "The sun hurts my eyes."

Rosie pinched ragged bits of cuticle between her incisors and ripped. She wrapped her stinging fingers in the hem of her skirt until the bleeding stopped.

Anita grabbed her hand and held it tight. "Don't."

Rosie pulled her hand back and tucked it under her arm. "I've always done it."

At home right about now her mother would be filling the percolator with coffee grounds and setting it on the stove. Her father would be in the half-bath next to the kitchen, whistling and stropping his straight razor. She looked at her watch. By the time Anita pulled into their driveway, he'd be at his dealership, but her mother would come onto the porch. She didn't appreciate unexpected visitors. She might not invite Anita inside.

"I still don't get why you have to go back this very minute," Anita said.

Rosie turned Bud's ring so she could squeeze the pearl solitaire against her palm. "I made a promise."

"What, that you wouldn't have a life?"

Rosie turned toward the window and hunched down in her seat. "We'll have a life."

Alongside the highway the grass was still brown. As they left the city, fields stretched out, dark and disordered, surrounding neglected farmhouses. She searched their yards for yellow forsythia and chartreuse weeping willow.

Rosie's mother did come through the back door to watch them make a pile of Rosie's things beside the front steps. She crossed her arms and leaned her head against a porch post for a few minutes before going back inside. When Rosie had called to say she was coming home, her mother had told her to stay in the city and finish her degree, that with a crippled husband, she would need a good job.

Alone on the driveway, Anita and Rosie leaned against the car in the pale March sunlight, their hips and the meat of their arms touching. Anita asked if there would still be a wedding, and Rosie said she didn't know.

There would still be a dress. That night after supper, her mother washed the dishes and wiped her hands dry. She swept away the tablecloth like a magician and held the buffet lamp close to the felt table protector to inspect for dirt before she brought forth the lace, satin, and tulle.

While Rosie was still at school, her mother had mailed cuttings from ladies' and brides' magazines. Rosie had glanced at them and at the sketches that followed, and then she'd pressed them between the back pages of the oversized dictionary on the bottom shelf of the bookcase. At Christmas break, she'd stood stooped over in her church heels, while her mother pinned the pattern to her underclothes.

The dress would flatter Rosie's figure. It would have princess seams, an off-the-shoulder neckline overlaid with lace, a natural waist, and a ball gown skirt like Elizabeth Taylor's when she married Nicky Hilton. Currently the skirt poked over the edge of the table at Rosie like a wayward pompom.

Her mother's needle bumped in and out of the fabric. "Are you sure?" she asked around the pins in her mouth.

Rosie looked up from her embroidery, a geometric pattern she was working on a pale, blue pillowcase. "The dress will be lovely."

"Sure it will," her mother said. "I meant about Bud."

Rosie lowered the embroidery hoop to her lap.

"What kind of person would I be if I backed out now?"

Her mother snipped a loose thread. "Have you been to the hospital yet?"

Rosie shoved the hoop into her sewing basket. "Tomorrow. Daddy's letting me borrow one of his cars."

* * *

Percy Jones Army Hospital was a sprawling brick behemoth, almost a city all its own looming over downtown Battle Creek from its post across the river. Rosie circled the hospital in her father's car, looking for something that would tell her which entrance to use or where she might find Bud, but there was nothing she could decipher.

She gave up, parked the car in the shade of a maple tree, and walked up the sidewalk toward the complex's colonnaded front. Above the tall columns, she counted thirteen floors. She counted each step in the four wide sets that made up the approach to the main entrance, a lane that gave the impression of a tongue lolling out of the building's enormous mouth. Inside there were signs and a receptionist in uniform, who took her information and drew her a map with directions to Bud's ward.

Holding the map out in front of her, Rosie marched past a small PX, a post office, and a smoking lounge where men in wheelchairs or lined up on benches waited their turn at the payphones.

The ward, when she arrived, was empty, save for a nurse at a desk that overlooked two long rows of freshly made beds, some with odd mechanical contraptions attached to them and each with a chair and a footlocker.

"They're at gymnastics," the nurse said, pointing. "Down that hall and to the left."

Wheelchairs and crutches lined the wall outside of the gym. Inside, dozens of men in shorts and white undershirts hoisted themselves onto rods hooked to slots in the walls, swung from rings hanging from the ceiling, and balanced themselves on parallel bars. These were vigorous men, and it took her a while to realize that each was incomplete, missing hands, feet, entire limbs.

Bud sat on a grey mat near a corner of the room doing floor exercises. His blond hair, cut short, still managed to brush his forehead, and when he grimaced with effort, his dimples appeared.

An orderly blew a whistle and shouted, "Secure from drills." Two more orderlies passed among the patients, doling out towels and helping them down from their apparatus. The men congratulated and teased each other.

Bud hoisted himself onto his crutches and hobbled toward the door, and Rosie retreated to the ward to ask the nurse which bed was his. When he arrived, she rose from the metal chair beside it.

He leaned on his crutches and ran one hand over his sweaty head. "If you'd only told me you were coming, I'd have made myself more presentable."

She focused on the spot where the neck of his undershirt made a v. "You look fine."

He maneuvered himself onto the bed and leaned toward her, the missing part of his leg obscured by the intact one. "So, how's my best girl?"

Rosie pulled her embroidery from her bag. "I've been to see the priest and told him we won't be having the wedding."

Bud sat up. "Postponed. You told him we've postponed it."

Rosie kept her head down, kept stitching. "He said if we wanted, we could have a small one in the rectory whenever you've recovered."

He eased himself back against his pillow. "That could be a long time. You saw how I am on those crutches, and they haven't finished fitting me for my leg yet."

More men began to file into the ward. Some sat on their beds and read books or letters; some wheeled around to visit one another or got up card games with buddies.

Bud sat up. "Lots of guys get married here. Military honors. The hospital has a chaplain."

She lifted her chin at the men playing cards. "I'm not interrupting your routine?"

He shook his head. "I mostly lie in bed. I've counted the tiles in both the floor and the ceiling. There's two hundred and eighty six on the floor—

"You're lucky, you know. You still have your knee."

He turned away. "Whatever you arrange is fine."

She put her needlework away, touched his shoulder, and left.

The hallways on her way out were filled with hundreds of veterans from the police action in Korea, and before this the hospital had healed thousands of men wounded in the big war.

Some of the men she'd seen today still had their limbs, but she knew fingers and toes now black with cold would eventually turn almost wooden. They might regain use, but not feeling.

That evening, while her mother sewed, she slid the wedding invitations into the kindling box beside the fireplace in the parlor. She'd stopped at the rectory on her way home and discussed possibly having a small ceremony with the priest, just family, not in the church. It might happen after Bud was discharged, after he got used to his false leg. She'd thought she might wear her going away suit, the one she'd already bought at Hudson's, but her mother wouldn't stop sewing the dress.

Her mother tilted up the lampshade. "Was Bud a good dancer before the amputation? Your daddy never took to it much."

Rosie knew her mother's childhood dream was to be like Ginger Rogers. She'd danced everywhere she went. The story went that her mother took a job as a waitress at some big car show in hopes of running into Hollywood mogul types like Howard Hughes or Darryl Zanuck, and there, with her tray full of canapés, she'd danced right into Rosie's father, the car salesman.

"What was Daddy like when he was younger?"

"Steady. A gentleman." Her mother worked and reworked one bit of lace that wouldn't sit right. She'd sewn it on and ripped it off three times already. She turned a tiny pleat with the point of her needle and stitched the piece down again. "He hasn't changed, really."

Before Korea, Bud had loved to dance, and he took her to the Arcadia Ballroom often. Big-name bands played there, and their friends always showed up. But for Rosie, dancing didn't mean Bud anymore. Since the day-trip to Belle Isle and the Four Aces concert, dancing only meant Anita.

They'd spread a blanket between the other concertgoers', and when the band played, children got up to dance. Then some couples did, and Anita had pulled Rosie up and tucked her hand against her shoulder, slipped an arm around Rosie's waist, and moved with her in the gentle night air.

It was a sure bet that Bud wouldn't want to dance anymore, and Rosie wouldn't miss the Arcadia Ballroom.

Finally satisfied with her handiwork, Her mother smoothed her palm over the now-flat lace. "You're taking on a lot," she said. "It may take Bud a long time to get back on his feet." She selected another bit of lace and pinned it to the dress.

Rosie looked at the sewing basket, but she couldn't stomach stitching one more pillowcase. "Have you finished spring cleaning? Does the kitchen ceiling still need washed?"

"I got your father to help me with that last weekend."

"Then if you don't need me, I'm going out."

Her mother fluttered her hand in the air, as if whisking Rosie away. "Fine, dear."

The parking lot at the West End Bar was packed. Rosie leaned her bike against the back of the drying bin at the grain elevator next door.

Her friend, Marjory, stood by the bar's back door. "Hey, big college girl. Didn't expect you home until my shower."

Marjory was engaged to Frank Schmidt, who worked at the car dealership, and Rosie had agreed to stand up in her wedding, but she still had difficulty believing her fickle friend had finally settled on one guy.

Marjory linked her arm through Rosie's and towed her toward the bar's back door. "My break's over." She leaned close and lowered her voice. "We heard about Bud. I'll buy you a drink."

They pushed their way to the bar, pausing along the way for friends and neighbors to hug Rosie or pat her back.

Marjory drew her a beer. "Frank says you've been to the hospital."

"People are talking about it?"

Marjory reached across the bar to touch Rosie's ring. "How brave you are."

Rosie took a sip of beer but couldn't swallow it. She looked for a place to spit.

Behind her men waited three deep for their turn at the pool tables. All of the booths were packed. As she motioned to Marjory, cupping her hands in front of her, a champagne cork

popped, someone called for glasses, and Marjory turned to get them. Rosie leaned over and let the warm beer dribble back into her glass.

At the corner market, she dropped a dime into the public phone and dialed Anita's number.

She answered on the third ring, like always, and Rosie asked her about school, about her job at the halfway house.

"Same as always," Anita said. "Your professors say you can still graduate."

A car drove past, and Rosie pushed her body as far as she could into the corner of the phone booth.

"Did you hear me?" Anita asked. "We could walk together."

Rosie pressed her forehead against the booth's cool glass. "The thing is—"

"Don't tell me about the thing. Tell me when you're coming back."

"I want to. You know I do, but he's broken."

Anita hung up.

* * *

Aside from the hem, the dress was finished. Rosie's mother followed her upstairs to her unheated bedroom, where Rosie undressed and stood shivering in her underwear.

"Give me a minute," her mother said, working the buttons at the back of the dress and arranging it like a pool of royal icing on the carpet. "Okay, step in, but be careful."

Her mother concentrated on pushing the tiny pearl buttons through the loops she'd made from rattail braid, counting aloud as she worked from the base of Rosie's spine toward the nape of her neck. Near Rosie's bra strap a forgotten pin pricked her finger, and she popped it into her mouth.

Rosie turned toward her.

"Don't move," her mother said. "It's on a seam where it won't show. Besides, blood on your dress is good luck."

Rosie stood very still. "Do you remember on rainy days when I was little, and Daddy was away on business, you would put music on the Victrola and dance around the living room with the carpet sweeper?"

Back then her mother had liked to dress her up in the old clothes from her grandmother's trousseau, so they could act out silly plays together. Rosie's nose had twitched like a rabbit's from the camphor in the mothballs. At the bottom of the trunk had been her mother's stack of headshots from when she lived in Hollywood. Rosie had asked about them a few months ago, but they were gone. Nothing remained of her mother's cinematic dreams beyond one, soft-focus portrait that hung on the wall beside Rosie's bedroom door.

Her mother squeezed her eyes shut and held her hands over Rosie's eyes. "Ready? One, two, three." She turned Rosie toward the mirror, dropped her hands, and opened her eyes.

They looked at one another in the long mirror affixed to the back of Rosie's bedroom door.

Her mother's breath caught in her chest. "You look so grown up. Do you like it?"

Rosie nodded once. "It's nice." She tugged at the waist, which felt snug.

Her mother fiddled with something in the back. "And you're sure?"

"Yes. Bud will need me now."

"Who will you get to stand up with you? That nice Anita?"

Rosie dropped her chin to her chest. "I don't know."

Taking Care

After church on Mother's Day, Rosie and Bud packed baby Sharon into her car bed and headed north. Bud steered with his left wrist rested on the bottom of the steering wheel.

These Sunday outings had started soon after Rosie got pregnant. She was up to her elbows in dishwater when Bud wrapped a few donuts leftover from breakfast in a tea towel and ushered her toward the car. Over and over again he'd told her that his favorite thing to do was slip along the wide-open, lakeshore road with her in the passenger seat of their station wagon and Sharon nestled behind them. Rosie watched his attention wander from the road to watch the lake or Sharon sleeping, or to lean over and fish a snack from the basket he kept on the seat beside him.

Today, Rosie felt him staring at the side of her head. She kept her eyes on the road, where the white dashes in the centerline seemed to go by too quickly, although he wasn't speeding. The sun glinted off the lake's ripples, and she was glad of her sunglasses.

"If you're tired, I can drive," she said.

"It's not much farther."

Nine miles from Shady Maples Nursing Home, Sharon woke up crying. Bud pulled into the rest stop, and they got out while Rosie jiggled her against her chest until she calmed.

"She'll be cranky when we get there," Rosie said.

Bud leaned on the driver's-side roof. "She's almost six months old. Past time Gram met her."

"I'm not sure Gram remembers she has a great-granddaughter."

Bud wedged himself back into the driver's seat and twisted the key in the ignition. "Get in."

By the time they arrived at the nursing home, visiting hours were well underway, and the parking lot was nearly full.

"Go on in and let me park," Rosie said. "She'll be waiting."

Bud kissed her and hurried toward the front doors.

Rosie found a shady spot at the far end of the parking lot. She removed everything from Sharon's diaper bag. She unfolded and refolded the white cloth diapers and stacked them on the seat next to her. Next she did the bright flannelette burp cloths and counted diaper pins and bottles. She opened the corsage box and took out the corsage Bud had insisted on bringing.

The three blush *Dendrobium* orchids were intertwined with baby's breath, a pink picot ribbon, and Bud had included a single, pink rose. It was the prettiest arrangement of his that

Rosie had ever seen. She nestled it back into its box and returned everything else to the bag, finally settling the corsage box on top before pulling the zipper closed and slinging the bag over her shoulder.

Sharon slept in her car bed with her head turned to one side, her knees drawn up, and her bottom in the air. Rosie caressed her head, smoothing the strands of blond hair that had begun to show against her pale scalp. Then she stroked the soft folds of Sharon's ears, gently coaxing her awake. Rolling onto her back, Sharon reached up. Rosie settled her on her hip and nudged the car door closed.

All over the visitor's room, families hugged and chatted. Elderly patients picked up puzzle pieces, examined them, and set them down without trying to fit them together. Children flipped through board books and slid big, wooden beads along a twisted wire structure that sat under the picture window opposite the door.

Gram's chin rested on her chest, head bobbing intermittently. Rosie, loaded down with the bag, sank into the chair opposite her. Bud leaned over and kissed Gram's cheek. When she woke, he pinned the orchids to her shoulder.

Gram pointed at Sharon. "And who is this?"

Rosie sat Sharon on the tabletop. "Your great-granddaughter. Would you like to hold her?"

Gram nodded, and Rosie transferred Sharon to her lap.

Gram made silly faces. "She's a sweet little thing. Like you were, Bud."

Sharon fussed a little, and Gram jostled her on her knees.

Sharon's cries swelled.

"Take it." Gram's voice trembled. "Get it off me." She pushed at Sharon, trying to scoot her off of her lap.

Rosie slipped an arm behind Sharon's back and scooped her up. Sharon wouldn't stop crying until Rosie gave her a bottle.

"You should see what they feed us here," Gram said.

"We had a nice dinner with you last time we visited," Rosie said.

"Yesterday the bread had bugs in it," Gram said.

Bud took Sharon from Rosie and put her on his shoulder. He patted her back, coaxing up a burp. "Gram, this is a decent place."

"Can't you smell how nasty it is? Cooties scurry around my room all night. I can't put my foot out of the bed to use the toilet."

"Let's get you some help," Rosie said.

Gram hissed at her. "There's nothing wrong with me." She stood as tall as she could, propping herself against the table with one fist, and raised the other almost to shoulder height to shake it at Rosie. The loose skin under her wrist wobbled. "Get out of here, Mamie."

The crowd of visitors had thinned, but everyone left in the room stared.

Rosie waited for Bud to correct Gram, to tell her she was wrong. That this was Rosie, his wife, not the mother who had abandoned him.

"Remember, this: I'm the one who loves him best," Gram said.

Bud put his arm around Gram's waist and helped her back down into her chair. "Hush now, Gram. You're making a scene."

"Don't shush me, boy." She glared at him. "And don't think I won't take care of you. I always took care of you, Bud." Gram's lips were wet. She pulled a handkerchief from the sleeve of her sweater and wiped her nose from side to side. "What did you mean, bringing her here?"

Now he would say it. He'd tell Gram that Rosie cared for him, too.

He took Gram's handkerchief and handed it to Rosie. "I wanted you to meet Sharon."

"Don't bring them again," Gram said. "They're no kin to me."

From the recreation room doorway, Gram's hand tucked under his arm, Bud shooed Rosie away behind his back.

* * *

After Bud's grandfather died, Rosie had given Gram a standing invitation for Sunday dinners, but she never came. By the time Rosie discovered something was wrong, dishes had filled Gram's sink and spilled onto the drainboard.

"Are you ill, Gram?"

"Worn out is all. I can't keep up."

Toast crumbs, mottled tea bags, and butter smears fouled the counters in the yellow and blue kitchen. Rosie tucked a dishtowel into the waistband of her skirt and rolled up her sleeves.

"Rest and keep me company while I do these up, then."

Gram licked the tips of her index and middle fingers and swiped them through the sugar strewn across the seat of her rocking chair.

"I don't know why Bud can't come by."

Rosie wrung out her dishcloth. "Let me get that." She wiped the ends of Gram's fingers. Up close, the creases in Bud's grandmother's neck hid grime, and there was a secret, musty smell about her. Rosie took Gram's hand between both of hers. The dishcloth dangled, cooling. "Let's sit together."

Rosie set the kitchen to rights and settled Gram with a cup of tea before checking the rest of the house. The bed sheets were grey, and the toilet crawled with mold.

After Gram locked Rosie out of the house and called the police, Rosie had packed Gram's clothes and the few personal mementos the nursing home would allow.

"I don't have time," Bud said. "The shop's about to open."

Florist shop grand opening or no, Bud wouldn't have been able to do what needed doing. He hadn't been any help when his grandfather died, either. Big Daddy's clothes still hung in his closet, and his garden tools stood rusting against the shed.

Rosy gathered candy and gum wrappers, washed the curtains, and scrubbed the baseboards on her hands and knees. Heavily pregnant, she toted boxes of papers to the curb. And because Bud couldn't bear to sell anything, she met the movers who came to take Gram's and Big Daddy's things to storage.

* * *

When Bud came onto the front porch, Rosie was rocking Sharon. Each time she pushed her bare toes against the painted boards they turned bright pink. She pulled Sharon's head tight to her chest. "I won't go back there."

The nursing home aide had sounded calm on the phone. She told Rosie that after Bud left, Gram had become restless, had put on her windbreaker and hung her handbag over her arm. She'd paced by the front doors tying and untying her plastic rain bonnet. The staff had tried to distract her with tea and gossip, but Gram wouldn't have it and insisted that she needed to go pick Bud up from school. She'd scooted around an orderly and made a beeline for the door. They'd had to forcibly restrain her.

"She'd never hurt Sharon," Bud said.

"You have no way of knowing what she'll do."

Bud walked down the porch steps. He pulled a couple of dandelions from the flowerbed beside the car, but they broke off, leaving the roots intact in the soil where they would regrow.

"She doesn't mean any of it. She's sick."

"You think I don't know that?"

The wind picked up, and Bud zipped his jacket.

Rosie tucked a stray tail of the swaddling blanket into a fold and patted Sharon's back.

"Go on inside and get warm," Bud said. "You don't have to come with me."

"That's my Bud, always taking care. But if you go, who's going to finish the centerpieces for the wedding tomorrow?"

He climbed back up the steps and put his hand on her shoulder. "I was hoping you'd help with that."

Rosie pushed up from the rocker and took Sharon inside, leaving it pitching back and forth on the porch. She let the screen door slam behind her.

Persistent Ache

The jukebox at the Heron Inn was dark, its cord coiled dormant on the floor. Rosie remembered the chips in the linoleum, but a new trail of exposed concrete tracked the intervening years of farmers' and truckers' boot-steps to the bar. A few grubby men leaned against the rail, faces turned up toward a game show playing on the small television mounted high in the corner. Vacant, stiff-backed stools held the spaces between them. Harry Hicks sat slumped in his usual spot, and Rosie assumed he was using his finger to play dot-to-dot with the coins resined into the bar top, as always.

When Sharon called and invited Rosie to meet here, Rosie had imagined a crowd surrounding the pool tables, players jeering when somebody scratched. She'd assumed

conversation with her daughter would be difficult on league night, but the place was practically empty.

She smelled stale grease and knew her freshly shampooed hair would need another washing when she got home. She pulled a paper napkin from its metal holder on the table, licked it, and tried to scrub a big drip of ketchup from the holder's shiny side. The ketchup was stiff and cracked, like an old rubber ball. She slid her thumbnail under the fat end of the splotch. Sharon should have been here already.

The waitress, a girl maybe ten years older than Sharon was when Rosie left, hung up the phone and walked out from behind the bar.

The waitress placed a glass of water on the table. "Ready to order?"

"Not yet," Rosie said. She wanted a glass of wine but thought she'd better wait for Sharon. The ketchup came loose all in one piece. Its underside was tacky, and Rosie rolled it between her finger and thumb.

On the drive into town, she had twice toured Broad Street, surprised at how different Big Cedar looked from the last time she'd visited. Her father's car showroom had closed after his funeral a decade ago, but now the implement dealer's lot was empty, Sanders' Grocery was shuttered, and a sheet of plywood covered the plate glass window at the West End Bar. As far as she could tell, Peaslee's Funeral Home, the Heron Inn, and the florist shop that she and Bud had opened together were the only places still in business. Since their divorce, Bud had operated the shop by himself.

Potted palms flanked the same utilitarian wreath of silk carnations that had always occupied RosieBud Florist's window. It looked nearly as bare as it had in the first, lean year after she and Bud opened it, when he left their bed before sunrise every Monday and drove to the

wholesaler in Saginaw to pick up the few flowers and plants they could afford. That winter she had swaddled baby Sharon in blankets and pulled out a drawer behind the counter for her to lie in, trusting this to keep the draft from the door off of her. But Sharon caught the croup, and while Bud was on the road, Rosie had to close the shop and stay home. She walked the floor in their tiny bathroom, back and forth for what had seemed like miles, jouncing Sharon on her shoulder until the shower ran out of hot water, and the air emptied of steam.

During the summer Rosie took Sharon into the shop's cooler to escape the heat. From the beginning Sharon loved the walk-in's thick scent of roses, lilies, and peonies. Rosie had encouraged her burbling, repeated the common names of flowers for her, brushed petals against her soft cheeks, and offered single blooms when she stretched her short, pink fingers toward the tempting masses stuffed upright into dark buckets.

By the time Sharon started kindergarten, she was obsessed with the outlandish displays Bud concocted. She couldn't get enough of Christmastime, when he crammed the shop with angels and shiny ornaments. She almost seemed more excited by the start of her school holiday, when she could spend whole days in the shop, than in discovering what Santa left for her under the tree on Christmas morning.

One year Bud ordered a pair of giant, porcelain reindeer all the way from Germany. The bucks' gold-leafed antlers drew Sharon like magnets, and she climbed into the window to stroke them. Rosie had to call her to come out.

Bud was charmed by the marketing possibilities and made her crawl back into the window while he exchanged the black and white film in his camera for color. Climbing back into the window, she toppled forward onto one of the deer and broke it. She'd banged her nose, but he'd snatched up the deer and left her wailing.

Despite Rosie's protests, he banned Sharon from the shop for a week. She claimed not to remember this or much else about the early days, not her parents' arguments over the books, not the silence that dulled the house.

Sharon scraped back a chair and sat down across from Rosie. "Sorry I'm late." She waved toward the bar. "Just water?"

"Whatever you're having is fine."

The waitress brought them both beer, and Rosie sipped the cold, bitter stuff. Sharon gulped down half of hers.

"How's your father?"

Sharon slid a thin, dog-eared booklet from her handbag and pushed it across the table.

Rosie scanned the pages filled with color photos of stylish floral designs, like the ones she had seen at home and garden shows in the city.

"From this year's conference in Chicago," Sharon said. "I've been practicing."

Rosie sipped her beer. "What does your father say about it?"

"Dad thinks spray-painting the tips of football mums is *avant-garde*." Sharon picked at her cuticles. "I feel like we're playing Pong. Every time I suggest a change, he swats it back at me. I need your help."

"Why would he listen to me?"

Sharon finished her beer and pointed at Rosie's. "Ready?"

Rosie shook her head.

Sharon put down her empty glass and leaned forward. "I need money to buy him out," she said.

* * *

On the afternoon Rosie left, she canned twenty-four quarts of tomatoes. She lowered basket after basket of them into boiling water and watched their skins crack and curl back. She lifted and plunged them into the sink filled with ice water. When the sink was full of the fruit, some trailing gory fibers, she began to slip off their skins, loosening the stubborn bits with a paring knife. The summer of 1962 was the hottest she could remember, and at first the frigid water was a reprieve. Soon the cold stung her skin and worked its way into the joints of her fingers until it became a persistent ache. Still she peeled and slid stripped tomatoes until the sink was empty and two-dozen jars waited to be lowered into the steaming kettle on top of the stove.

At last all of the jars rested on the table, swaddled in clean dishtowels, and she went to finish packing. From the bedroom she heard the firm, final *thok* of jars sealing.

There had been trial runs. She had scanned the want ads in the city papers for months and scribbled budget after budget, long columns of numbers—food, babysitting, gasoline, rent—on the backs of the torn-open envelopes from utility bills that she normally used for her shopping lists.

A week in Detroit was explained as a women's retreat, something to do with the church Bud no longer attended. Anita thought that was funny when they arranged it, and it had seemed clever to Rosie on the road, with the shiver of each passing semi-truck's bow wave rushing her toward to their rendezvous.

She had not wanted to take Sharon with her on the long weekend that was billed as a shopping trip with a friend, but Bud's grandmother had taken ill. At seven, Sharon was too young

to care for herself, Bud said. He couldn't deal with both Sharon and his grandmother. If Rosie wanted to go, she'd have to bring Sharon along.

After months apart, Rosie and Anita's need rendered them reckless and forgetful of locks; it hushed the squeal of unoiled hinges. They'd sent Sharon to the playground across the street with some other children from Anita's neighborhood. She'd run inside when she got thirsty and found them together. She forgot the glass of water and only wanted to know what Rosie and Anita were doing in bed in the middle of a Sunday afternoon.

Rosie dressed. She sat on the sofa, held Sharon's hands, and answered her questions until she seemed satisfied. Afterwards Sharon didn't want to go back outside. She stayed on the couch and looked at a book she'd brought from home.

The silent drive home with Sharon was merely a rehearsal for Bud's fury when Rosie confessed the affair. Rage filtered in and, little by little, built a fragile crust over his injury while they tried to sort things out.

Bud slammed their bedroom door. "How long?"

Rosy sank onto the bed. "You know we've been friends since college, but—"

"Before we even got married? Well, that explains a few things."

"It's not like you think—"

"I doubt you'd want to know what I'm thinking."

He repeated questions like reciting the rosary: had she ever loved him; why did she ever marry him; could she give him one reason to forgive her; did she know what she was doing to them, to Sharon? He said he might be able to forgive her, if she'd just come to her senses.

Rosie struggled to make him understand that she cared for him but that what she felt for Anita was different, something she'd never expected to feel, had never felt with anyone, couldn't imagine she'd ever feel again.

He couldn't hear it, went out, came home drunk. Sharon retreated to the foot of her bed, curled up like a mouse with her blankets over her head.

"You're no better than my mother, throwing me away," he roared at her from the driveway.

He banished her, told her he wouldn't allow her to hurt Sharon, too. That if she tried to see her, he'd have her committed.

Rosie unwrapped the tomatoes, folded the dishcloths, and returned them to their drawer. She went back to the bedroom, opened her jewelry box, and put on her grandmother's bracelet and the necklace of beads Sharon gave her on Mother's Day. In their place she left her wedding ring.

She set her suitcase near the kitchen door and carried the jars in pairs down the cellar stairs, and when she was done, stood considering them in the dim light filtering down from the door above her. They looked solid and comfortable nestled alongside pints of slim green beans and olive-drab dill pickles.

* * *

Sharon took another sip of beer and leaned toward Rosie, bracing her elbows on the table.

"Do you have much saved?" Rosie asked.

"Dad says he only wants half of market value, so that's all I'd need."

"We don't have that kind of money," Rosie said.

Sharon gripped the table edge. "But you travel," she said. "You and Anita."

"Not much since you finished school," Rosie said. "We're saving for retirement."

Of course, they weren't ready to retire, yet. Maybe they could float a loan. Anita would understand that Sharon needed it more than they did right now.

* * *

After Rosie left, she and Sharon talked on the phone every other Sunday. Bud listened in on the other line, but for eight years he never spoke. It wasn't until Rosie's father died that Bud called her to announce she would be allowed visitation. Sharon would stay with her one weekend each month and for two weeks in summer.

Before she converted to Catholicism so she could marry Bud, Rosie had spent countless Saturday afternoons in the sanctuary of the Methodist Church with her mother, cleaning. They'd worked in concert, one of them on each side of the aisle, dusting pews, oiling oak, and straightening hymnals. Afterwards Rosie's mother readied the chancel, while Rosie telescoped the long duster until it reached the dark, timber beams that hovered overhead like the undergirding of a bridge. On the morning of her father's funeral, the church smelled the same as

it always had, like the lavender water she and her mother had sprinkled between the linens and the Liquid Gold oil they used to polish the woodwork.

Her mother was long dead, and now her father's casket rested before the chancel table. At the back of the church, Rosie gave Anita's hand a hasty squeeze. They'd agreed Anita would find a seat in one of the last rows. Rosie, her father's only immediate family, only living relative, had to sit up front.

Focusing on the three, arched niches behind the altar, Rosie stepped carefully down the aisle. She scanned the pews. Women in hats, men in suits, none of them Bud; children in their Sunday best, none resembling Sharon's most recent school photo. An usher pointed Rosie to her seat.

The young minister, his eyes magnified like a bug's by his thick glasses, unfolded a pall and placed it over her father's casket. "Dying, Christ destroyed our death. Rising, Christ restored our life. Christ will come again in glory. As in baptism Walter put on Christ, so in Christ may Walter be clothed with glory."

No one called her father Walter. He'd always hated it, wouldn't answer to it, and refused to use it in anything other than official papers.

The minister nodded for the congregation to stand. His head looked like it might topple from his thin, stalk-like neck. Organ music swelled, and everyone sang, "The sower went forth sowing / The seed in secret kept . . ."

Why weren't the fans on? Rosie regretted slipping on the thin jacket Anita had bought her to wear over her sleeveless dress. Taking it off now, standing at the front of the church, would attract too much attention.

Finally the hymn ended. Rosie sat quarter turned in the pew, shoulder blades drawn tight together, and shrugged off her jacket, while the minister buzzed on about her father's life, a life he seemed bored by, and about which he plainly didn't know much. Out of the corner of her eye, she watched the other mourners to see if they'd noticed her baring her arms, and suddenly saw Bud, three rows back, with Sharon beside him.

Sharon's set jaw and the grief lines between her eyebrows didn't diminish her loveliness. As a baby and a young girl, she had seemed to Rosie like an equal mixture: half each parent. Now fifteen, she was much more her own self. Time and genetics had taken Rosie's dark hair, Bud's small ears, and Walt's almond eyes and worked some sort of transformation, one that hadn't quite been perceptible on the flat plane of school photos.

When the minister blessed and dismissed the congregation, everyone waited for Rosie to pass. Bud nodded to her, but Sharon kept her eyes trained on her hands.

In the fellowship hall, plastic tablecloths had been spread, and roasters heaped full of baked beans, scalloped potatoes, and roast chicken waited. A side table held gelatin desserts, cookies, and cream pies.

A woman in an apron held out a plate. "So sorry for your loss, but he's in a better place, Dear."

Mumbling a thank you, Rosie scooped up a spoonful of potatoes and retreated to a distant corner where she could watch people spill through the double doors to line up for food. Anita came to keep her company, while her father's friends filed past offering condolences.

Sitting together at one of the long tables, Bud and Sharon took their time eating. Sharon especially, lingered over her dessert while Bud talked. Finally, Sharon pushed back from the table, gathered their empty plates, and made her way to the trashcan near where Rosie stood.

Turning toward Rosie before she dumped her dirty plates, Sharon asked, "Why did she have to come?"

Anita took the plates from Sharon. "I'll be in the car."

* * *

Anita would agree to help Sharon, Rosie knew it. She was still angry that they'd already paid for half of the shop when Rosie left without even taking her share of the joint savings account, but if Sharon wanted help, then they'd find a way.

Rosie reached across the table for Sharon's hand. "I always want—"

Sharon pushed herself away from Rosie, hard against the back of her chair. "Why is everything about you?" With Rosie's half-full beer glass in her hand, she stood up.

Rosie pressed the soles of her shoes hard against the floor and hunched her shoulders.

Sharon lifted the beer, gulped it down, and smacked the glass down on the table.

The old men at the bar turned away from the television to watch.

"Do what you want," Sharon said. "Like always."

After she left, Rosie counted backwards from a hundred in her head. She gave up when she reached forty and slung her handbag over her shoulder. She stuffed her soiled, crumpled napkin in Sharon's glass.

Sharon's booklet lay beside it on the table. She held it flat between her hands for a long spell, and then she slid it into her back pocket.

Rosie dropped some bills on the bar and left without waiting for her change. She picked at the ketchup that had stuck to her sweater sleeve. It would be tough to get the stain out.

It's Never Perfect

Rosie and Anita sat drinking coffee on low-slung, rattan chairs in the garden behind their single shotgun home. The furniture, with its thick, bark cloth cushions, had been ideal for their covered patio in Detroit, but after only six months in New Orleans, the cane bindings had already begun to split, and the upholstery was faded.

Rosie lifted the coffee pot. "More?"

Anita shook her head. "I need to get to my meeting." She dusted biscuit crumbs from her lap and stacked her mug on top of her plate.

"You know I'll get those," Rosie said.

Anita kissed the top of her head.

"Two thirty?" Rosie asked.

Anita shrugged. "I might be a little later. Thought I'd stop by the shelter after, take a look at the new puppies."

Kelsey, who lived next door, worked at the animal shelter and had talked Anita into volunteering soon after they'd moved in.

"Don't bring any home."

Rosie walked a little way down the block to stand beside her car, so she could watch Anita stand on her pedals and wave, silver ponytail flashing in the sun as she cut through the intersection.

Kelsey emerged from behind a stubby lime tree in her own front yard. "Good morning, Miss Rosie."

Rosie dropped the bag she'd retrieved from the trunk of her car. "What do you think you're doing, jumping out at me like that?"

"I'm sorry." Kelsey's hair swept forward when she leaned over to recover the sack, revealing a track of tiny, sweaty curls along the nape of her neck. "Hope nothing's broke."

Rosie grabbed the bag back from Kelsey, and it ripped open. Three coordinated gift boxes tumbled to the pavement.

Kelsey bent again to rescue the packages. "Those are real pretty. Are they for Miss Anita?"

"They're a surprise." Leaving the torn, brown paper neglected on the sidewalk, Rosie stacked the boxes atop one another and vised them between her hands.

Kelsey planted her fists on her hips and tilted her head at Rosie. The girl looked so much like a toddler planning to throw a tantrum that Rosie had to press her lips together to suppress a

chuckle. Laughing at Kelsey would hurt her feelings, and she'd probably tell Anita all about this encounter the next time they were at the shelter together.

"They're for my daughter, Sharon."

"She coming to visit?"

"She's planning a trip, yes." The boxes sandwiched between Rosie's hands slipped. She tilted them up to keep them from sliding back to the sidewalk. "Can you not mention this to Anita, since the plans aren't firm, yet?"

Kelsey bent down again, picked up the paper bag, and crumpled it. "Guess that's between y'all," she said, striding up her front steps. She waggled the bag at Rosie.

Rosie set the gift boxes down on the kitchen counter and, on her way out to the garden, plunged her nails into a bar of soap riddled with half moons. She didn't wear gloves anymore, simply drove her bare hands into the sun-warmed dirt. The soil, when she dug into it, was loamy and laced with tiny, hair-like roots. Azaleas, salvia, and sasanquas bloomed in December, such excess.

She had drawn plans for the garden and colored them with pencils that she bought from the Woolworths on Magazine Street. A black dotted line, frillier at the front of the plot to give the impression of wrought iron fencing, surrounded the entire scheme, and the house was a long, blue rectangle set back and to the left. Each season had its own onionskin layer, its own mounds of color. When she laid them on top of each other, she could envision it completed: color coordinated, trimmed back, weed free.

The Confederate jasmine she'd tried to start from a slip an across-the-street neighbor gave her hadn't taken root like the roses she propagated. Now she'd have to find something else to fill the empty space between the front door and window.

Anita, with her volunteer work and interminable board meetings, didn't have time for gardening, but Rosie cultivated the ginger and tender perennials she'd already planted beside their front steps for at least an hour each day, and she'd begun work in the back yard, too.

She washed her hands, put the teakettle on to heat, and pulled her favorite mug from the cabinet beside the sink

Two calliope hummingbirds fought over the feeder Anita kept near the kitchen window. As soon as one hovered up for a sip, the other buzzed in with its green head lowered, to chase it away. Their chittering was audible over the ticking teakettle. One finally ran into the other and knocked it off the feeder.

Rosie went outside to see if it was hurt, but both had vanished.

Her phone rang in the living room, and on her way through the kitchen to answer it she turned off the kettle.

She carried the cordless handset back into the kitchen and tucked it into the crook of her neck, so she could talk with Sharon while she poured hot water. "Where are you, Honey? You sound like you're at the bottom of a well."

"Home with Paul, of course."

"Has he put in for vacation, yet? Do you have an itinerary?"

The hummers returned, zooming back and forth, dive bombing the feeder and each other.

Sharon chattered about the winter holidays in California, how different it was from Michigan. Something about none of the houses having front yards and her mother-in-law lighting a fire before Thanksgiving dinner even though it was sweltering.

Rosie squeezed lemon into her tea. "Sounds like you had a nice time. When are you coming?"

"I'm going to see Dad. We'll have to reschedule."

"Oh?"

Sharon was quiet for a long stretch. "I hadn't planned to, but then there was Paul's parents' Christmas party, and everyone was too nice. All I could think about was how holidays with Dad were and that big, drafty house."

"You're second-guessing your decision to leave. Do you think if you'd stayed, he'd ever have let you run the florist shop the way you wanted?" Rosie sipped her tea and scalded her tongue.

"You know the Thanksgiving after you left? I don't think I ever told you, but he cooked a turkey, even made Gram's cranberry-orange relish. In the middle of carving he set down the knife and fork, crammed his fist into the cavity, lifted the bird over his head, and let it fly. I don't think he was even aiming at anything.

"I'm so sorry."

"I never could get that grease spot off the wall, and it's not your fault. Not really." Sharon sniffed. "Paul and I are doing fine out here. His family's great. Anyway, I'll let you know about visiting, okay?"

"Whatever you two decide."

* * *

The garden center had tubs of camellias stacked on shelves and steps to create an alluring display, but none of them was the large specimen Rosie had in mind. She returned home empty handed. In the front yard, variegated ginger provided structure as a counterpoint for blousy roses, and pink and white impatiens filled the shady spots. Mold had begun to creep up the siding in the space between the window and door.

Rosie's footsteps echoed in the empty house. She set her handbag on the kitchen table and went through to the back garden, where Anita and Kelsey sat laughing over glasses of wine.

"Kels thinks we should get a puppy," Anita said.

Kelsey shook her head. "It doesn't have to be a puppy."

"Dogs are a lot of responsibility," Rosie said.

Anita tapped the back of Kelsey's hand with her index finger. "Exactly as predicted, right?" She turned to Rosie. "Seriously, though, she's right about the need for homes. If you could just see the mounds of euthanized dogs."

Kelsey put both hands over her face. "I've been working there too long."

Anita scooted her chair over and put her arm around Kelsey. "C'mon, girl. Don't cry."

Rosie shoved her hands into her back pockets. "I see you two finished the last bottle of wine. I'll get myself some tea."

* * *

When Anita walked up the sidewalk, Rosie was slumped on the front steps with her elbows resting on her knees and the phone in her hands.

"How are the dogs today?"

"Fine," Anita said. "Kelsey's coming over later with one for us to foster."

Rosie raised her head. "I asked you not to do that. A dog is too much." She pointed the phone at Anita. "But of course it's what you want that's important."

Anita took the phone from Rosie's hand. "I'm not the one plotting to have company behind people's backs."

"Sharon's not coming, now." Rosie sank back onto the steps. "And you keep shoving Kelsey's dogs in my face."

"The dog is temporary, a foster, not an adoption."

"Sure," Rosy said. "You're great at half measures. The dog won't be permanent the same way we weren't supposed to end up serving at the soup kitchen every damned holiday or be the only ones mimeographing family planning pamphlets."

Anita lowered herself to the step and bumped Rosie's hip for more room. "C'mon, Ro. Ninety days, max. I promise." She put an arm around Rosie's waist and squeezed.

Rosie retreated to the bottom of the steps. "I don't get it. It's not like you to start taking in strays all of a sudden. First Kelsey, now a dog."

This new Anita, the kinder, softer one, was a recent development. When their first apartment in Detroit turned out to be roach infested, she'd been the one who'd known what to do.

She'd smoothed poison-coated paper onto cabinet shelves with rubber-gloved hands. "We do this at my family's catering kitchen. No one's ever gotten sick."

The following morning dead roaches were everywhere: on the countertops, in the sink, and if Rosy wasn't careful, crunching underfoot. Some were cemented down with smudges of shit.

All business, Anita had used the broom to clear her path and a paper towel to sweep them into the trash, wiped the counters with disinfectant. Finished, she washed her hands and dried them on her pants legs. "Stick with me," she'd said, kissing Rosie and foxtrotting her around the apartment.

Anita's eyes narrowed. "You can't be jealous of Kels. She's just a kid."

"Yeah, and my kid should be able to visit without me having to tiptoe around you."

Anita bent over at the waist and laid her head on her knees. "I've tried."

"Past tense."

Anita lifted her head. "I just want it to be good. Things feel good here."

"For you, maybe." Rosie strode to the bare spot at the front of the house and spread her arms wide. "I can't even get the garden right. I killed that jasmine slip the neighbor gave us." She sank to the dirt and wrapped her arms around her knees.

Anita pulled a weed and twisted it between her fingers. "The garden and the house are beautiful. You've always made a home for us, wherever we lived."

Rosie lifted her head and swept out an arm. "What do you think a dog would do to this?"

"Okay," Anita dropped the weed and sandwiched Rosie's hand between both of hers. She kissed Rosie's knuckles. "No dog."

* * *

A week later the hummingbirds were back, one sipping from the old feeder near the kitchen window, and the other hovering above a new feeder Anita had hung from the crape myrtle near the back fence.

Rosie, seated next to Anita on the rattan loveseat, leaned over and showed her Sharon's letter. "Looks like they're planning on springtime."

Anita pulled Rosie's head onto her shoulder. "That'll give you time to finish your planting, maybe do some other things, get out more."

Rosie's bike leaned against the fence behind Anita's, in the same spot where Rosie had parked it when she wheeled it off the U-Haul van. Its chain gleamed. Anita must have taken some soap and a wire brush to it.

Sharon and Paul were coming. In the meantime, who knew what would happen? Maybe she and Anita would find the right camellia for the hole they'd dug together in the front yard. Maybe they could put down some sod in the back garden, a patch of lawn for a puppy.

End of the Road

Nudging aside an orange, Bud pinches a miniature chocolate bar from the gift basket the Ladies Aid delivered the day before and offers it to his daughter Sharon. "To what do I owe the honor?"

"I didn't want you to be alone at Christmas, is all." She picks up a stack of meals-on-wheels trays from the counter near the sink and dumps them into the trash bin. "And there's this." She screws the cap back onto a half-empty bottle next to his elbow.

"Why is that your problem?" He isn't yet as drunk as he likes to be by early afternoon.

She pulls the red glass bulbs from the deer mount hanging in the dining room. "Why do you insist on defiling this moth-eaten old thing?"

It is the one thing he still has from his own father, and he started decorating it years ago, in a festive burst that has somehow become tradition.

"How long can you stay for?" he asks. "Don't think there are sheets on your bed."

"A couple of days, and don't worry about me. Steph's putting me up. You remember her, from school?"

"Sure I remember Stephanie." Sharon had spent more time at her house than at home in the years after Rosie left them. "Why don't you make supper, ask her over?"

Sharon putters, pulling packages out of cupboards, and peering at expiration dates.

"Did you know it doesn't snow in Southern California?" Sharon asks. "Except in the mountains. And there are these autumn winds, Santa Anas they call them, that can make it downright hot." She drops some more things into the trash. "I wore tights to Thanksgiving at the in-laws', and the backs of my legs sweated straight through."

"What do you say we go out and cut one of the trees from behind the barn like we used to?"

Sharon dampens a washrag, sniffs it, throws it in the hamper, and pulls a fresh one from the drawer beside the sink. "Won't they be too big by now?"

He had planted the trees when Sharon was a baby, and for a few years they were the perfect size. Together they watched the trees grow and kept them trimmed through the summers. She helped him pick which one they'd cut down and drag into the house on Christmas Eve. For the first few years, she'd been too little to use the bow saw by herself, and he'd had to help her, his big hand covering hers, his strength making the saw teeth bite into the wood.

"We could take the smallest one, lop some off the bottom," Bud says.

She's in the living room, and he can hear her dragging the old canister vacuum cleaner out of the closet under the stairs.

"Don't switch that noisy thing on. Sit down and talk to me."

She sits and tells him about Thanksgiving with her husband Paul's folks, Nick and Liz, how despite the heat, Liz insisted on lighting the gas log before the crowd sat down to dinner. How the flowers wilted in Liz's cornucopia.

"She arranged it herself, put in citrus fruits and an artichoke, can you imagine?" Sharon gets up to feed the fire in the wood stove.

There had never been anything that tasteless in Bud's shop. Folks might have called his style dated, but he preferred to think of it as classic: he brought in masses of poinsettias for Christmas, mounds of holly, tinsel and twinkling lights, glass bulbs, and porcelain figurines. After Sharon graduated from art school, he'd let her trim the trees in the shop, and some people in town hired her to decorate their homes for the holidays.

Apparently everyone at the table had admired the cornucopia anyway; all the food was delicious, and Paul and his dad kept the wine glasses filled.

"But no one got loud," Sharon says. "And when I accidentally knocked my glass over, everyone thought it was funny."

Bud smooths some wrinkles in the vinyl tablecloth with a fingertip. "Sounds like a good time, like our holidays."

"Yep." She gets up from the table and goes back into the living room to finish vacuuming. "The way Nick teases his kids and Liz pushes leftovers on everyone because she always makes too much food are exactly like us sitting here alone together."

Bud raises his voice. "Did they play cards, at least?"

Sharon comes to lean against the doorway. "Rummy, for pennies, and Paul blessed me out for winning."

"That's my girl."

She grins. "I told him he wouldn't have wanted to sit in on our cutthroat cribbage games."

They bundle up in a couple of Bud's old barn jackets and trudge side-by-side out to the line of trees. None is smaller than fifteen feet high.

Bud taps a yellowed thumbnail against a bare spot about four feet up the trunk of the shortest one and hands Sharon the saw. "Cut it here."

"Liz sent us to get her a Doug fir." Sharon draws the teeth of the saw across the trunk to start a groove. "When I saw the atrocities at the tree lot, I wanted to bring Paul here to get a good one."

Sharon pulls and pushes the bow saw along its entire length, but he didn't sharpen the saw the last time he put it away, and it won't take a bite.

"Give it here." Bud grabs the saw. "You're not doing it right."

He works up a sweat pressing the dull teeth into the wet wood, tearing at it until he's made enough progress to push it over, leaving it hanging by a string of bark. He goes around the tree and pulls. The tree finally gives, and he ends up on his ass in the snow with the tree on top of him.

"That's one way to do it," Sharon says.

"We'll lop off some of these bottom branches and shorten it some more," he says, dragging the tree behind him and dropping it outside of the garage.

Sharon says she and Paul had found the firs leaning against the tree lot's back fence. There weren't many to choose from so close to Christmas, just a few heaped up on the asphalt,

still tied with grower's twine. The lot attendant claimed they weren't popular like they used to be, too empty looking. Paul had Sharon stand each tree up and twirl it for him until they found the one with the fewest bare spots.

Sharon stands the tree upright and banged it against the frozen ground to shake loose snow and dead needles. "This is better than the one we got."

"You're damned right. Let's take it inside and get it prettied up."

"Liz let me help with their annual tree-trimming party. She made Paul and me sleep in his old room."

She says Paul hadn't minded this, that his parents' house was beautiful, the only house in the neighborhood with a lawn, the only one that hadn't been torn down and replaced by a two-story box with a garage in front and the living room on top of it. She hoists the tree and heads toward the back steps.

Bud hasn't shoveled since the last snow, and the steps are covered with slush. "Give me a sec." He opens the old tin milk delivery box inside the garage door that he kept for storing salt, but it's empty.

"Never mind," Sharon says and hauls the tree inside.

She carries the Christmas box down from the attic and gets out the green metal stand.

"Liz makes Nick put white lights on the tree because she likes to imagine fairies living in there," Sharon said, loosening the stand's eye bolts. "And after dinner everyone decorated the tree together. Christmas carols played on the hi-fi. No one raised their voice. No one got too drunk. I had to go sit outside on the stoop."

Bud puts down the porcelain reindeer he's holding. "Missed me, didn't you."

"I thought about what I'd been missing, all right."

He wants a drink. "You and Paul are welcome back any time. I never could figure out why you left."

Sharon drops the tree stand back in the box, shucks off his barn coat, and goes to the kitchen to get her purse. He follows her to her car.

"I left because you wouldn't let me run the shop how I wanted, even after I bought you out."

She leans into the car's open window, pulls out a wrapped package, and tosses it at him. "Socks and undershirts. They need a change sometimes." She backs down the long driveway. "I'll be at Steph's."

* * *

During the summer of 1949, before Bud left for the Marines, before his best friend Andy started seminary, they lit out for Tijuana together in Andy's Studebaker Commander. They packed their savings from a couple of summers haying, an aluminum cooler full of beer, some crackers and tins of sardines, and headed for Chicago along Route 12. Running downhill from Michigan, the blacktop felt smooth, like a groove the car fell into. They spun south from Chicago onto Route 66, and the Mother Road delivered them to Springfield, where Andy pulled into the parking lot at the Lincoln Motel for a night's sleep in a real bed.

The lights in the motel dining room puddled in the corners and along the edges of the slender bar. Early on a Wednesday evening, the boys had the place to themselves. When the

waitress showed up, Andy ordered pork chops and a whiskey, neat with water back. Bud said he wanted the same.

The waitress kept her head bent over her pad. "Baked potato and corn okay?" she asked but didn't wait for an answer before leaving to put their order in.

The boys relaxed into their chairs and watched the smooth, back-and-forth slide of her ass under her thin, cotton uniform.

Andy let out a soft whistle. "Shake it, don't break it."

"Doesn't seem your type."

Andy snagged a toothpick and ground it between his teeth. He pulled it out and tossed it into the ashtray. "I have a type?"

"Don't get hacked off. She just seems nice, is all, quiet."

"You know that how, exactly? From ten seconds watching her do her job?"

"You usually go for the flashy ones," Bud said. "Besides, I thought you were giving up pleasures of the flesh."

"What's it to you? Anyway, you're engaged."

The waitress placed four glasses on the table between them.

"Thanks . . ." Bud read the script embroidery on her uniform. "Ellen." He sipped the whiskey. It was smoother than he was used to.

"You guys didn't say, so I guessed George Dickel." She smiled with just one side of her mouth.

"That's fine," Andy said. "Just fine."

She brought them second drinks with their meals.

Andy extended his hand toward the chair between him and Bud. "Can you join us?"

She nodded toward the bar. "Sal needs help."

The woman tending bar pulled a towel from her apron, wiped the bar top, and stared at them until an old man wearing a corduroy coat trudged in and sat at the bar, blocking her line of sight.

"Looks like she can handle things," Andy said. He took a mouthful of whiskey.

"I need to do my set ups."

Bud concentrated on his pork chop. It was overcooked, and the fat had shriveled to a thin, grey scum. Most of the meat was as dry as Melba toast, but the chop was nearly an inch thick, and around the bone it was still a little juicy.

Andy mashed butter and sour cream into his baked potato and swirled in corn. He swigged whiskey between bites. When Ellen returned, he asked if there was pie.

"We got apple and cherry, or there's custard or coconut cream," she said.

"We're headed for the tropics," Bud said. "Could you bring us the coconut?"

Ellen brought a third drink for Andy with generous slices of pie. She smiled for real this time and took the seat between them. "Coconut cream's my favorite. Where in the tropics you two headed?"

They talked at the table until last call. Ellen wanted to know everything about their trip. Bud told her being on the road felt the way he imagined flying did. She said she'd never been outside of Springfield, but before she was born her parents had travelled, and she hoped some day she would. She offered to show them her parents' scrapbooks.

Bud woke trapped between twin mattresses. Neither he nor Ellen had thought to turn them crosswise on the box springs. He rubbed a hand over his face.

The night's particulars were unclear, but Bud remembered Ellen saying that she was alone, had lost her dad a couple of months back. He recalled Andy snagging a full bottle from behind the bar, when Sal went for the keys to lock up. The rest of the night had been memorable, too. His first time, but clearly not hers. Bud had the distinct feeling he'd been chosen and couldn't suss out why, when Andy had been so obviously available. Now Ellen was missing, and Bud had no idea where Andy had slunk off to.

With bright morning light flooding through the windows, the motel dining room was dingy. Bud ordered breakfast from the thick-waisted breakfast waitress, whose hair stuck up on her head like clumps of dried thistle. He asked about Ellen.

The waitress flipped a cup upright in its saucer and poured. "Off 'til Friday." She went to take someone else's order.

Andy, his face and clothes puckered, flopped onto the chair across from Bud. "Morning."

"What happened?"

"That's my line," Andy said. He signaled the waitress. "Tell."

Bud took a deep breath. "You disappeared."

When more coffee and Bud's breakfast arrived, Andy asked for sunny side up eggs and well-done hash browns.

"Slept in the car," Andy said. "Bet your fiancée would be interested to know how that motel room looks this morning."

"You saw it?"

Andy leered.

"It was late," Bud said. "She didn't have a ride home."

Andy slurped coffee and wagged a finger. "Saw her drive away in a perfectly good vehicle not too many minutes ago, Buddy-boy."

He'd fallen for a lie, then. And how much of the rest of it had Ellen constructed out of floss just to manipulate him? Andy would know. As long as they'd been friends, Andy had chased skirts, and girls had fallen over each other lining up for him. Bud's luck was different. Rosie had been all show and no go even after he told her he was joining the Marines, and she'd finally agreed to marry him. No way would she understand what he'd done last night.

Andy scratched a mosquito bite and palmed the bill the waitress dropped on the table alongside his plate. "Go pack. I've got this."

Back on the road, they blew through cornfields, sprinted westward onto the bridge across the murky Mississippi, and rumbled over the Ozarks. By the time Andy stopped for a needed fill at a station in Tulsa, the shadows from windmills watering stock in the flats stretched out thin across the highway.

The station attendant let the wiper down onto the windshield and stuffed his rag into his back pocket. "That'll be two seventy."

It was Bud's turn to pay, and he reached for his wallet, but his hip pocket was empty. He sifted through empty cracker boxes, poorly folded maps, and paper napkins in the glove box. The wallet wasn't in the niche under the door handle, where he sometimes wedged it, and the floorboards were clear, too.

Andy had gone to use the restroom. Now he swaggered back to the car carrying two Cokes. "Ready to go?"

"I misplaced my wallet," Bud said. "If you get this one, I'll promise I'll pay you back."

"Misplaced?" Andy jerked open the glove box and rummaged around.

"I already looked."

Andy snorted and paid the attendant. "You sap," he said. "That broad robbed you." He slipped into the drivers' seat. "She knew better than to try that with me. You're too damned easy."

Outside of town that night, after a supper of crackers and cheese that was all they had left in the cooler, Bud lay across the Studebaker's wide back seat and counted the stars, glad Andy had left the top down.

Before Andy fell asleep in the front seat, he diagnosed Bud's problem as being too nice, but Bud was pretty sure it wasn't exactly that. More like he wanted people to be nice, to do right by him, so he tried to be nice to them. Untrustworthy or mean people always caught him by surprise.

He considered calling Rosie to tell her about the missing money. She'd been the one who got help when they were all a little drunk and Andy crashed his car. She'd let him cry on her shoulder about his mother, too. She'd have good advice, but what would he tell her about his wallet, about Ellen?

By morning, Andy's mood had improved. "I've done some figuring, and we can make the Grand Canyon on what I've got left. At least we can ride the mules."

Between Oklahoma and Arizona, he let the car loose. Mounds of creosote bush and silver cholla competed in the soil. The flats gave way to red-painted hills and plateaus that stood out against the endless sky like cardboard Western movie sets. Bud drew his initials in the orange dust covering the car.

They drove through the night, and arrived on the south rim as dawn broke over the canyon rim. Andy stopped the Commander in the middle of the road to watch the sun rise,

shortening shadows on the canyon walls. Outcrops and grooves from centuries of erosion emerged with the dawn.

When the park office opened, Andy bought two tickets for the Bright Angel mule train.

"I can't let you do that," Bud said.

Andy handed the tickets to the trail guide. "Already done, pard."

Bud hung back at the corral gate.

Andy gripped his mule's reins, put one foot into a stirrup, and flung his other leg over the mule's back. "Saddle up. You want to get left behind?"

Bud mounted the remaining mule and took his place behind Andy at the end of the line.

Their guide was quiet all the way down, and until they got to the base of the switchbacks at Jacob's Ladder, the only sounds were the mules' heavy breathing and their muffled hooves beating the trail dust finer.

Lizards flipped their tails as the train passed, and a chipmunk hid under the awning of a large rock. In the middle of a switchback, the guide paused just long enough to point out the seismic fault line that ran up the side of the canyon and the point where the rim had slipped. Then he turned back up the trail.

Bud didn't see what made Andy's mule stumble. There was an odd clattering sound, a thud, and the mule went down on its forelegs, leaning against the canyon wall as if it were too beat to go even one more step. Andy had slid sideways on the saddle and was pinned between the mule and the wall from his knee to his chest.

If Bud tried to maneuver his mule around Andy's on the narrow trail, he might slide into the canyon below, or he might crowd Andy's mule and make things worse. The rest of the mule

train was up ahead, climbing the twisting trail. Calling out to them could spook either of their mules.

"How you doing?" Bud asked.

"Remember when I broke my arm?"

Bud slid from his saddle, but kept the bitter end of the reins loose in his hands. "Yeah."

"I don't think it's that bad." Andy coughed. "Crap, that hurts."

Bud skimmed his hand over Andy's mule and caught hold of the reins near its head. "I'm going try to pull him up slow. Hold tight, okay?"

Andy nodded.

Bud pulled on the reins, but nothing happened. The mule wouldn't move. It knelt like a squire ready to be knighted.

"Nothing's happening," Andy said. He'd begun to pant.

Bud pulled on the reins again, and this time, he placed his other hand under the mule's dusty leg, urging it to rise.

"It's moving," Andy said.

"Hold on."

The mule struggled to its feet with Andy pulling himself flat against the saddle. Bud gave him the reins, but they weren't necessary. Following the tracks the rest of the train had left, the mule resumed its steady pace, and they caught up with the others before they reached the corral.

Andy limped back to the car holding his arm tight against his side. "I owe you big."

"How do you figure? You're the one who bought the tickets."

Andy shoved Bud with his good arm and winced. "For starters you get to drive home. And there's a gift shop over there. Let's find something you can take back to Rosie."

Bud walked around the store picking up one thing after another: sets of petrified wood bookends, kachina dolls, salt and pepper sets. He couldn't decide what Rosie would like. Finally, he saw the tiny silver mule. He palmed it and imagined hooking it to her charm bracelet, telling his hero story, the look she would give him.

Two nights later, on their way back home, Bud pulled back into the parking lot at the Lincoln Motel.

"Want me to come with you?" Andy asked.

"I've got this."

Both waitresses worked the busy dining room. Bud was seated in the wrong section and had to ask the thick-waisted waitress for Ellen, but she was busy. He sipped water and twisted his glass in the condensation ring. Two tables over a family celebrated some event. The kids wore their Sunday patent leathers. He drained his water glass and crossed the room to the order window, where Ellen was loading plates full of food onto a serving tray.

"Ashamed of yourself?" he asked.

"Busy," Ellen put her tray down, "or hadn't you noticed?"

He gripped her upper arm. "You have something that belongs to me."

She jerked her arm away and turned toward the kitchen door. "Give me a minute." When she returned she held his wallet at arm's length. "Housekeeping found it in your room. They wanted to contact you, but I told them you were travelling."

Bud slipped the wallet into his pocket. "Thanks. We're on our way home."

She smiled the same half smile she had when they met. "Not staying for something to eat?"

He picked up her heavy tray and held it out to her. "Sorry, Andy's waiting."

Because he didn't want her to see him check, he waited until he got to the car to pull out the wallet and count his cash.

"All there?" Andy asked.

Not a dollar was missing. There was enough to repay Andy for his mule train ticket and his share of gas.

"Yeah," Bud said. "It's here."

* * *

The top of the wood stove glows orange like the manifold on Bud's delivery van used to on icy winter days. The old house has always been drafty, and the cold knives in.

Sharon's visit hadn't been a complete surprise. Rosie had called to let him know their daughter was on her way.

"She told me about the first year after I left, about you and that turkey," Rosie said.

Bud stared at the spot where the turkey smashed into the wall when he threw it all those years ago. Sharon had scrubbed and scrubbed, but hadn't been able to rub out the grease spot. He'd finally painted over it a couple of months before she moved out. "I didn't know how to talk about it."

"Neither of us did."

Bud fiddles with the radio, but all he gets is a rush of static. The local AM station plays country music most of the time, but there's talk in the afternoon, and Friday evenings at six they

play Bud's favorite big bands and polka. Tonight for some reason, it won't tune in. He takes a sip of Ten High and considers his options. He's already read the weekly paper, finished the jumble and the crossword, and he doesn't feel like watching television.

He sips some more. Even on a payday like tonight, there probably won't be anyone at the Heron Inn to buy him a drink. Besides, they switched the jukebox to the crap the kids listen to. Maybe he could shoot pool with some of the other regulars, but he'd probably have to buy some rounds. He throws his barn jacket over his stained undershirt.

When he turns onto Broad Street, Sharon's silver rental car shines among the half-dozen dirty work trucks parked outside the bar. He circles the block before pulling into the lot.

He rolls the ember out of the end of his cigarette and leaves it smoldering in the cluttered ashtray, finishes his drink, and leaves the dirty glass in the cup holder.

Stepping into the night, he leans against the bumper and watches neon beer signs sputter in the bar window. The cold air burns his ears, and he turns back toward the van to retrieve his wool cap.

His old van stands out like a gravy smear against the fresh snow in the parking lot. After Sharon moved away, he obliterated the florist's logo and its ridiculous rosebud with spray paint. One of the rear doors is broken. It used to hang loose, but he's long since wired it shut.

Hat forgotten, he climbs back into the van and fires it up, but there's nowhere left for him to go.

VITA

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