Giving Setting Character: Identity and Place in American Southern Literature

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ABSTRACT

In an effort to address and to rectify the overabundance of stereotype in regional literature of the American South, this dissertation seeks to recontextualize the traditional markers and the use of sense of place to determine setting. Instead, the thesis emphasizes and explores how relationships of identity through *attitudes of dysfunction* and *obsession* can give place or land agency within a narrative, thus reinvigorating the value and authenticity of the regional narrative beyond common and expected patterns. This is exemplified and analyzed in close readings of contemporary Southern writers who defy the traditional narrative, e.g. Jesmyn Ward, Benh Zeitlin, and Karen Russell, as well as canonical authors whose success can be seen in the appearance of these attitudes and development of identity for place, e.g. William Faulkner and Margaret Mitchell. The accompanying novel excerpts serve to highlight even further the execution and power of this literary form for a post-millennium Southern Literature, which can evade its growing presence as a genre literature and regains its position as a figurehead for the significance of regional writing.

THE LIVES OF FLAMMABLE OBJECTS

Juniper and the Ruins

It was the heat that struck her as she exited from the baggage claim of the small airport. Behind her, the automatic doors closed, swallowing the cold from her back. June forced her chest to move against the thick air. Her clothes felt tighter, smothering her skin and sweating her out underneath. She stood at the edge of the pick-up lanes of the airport bundled in layers and tall leather boots, dressed for the rain she'd left behind.

In London, it had trickled in a fine mist from dawn until her departure. Even in summer, England was more damp than humid. It was nothing to wear a jacket all through to August. She often though Brits nutrient starved under the norm of gray clouds. There, when the Celsius rose with the sun, they circled to the parks and patio seating like moths crawling over each other. Here, her tights seemed to be melting into her pores instead of blocking the cold winds from the Thames. This was the South, the belly of America. And in Fahrenheit, the temperature was enough to tempt her to strip down to her bones and run for the wind, or just run to escape.

With the heat, she felt five years old again, curled up alone in her mother's old bed. Pap, her father's father had died the year before, leaving the maternal grandparents as the only other family to send her to while her parents sorted out "grown up" things. It was Laurel, her older sister, who had spit around the word "divorce" like their grandfather did his tobacco. Twelve years older and with her own car, Laurel had chosen her own living arrangements, which left June to long, hot days quietly filled by her own devices. Her grandparents' house never had air-conditioning, only dollar store popsicles and fans as tall as the oven that cut her words to pieces.

The first suitcase June ever packed was for that summer, a red duffel bag that belonged to her father. She packed for an exile, for two months even farther away from civilization than her

small hometown. She had run out of books within the first three weeks. She killed the remaining days by flicking through the family bible, their solitary book. June didn't read it much, but she would stare for hours at the pictures, bright, detailed paintings spread throughout the thin leaves of paper. Daniel in the Lion's Den, King Solomon and the Two Women, Jesus' arrival in Jerusalem, these beautiful images that sustained her through sweat and boredom. But it was nights, like the night now, that made her miserable, when the heat felt like a living thing, waiting for the cover of black to creep in through the screen windows and smother her with her own skin. She spent each night tossing and turning until the sun rose.

Nearly two decades later, June was again sleepless and smothering.

"Juniper, welcome home," she murmured to herself and, then, went for a step. Her ankle wobbled, lightheaded and still tipsy from the alcohol. She had only stopped drinking just before landing, when flight attendants stopped serving. Steadying herself, she took a deep, dry breath to regain her ground.

June peeled off her sweater to stave off some of the moisture and heat, and then began pulling along her suitcases, two large black monsters and a carry-on. They were covered in patches like old travel trunks; both stuffed full and the extension zippers undone. She stepped and tugged. Her heels clicked, echoing loudly around the concrete pillars that lined the arrivals lanes to Nashville Airport. After a layover on the coast, she'd arrived on one of the last flights in.

A few minutes past midnight and orange lights buzzed overhead, highlighting the increasing desertion of the area. The outside baggage check-ins were closed, rolling racks skewed and empty. The few other passengers exited out the various doors. Vacation families carrying passed out children strolled out to long term parking and suited professionals used to the red-eyes went up to bored drivers holding a stranger's name. She kept moving as they thinned

out and disappeared. One traveler, next to the trunk of hired silver car, glimpsed her walking along. He waved vigorously with a smile. She let go of a handle and hesitantly waved back across the lanes. She tried to remember his name, but it was gone. Either she never had it or assumed it had drowned in the whiskey. He had been seated next to her on the small jet from Boston.

By then, she had lost count of her spirits, breaking her travel rule to save drinking for arrival. For this trip, she had started at home, pulling out the two bottles of white wine that she and the flatmates kept in the vegetable crisper of the petite fridge. The bottle of Ugni Blanc was empty before she had even opened her suitcases. She had sobered slightly on the train to Heathrow and remained that way until the turbulence began over Ireland, following her across the ocean and even as she got deeper into the country. She had bent, broken, and finally obliterated her drinking rule with the kamikaze shots she'd had during the layover in Philadelphia. These had numbed her body, minimizing the quaking that seemed to resonate out from under her feet.

Her row companion had not taken the same course. A more nervous flier than June on her worst days, the man with no name had talked, as though attempting to negate the motions with his own rattling jaw. He remained silent only until they leveled out in the air after take-off and, then his lips seemed to move as fast as the turbines carrying them.

"I travel a lot," he said, while June sipped on the first drink of the flight. He had sealed the window, blocking out the navy blue sky and flecks of light, limiting June's view to the cramped cabin and himself, a middle-aged man with khaki shorts and pot-belly. She never bothered to read the print on his white t-shirt.

"I usually drive," he only kept going. "But planes are quicker. Can't argue that. When

you've got somewhere to be, planes make sense. Statistically, they're safe. But, you know, everything comes with a risk. Evolution didn't exactly prepare us to be hurtling around in metal buckets at these kind of speeds and altitudes. Sure, it's a one in a million chance. But if you're that one, there's no chance." He clicked the back of his teeth, shaking his head and shuddering as the imagined the demise of some stranger. "Seriously, how many plane crash survivors do you ever hear about? Once, I took a cross country train with friends. Took over a week but we went through Nevada, Arizona, and California. Beautiful sunsets," he sighed, catching his breath. "I enjoyed that. Plus, you can make it out of a train wreck. If it happens."

He was meeting those friends in Nashville for an air show at the Army Reserve. Crunching on her ice, June noted the irony but he never paused. As the next flight attendant came by, she spit the frozen bits with a pop back into the plastic mini-cup and handed it off for a refill. The sparse passengers made for quick service. Another swirl of caramel liquid and then a tiny red can appeared on her folding tray. Slurping her time away, she let the man beside her ramble, only half listening about his vacation, his work in a computer security, and his thirty-minute diatribe comparing New England clam chowders. He came from Boston, she decided not to hold that one against him. He seemed sweet, maybe even a little lonely, stuck by himself to catch up with his friends. She guessed he was around her father's age. He didn't wear a ring.

Any other trip, June would have probably reveled in excavating the man's life like sorting through layers of paint on a canvas, prompting with questions, trading her own stories. Strangers were often her favorite people. Most of those she considered friends, she'd meet for a few nights in a hostel or from a shared berth on a long train ride and scattered around the globe. She still sent monthly emails to a girl named Marcella from Colombia. They had met in Edinburgh during a ghost walk. She wasn't afraid to speak to anyone. She was like her father

that way. He could talk for hours to whatever body was placed before him. When she was growing up, people often stopped their passing cars in the middle of the road, windows down, chatting and trying the patience of traffic behind them and her father. "Politicking," he had called it. Usually, because they all wanted something, if nothing else but attention. Everybody had wanted her father's attention, and he always had theirs, even when he didn't want it.

June hadn't been in the mood, however, to chat with this man. She had cradled her drink and held on to the shaking arm rest more than she did his words, until he knocked her out of her haze of polite nods and yes/no answers with a sudden question.

"So, what brings you to Nashville?"

"Family," she had said curtly, swallowing another gulp.

"Where abouts there?"

"They're not in Nashville."

"Then where are you going?"

"Three Forks, Kentucky."

"Never heard of it." He said as he leaned closer to her than to the window.

"For good reason," she told him, though he seemed to waited for more.

The blank stare she received when discussing her origins never surprised her anymore, not after nearly three years with Europeans who seemed to divide America into three sections: New York, California, and everywhere else. If it wasn't for fried chicken and the "Dahrbee", the people she met wouldn't even know Kentucky was a state. Her hometown was lucky to be an image on Google Earth. It's only claim to fame was a close proximity to Cedar Mountain National Park, which brought in enough tourists to sustain the economy.

The backwoods town began as a crossroads stop on the old Louisville-Nashville

Turnpike, founded in 1827 with nothing more than a stone pillar and Bell Tavern, where the stagecoach travelers would stay for honey whiskey. The ruins of the tavern sat across the railroad tracks, built fifty years later. In the last year of the Civil War, the tavern had burned, killing several including the owner and family patriarch. It had never re-opened. For as long as June could remember, those stones looked like a gust of wind might topple them into the snakes and weeds that consumed the old basement and foundations. Each August, the town celebrated with an annual heritage festival where she usually had gotten stuck working the Fire Department's dunk booth. All money raised went to keep the remaining stones and arches in place, just like the war left them.

When she was six, June and her father started to spend every Sunday at the ruins. Beginning the next summer after exile, he would pick her up after church with her mother, making a stop for milkshakes at the Dairy Queen a town over. They walked around the ground with their frosty drinks, and he would tell her stories about the tavern, the history of the town, and the graveyards that lay beyond the woods, where the Bell Family and her own paternal grandparents lay. But after a while, they began to talk about the divorce and so much more besides the tavern. When it grew too cold to walk, they stayed in the gravel parking lot, holed up in his big white Ford truck with the heaters on full blast, torching June's toes through her pantyhose, until he finally took her to visit an apartment across the road and re-introduced her to the owner she remembered vaguely from her grandfather's funeral.

"How long since you've been back?" The man had inquired.

"Six years," June had replied, talking against the hard knot grown in her throat. A quarter of her life. She hadn't been back for even a single holiday.

"So, why come home now?"

June kept asking herself that question as well. Three Forks might as well have been torched and razed to the ground for all that she ever expected to return. Friends had married, babies had been born, and families had their reunions, while she had stayed happily tucked away in New York or more recently in London. Smart as she was, she had been naïve to believe nothing could bring her back. Under her fingers, she spun her passport, lying on the folding tray, useless after passing customs. Her nails flicked at the edges of a photo sticking out of the stamped pages.

"My father died yesterday," June said, teeth tugging at her bottom lip. It was the first time she'd said it aloud. She sounded as if she was talking about someone else, like a story she'd heard or a picture she'd seen. It seemed separate from her.

"I'm so sorry." He reached for her shoulder. June shrugged him off, waving to the stewards to get another refill.

"I'm fine. Really, I'll be okay."

He had begun to ask another question, something equally as personal June had assumed. Possibly how her father died, which she wasn't quite sure of herself. She just knew that he had. The seatbelt sign dinged. Though delaying her refill, it saved her. The sound giving her time to sort through her liquor drenched thoughts and navigate the subject away from her. She asked him what hotel he had booked for his stay, and the Boston man had instantly gone on about some chandelier while letting June go back to counting tremors, which seemed to get worse the closer they got to Tennessee.

June was back on solid ground now, rubbing the soles of her boots over the gritty surface outside the airport as if to remind herself. As she twisted on her ankles, June collapsed her wave into a fist and then, as the Bostonian did, dropped her arm like a dumbbell back to her side. It felt

heavy, like her lungs. She blamed the liquor again. The man looked light as whipped marshmallows back on the ground. He was grinning at her through the heat. She held her stance on the sidewalk, a few hundred feet away from him. She was debating whether to cross, to speak to him and let the barrage of possible questions continue, when he ducked into the front passenger seat.

"Hey," the small word escaped her, too soft for anyone to hear her, much less through a closed window. He had been waving goodbye, she realized. Even he had friends to meet, a life to continue. She sighed to herself, grinding her foot again against the ground. Like everyone else, he disappeared quickly down the lane and to the ramps that led back to the interstate. He was the only familiar face she had, and now he was gone. Very soon there were no more faces, familiar or otherwise.

June became the sole lingering presence, abandoned to poor lighting and unsubtle black orbs like beetle eyes plucked and hung every few meters watching her. The airport was quieter than she imagined a city building could be.

Readjusting the grip on her bags, June continued along the concrete to a crosswalk under the Delta check in. She scanned the parking lot that lay on the other side. It was full of SUVs and all-terrain trucks, bulky metal buckets and ostentatious gas guzzlers in straight paired lines. She hadn't seen vehicles this large in years. What bothered her more was that she didn't recognize any of them. No one was here for her.

June looked to her right. Through the glass walls, the departures screen inside listed no flights for the next six hours. She was going nowhere fast. Her options were stalled and she felt overheated. The liquor and temperatures began working in tandem, making her heart thump hard against her diaphragm.

With a couple swift kicks, she toppled her baggage over on the sidewalk and sat down on the front pockets. She prodded through her purse for a phone. She fished through, dumping out her wallet, her oyster card for London and her passport she had waited eight hours at the UK Border Control to have returned. She was forced to resend her visa renewal to get it back in time. Leaving the country meant an automatic withdrawal. No exceptions, they said when she had called first. And no refunds, the voice on the other end added. She had cursed and stomped about the empty flat while the girls had left for work, going on with their daily lives. She had wanted to scream about it, all of it, scream like her windpipe would shred. But there were neighbors, people on the street. For the first time, June had felt claustrophobic in the city. That was when she had turned to the wine.

Her stomach churned holding the stiff blue book. Her current UK visa expired in three weeks. Briefly, she flipped through the pages and her collection of colored, half unreadable stamps. She opened it up on the photo she'd tucked inside at the last minute. She had been pushing the baggage weight limits. Among other things, in an effort to find any means possible of reducing size, she had taken photos out of their frames. She had shoved others into suitcases, but not this one. It was old, printed on stiff paper stock, the glossy kind that showed every fingerprint that touched it.

Images were important to June, whether paintings or photographs. She liked seeing something as fleeting as a moment made immortal. Eternity could be hard earned though, which is why she worked in preservation and restoration. She'd gone into art thinking she would create beautiful things, but found she liked saving them better. The photo in her hands had recently become even more important to preserve, the way paintings did when their masters died. Every photo of June's father was infinitely more valuable because there would never be more. This

one, of her and him at Bell Tavern, had made her pause during packing. She'd put it in her other priceless belonging rather than stuffed into her suitcases. Her means of later escape and her reason for returning became merged together.

June placed them both into a zipped pocket in the black hole of her bag and kept sorting, knowing she had other problems to solve first. Her travel alarm clock and a set of keys clattered as they slipped through her digging fingers. She threw the homeless keys back in, but she paused on the clock, the battery jarred half out. It was still programmed to London, 6:30a.m.

June crushed the tip of her boots onto the clock. The small Duracell popped out, rolling away into a crevice, and the screen went blank. Even with the time gone, it reminded her she'd been awake for two days straight now. It reminded her that one transatlantic, middle-of-the-night phone call later and she was smashing who-knows-what with her ass while wide-awake and proper sweaty. It was as though she could forget about the heat for only a moment before it came slamming back to her even harder than before. It didn't get warm like this anywhere else. Her body was used to drear and damp, the sporadic sun. She had the nearly translucent skin tone to prove it. The last time she remembered being truly hot was the summer she had spent in Italy. Her shoulders had broken out in a pox of freckles. Her nose peeled for weeks like an unraveling mummy. But waiting in a two-hour long line for the Uffizi in July had been a sauna. This was hell, even at night. She stripped off another shirt, down to her tank top, pink bra straps peeking out. Shoving it into her giant purse with her sweater, June finally found a phone—the wrong one.

As it was no longer in danger of plummeting a plane, she turned it on anyway. It beeped and glowed to life but couldn't find a signal. She had killed off the power as she ran for the gate, unable to reply to anyone, not her flatmates or her internship director, before she left. She had no words before, and modern technology could not send an awkward pause. Now, she couldn't

deliver anything at all. Distance was a cruel thing. She dropped the British phone back into her bag and gave up searching for other one. Sprawling out her legs to dry out the back of her knees, she began waiting for any number of things, a car, a taxi, the next plane home, the seventh broken seal and a chorus of blasting trumpets. As she closed her eyes and stretched in the heat, flattening over her suitcases, she was eerily unconcerned with which came first.

She thought of that family bible. That book hadn't occurred to her in years, and, yet suddenly, the only paintings swimming in her mind were from between the crispy thin pages of an archaic tome. The Parable of the Prodigal Son had been her favorite when she was little. It had been the most gruesome. The picture contained the hobbling son and blue robed father as they embraced next the slit throat of a 'fattened' white calf. The blood seeping all around their feet completed it, something about the slaughtered animal underneath all that joy being more terrifying than hell and crucifixions. Reunion, death and celebration.

June didn't eat red meat anymore. And a literal biblical interpretation wasn't the expectation, but she had briefly imagined a more abundant reception to her arrival. If nothing else, she had at least expected someone to pick her up. Why else had she even bothered to send that damn flight information?

The longer June lay alone in the dim lights, the farther she felt from a biblical return and the closer to the image in Revelations. The trumpets and angels wouldn't surprise her at this point. The desolate and quiet area did have an end of days quality about it. If the sheep were called up then and there, she assumed she would be just as stranded as she was now.

As eerie as it was, she still loved airports. While most people thought of the hassle from baggage and security checks, the sterility of waiting areas by the gates, she usually saw infinite possibility. There was something about standing in front of the display boards with their giant

lists of time and destinations, glowing and changing constantly. She only had to pick, any gate would do. Even the smallest airport could take her elsewhere. No one went to an airport unless they wanted to go away somewhere. And for June, a constant factor in her life was the desire to leave.

Six years ago, she'd left through this very airport. Seventeen, high school diploma fresh in hand, she'd stood at the gate with her backpack, just waiting. The attendant at the desk had called her row. Then she'd called for final boarding for New York. Still, June had stood there, two tickets in hand. She stared at the departure board, realizing like she never had before that she'd never been more than an hour from home, certainly not alone.

"Is this your flight?" the attendant finally asked. June had thought about lying, running back out of the airport, chalking it up to a mistake. She knew she could have called her father. He would have rescued her from herself and it was that last realization that spurred her to answer. Her father would be there if she needed him.

"Yeah." She blinked. "I mean, yes, it is."

"Well, c'mon then, sweetheart." The older lady gestured for the boarding pass.

Nashville was her first airport, her first plane, the beginning of her life. Hesitant as June was, especially with the empty seat beside her, she'd begun to feel the safety of traveling, the comfort in moving. She remembered that rush and trill in her chest at take-off as the world condensed, and she felt as though she was nowhere and anywhere. Even now, an opportunity remained just by sheer present location. There were no direct flights from Nashville back to London, certainly not for the mere three hundred quid left on her British bank card or the emergency fifty tucked in her boot. But it would take her somewhere, anywhere else. She had friends in New York and California. She knew an Air Force pilot stationed in Hawaii who'd had

fancied her during a weekend leave in Rome. Suddenly, sandy beaches and a fruit cocktail sounded like paradise. She had a whole world spreading out from under her feet. There was a choice to turn six years into a lifetime.

Except she'd promised her sister she'd be there for the funeral.

June let her head loll back even farther, dropping off the end of her suitcase. A few small drops squeezed through her clamped eyelids, merging into the dripping sweat down her forehead. She could taste salt in the air.

"Honey, where are you supposed to be?" a woman's voice asked, mimicking the same circular running question in her head. Her eyes broke open and June twisted up to the security official who looked like Tanning Bed Barbie. That is if Barbie ever wore a dark blue guard's uniform and had hips and thighs like two fresh country hams. Her wide curves held her sturdy like a Greek sculpture.

Unlike June, she barely glistened in the humidity. Considering the crisp brown wrinkles around her eyes, her skin was clearly more used to the intense heat. Her blonde hair, pulled into a messy knot in the knot in the back like a rooster, appeared equally fried. June was so flummoxed trying to guess an age, wondering if all the superficial prodding worked and she was old as Methuselah or if the baking had advanced the process, she couldn't manage a response.

The woman repeated her question. Her lazy, Southern accent crackled from years of nicotine addiction. It made June's ears itch.

"Where do you need to be?"

They both knew it wasn't on the sidewalk long after midnight.

"Kentucky," June answered this time. "My…Someone is supposed to come get me, I think."

"Are they on their way? 'Cause we aren't exactly a Motel Six here," she said, tempering the inquisition like a joke, smiling at June. A lower canine had a darkening hole, but the rest of her teeth looked impossibly white next to her dark skin. The woman crouched down to her level, a badge clipped to her lapel dangled in front of June. It named her Leanne. "You coulda rented a car," she suggested. "Would've been quicker than waiting."

"I don't drive anymore." June shrugged. The car rental had already closed before her plane landed.

"Well, that's too bad. Cause I can't let you sit here all night and there ain't no other way of getting to Kentucky this late. I can call you up a shuttle to a hotel in the city. Opryland if you want, the tourists always want to stay there."

"I'm not a tourist," came out more harshly than June intended. Especially since despite her sandstone exterior, this Leanne was being helpful. She hoped she wasn't about to get carted into some security holding. However, instead of getting offended, Leanne simply crushed her eyebrows together as she seemed to reanalyze June and then chuckled.

"Boy, you sure don't sound it," she said with a groan as she pushed up from her knees. "So, where should I send you?"

"I promise, someone is coming for me," June reassured, following her up, her heart pumping as she stood, raising up her suitcases quickly as well.

"Are you sure you got a ride, sweetheart?"

In her heels, June was taller than the woman, but she felt young and small under her concerned gaze. Leanne looked at her like she was a child.

"Can I have ten more minutes, if that's okay?" June could see the inward debate and the same tentative yes her own mother used to wear when asked for anything. That woman never

gave without hesitation. But those terse lips were the only common feature June saw. Her mother had darker, untouched features, wearing makeup that was fair and light. She held to the adage that the body was God's temple. Leanne looked more like a painted free spirit, the kind of woman her mother would call a Magdalene.

"Alright, but if no one shows up by then..."

Leanne wasn't allowed to finish her disclaimer. A set of bright headlights glared and brightened the lanes as it swung around the corner. They were attached to a '95 white Ford. June's racing heart didn't so much stop as freeze. It burned like cold, dry ice, and she nearly forgot the kind Leanne standing with her as rubber tires screamed and her father's truck parked along the sidewalk.

"He's here," June managed in a whisper.

"About time, huh?" She heard the grin in Leanne's voice, but she had her eyes fastened onto the vehicle before her. "Well, good. You have a goodnight, sweetie. Get home safe."

With that last salutation, the woman left, going back to her normal night duties. The driver's door of the truck cracked as it opened. A tall, thickly built man stepped down and around towards the curb. He was wearing a highlighter red windbreaker. The chest displayed a white emblem of an ax, ladder, and hose; the crest of Three Forks Fire Department.

The town didn't have much, but the fire department served as a point of pride. It started as a small group, not long after the fire destroyed Bell's Tavern. In 1932, a station was built just by the elementary school. It was a long two story brick building, filled and equipped over the decades with three tank engines and two medical response vehicles to serve its district, not just the town but nine miles of Cumberland Parkway, ten miles of Interstate 65, and as wildfire support for the National Park.

The members were all volunteers, men in town who filled their free time with EMT classes, sirens, and occasional poker games in the upstairs office and meeting room. They were men like her father, who worked the nine to five somewhere else and kept in shape by mowing their lawns. Firemen identifiable only by the pagers hanging from their Levis or those singularly red jackets, for which they raised the money during each annual pancake breakfast.

Four months ago, June's father had left the pager at home but he wore the jacket as he came out of Heathrow's terminal three as a big splash of color among the muted browns and blacks. No one had visited June when she left except for her father. He'd come several times in New York, but they only had the one trip together in Europe, a last minute whirlwind through London, Paris, and Rome. And in each city she took him to, he had worn that jacket. The strangers they met in hour long queues called him 'Chief' as they chatted, noting the title printed on the windbreaker. Her father had liked that. Though he had called himself the Jolly Green Giant, especially in the times he struggled to squeeze past groups of tourist like the Japanese crowd swarming around the Venus de Milo.

"More like the Jolly Red Giant," June had corrected him, scratching at the plastic material as she tugged him through former palace passageways of the Louvre.

"They don't quite make 'em like me over here, do they?" he had asked.

Her father had stood out. June noticed him more as a transplant. He was well over six feet, shoulders nearly as broad as his height, with thick arms that had carried chainsaws and fire hoses nearly all his life. What she had really observed, however, wasn't how his stature and clothes differed from the Europeans, but that for the first time in her memory he had aged. It had been a long time since the infrequent holiday trips to see his college daughter. His hair had always been thin but the remaining strands and his beard were dappled heavily with gray she'd

never seen before. The circumference of his stomach had grown much softer. He'd begun to transition in his red coat from Brawny Man to Santa Claus.

The image June carried of her father changed after their trip. But as she waited for the man at the airport to reach her, she found it funny how reluctant she was to replace the childhood vision of her father. She wanted him to be there again like those days when the wrinkles around his eyes were thinner and he'd come in this truck to take her from her mother and to the Tavern ruins. In those days, it was all she could do not the run from the Church doors to her father's pick-up under the great white oak tree. Her mother used to hold the back neck of her dresses just to stop her unmannerly exits. And, as she watched the driver, for a moment, she considered she had traveled back in time. He was younger, moving without a stiffness in his knees that her father had for years after his logging accident. It made her feel like the little girl waiting to be picked up, eager and yet still held back by something greater. Because when the truck no longer blocked her view and the rusty lights hit his face, she remembered that the large man in red coming towards her wasn't her father. She felt older than her heart.

Her brother-in-law jogged around the front of the truck, tall and bearded like her father. His wrapped around her where she stood, but they weren't her father's arms, no matter how much they loved her as well. He crushed and held her, pinching her elbows flat until he pulled away. She had known that he wasn't going to be her father. She knew what Laurel had told her on the phone. Death was too far for even her father to come back from. But for a flickering moment, she hoped and imagined it had all been some trick.

"Well, look at you. Little Juniper, just look at you!"

His eyes were nearly the same age as her father's but they were too dark. Her father's eyes were a honey brown. This black pair watched her with care, so happy to see her, yet the

crinkles at the edges gave away the rest. She had a thought that they both wished it was her father picking her up instead.

"Hello, Cal," she said, and for his sake, she mustered a smile. She felt almost proud, knowing it was as genuine as fake could be. She even leaned in to peck her brother-in-law on the cheek. He wasn't such a younger version of her father as she had considered. Gray marked his stubble as well.

"Someone's gotten all mannered. You've been with those Brits too long," he said, giving her a friendly slap to the back, jarring and overdone. Cal could be large in his ways, his voice loud, his laughing louder, not like this. He made noise for the sake of noise. June wanted to tell him it was okay, that she was okay. Then she worried what would replace it and said nothing instead. She let Cal's running words swallow her up like the heat. "I'm sorry I'm late," he continued scrambling as he spoke and dragged her luggage towards the back of the truck. "We had the biggest trouble trying to read that flight itinerary you sent. Finally figured what twenty-three meant, but we weren't sure what time zone it meant then you'd already left so we didn't know who to ask. Plus, it has been hectic in town. Everybody's making a fuss. Your sister finally took the phone off the hook, said she was sick of people wanting to know about every deep breath. That worked for all of five minutes. Then came cell phones, email, everybody writing on her Facebook wall. Used to be you closed your door and your business was private, now everybody's got fifteen different ways to pester you. She damn near closed all her accounts to get some peace, except then how would you get a hold of us. You been waiting long by the way?" Cal jerked back to her.

"Not at all," June lied. "I'm sorry you had to drive out here for me. It sounds like you and Laurel were busy."

"Sorry?" He grunted and clutched the handles of her suitcases, heaving them into the back of the pickup. The wheels clipped the black plastic ridges of the truck bed. "Holy shit, are you packing bricks?" Cal asked.

"Not that I recall," she said, rolling her carry-on from the sidewalk to him.

There were no bricks, but she could name little else. Whatever had not fit in the rush of packing, she left in her shared flat. More pieces, like her picture frames, she abandoned to the rubbish bins at Heathrow's bag drop when those red digital numbers flashed past the kilogram limit. She didn't know what remained, except for her little black dress. That she knew was still folded and buried at the bottom. The rest of her life lay scattered an ocean away.

Her brother-in-law laughed like it was a joke.

"Sorry?" he said. "Don't be sorry, Junebug. I volunteered for the gig." She cringed at the long forgotten nickname, handing over the plastic handles to her suitcase.

"And my mother let you? How did you manage that? I was fully prepared to have her waiting and crying a fit at baggage claim." June said 'prepared' but part of her had been terrified by the idea. Her mother had never visited. The woman never left the state if she could help it. They hadn't been in the same room since June was seventeen, when she left for college in New York. Communication between them was restricted to the occasional Facebook posts, usually June refusing to share chain statuses or anti-Obama spam, and their monthly web-video chats. She was used to seeing her mother in pixels and a safe distance away for an hour at a time. It was hard to prepare for the full scope of her presence.

"Oh, she wanted to be here. Don't doubt that at all. But we didn't tell Nora you were coming," he said and stopped loading her bags into the back. He looked at June as though to gage her reactions. She waited stonily, before he explained. "I mean, she knows. Everybody

knows you're coming home. It was just decided that for everyone's sake mind you, not just yours, we'd tell a little white lie. We told your momma you didn't give us a time and you were finding your own way to Three Forks. So, don't sell us out when you see her."

"I won't," June shook her head. She was too grateful for that. Not that lying to her mother was a new sport. At seven years old, she had told her first lie to her mother, one she still maintained to this day. White lies were often the only truth her mother would accept. Even now, June did it to her every month for years. "Eventually", she answered each time before signing off. When there was time, the money, a break from work or studies, then she'd come home. But none of those things had ever happened. She took winter classes, signed up for summer programs, volunteer work, internships abroad. She found anything to keep her in New York or Europe. The extra course work allowed her to graduate a year early with a Bachelor's in Art History and a certificate in Restoration.

Professors liked to call June a go-getter. Personally, she knew she was a runner. One false step and she would sink back into the cultural wasteland that crept on her heels, where the only things people wanted to preserve were Jesus and the Stars and Bars. June had the feeling that if her mother had the chance, she'd nail her daughter's feet to the church pews.

June's mother had trouble understanding the obsession with pictures in other countries because she thought great art was the Home Interior paintings she got cheap in yard sales. Her tolerance reduced each time June collected a new painting. She used to bring home works that had been destroyed, buying posters and other copies since the originals were long gone. It reminded her of the importance of preservation while her mother complained. She fussed about the nudity of Michelangelo's *Leda and the Swan*, the violence of Richard Wilson's *Niobe and the Destruction*, and the strange imagery of Picasso's *The Painter*. Her mother's vision was too

narrow to see the beauty. So, when June ran off to London for graduate school, her mother hadn't been anymore thrilled than when she had first left for New York.

"You're making a grave mistake," her mother had said over the phone, drawing out the syllables as thought they could accent the poignancy and make her warning serious. "You've been away from God and your family too long. I know what it's like to stray from church. It's a cold, sinful world, Juniper Mae. Trust me." June moved anyway, and the last words her mother send to her for nearly six months were "I'll pray for you." Then not long after she was settled in the city, her mother sent an email. No apology, but June hadn't really expected one. Everything began again as though the previous interaction earlier that year had never occurred, the gap of silence never mentioned. Her mother wanted to know all about her life. They resumed the month to month dialogue and June her postponements.

Despite her best efforts, June was back and she knew that seeing her mother was part of the deal. She just wasn't ready for it.

"Thank you," she added. She wasn't sure anything could express the relief the bit of subterfuge had given her.

Cal shrugged, loading the last suitcase.

"It was your sister's idea. And don't start thanking us yet." He slammed up the tailgate, the sound vibrating through the pick-up area. June jumped a little. "You're still going to have to see her tomorrow."

True, she thought. But one night of peace left remained.

With her bags locked up, her fate felt as sealed and that sobered her drastically. The last bit of drinking and heat induced haze cleared and underneath she found the will to rally for another round. June waited for Cal to head around towards the driver's side, but he lingered,

stepping up next to her on the curbside. Her brother stared at her the way she did paintings. She straightened the edges of her clothes, patting her hair down. She even rolled her tongue around her teeth checking for leftover bits of the beef flight meals, regretting that along with drinking she broke another travel rule: always go chicken.

"What are you looking at?" June finally popped out.

"You've grown up so much." It was the slowest thing he'd said so far.

"What else was I supposed to do?" She asked, shifting nervously from heel to heel. The idea of the inevitable surprising him confused her.

"Stay little. In a perfect world, you'd never remind me how old I'm getting. You should still be a little girl in Minnie Mouse pajamas, biting your nails down to the nubs. And now, just look at you," he echoed like before. He stepped back.

She couldn't though.

June had read a story once on the train. It had been in a free paper she had picked up for her afternoon ride back to the flat. It was about human voices, how sound waves moved. The article said that we would never hear what our voices really sound like, not on tape or any digital recording. Our ears are tuned against our own voices, something in the science, the kind of details that didn't stick for her but June remembered it, that she would never hear her true voice. Only strangers, people on the outside knew what she sounded like. She thought about pictures, video, even mirrors with their reversal felt like forgeries of herself as well. The entire hall at Versailles would never show her what Cal saw, what any of them saw. Not even what her father saw in Paris. She had told him there, as they stood front of the glass plane, that even the Mona Lisa might be fake.

"She disappeared for two years," June had said, stealing her father's eyes from *The*

Wedding at Cana. Tourists, with their cameras clicking and leaving, shifted the crowd around her and her father. That museum was their last stop before they took the Chunnel back to London, before he would leave the next day. The two of them stayed on the edge of the rope, her father's hands in the pockets of his red jacket.

"She was taken from the Louvre in 1911. Then found in Florence with a man named Vincenzo. He just wanted to return her to the home country. He ended up with a jail sentence and she got a brief tour of Italy before winding up back in here, behind a bulletproof case in France. Though, some skeptics doubt if she was really brought back. This could be her, maybe not. It was a long time for a painting to be gone.

"If she is the original, that makes her around five hundred years old," she continued like a history book. "She's had more work done than Cher and Joan Rivers combined; washed, re-varnished, color touch-ups, damage repairs, repainting. And, with the exception of her missing eyebrows, she still looks better than they do. The Louvre does everything it can to preserve and restore her."

"How do you remember all this stuff?" her father had asked, looking at the famed woman. "The ruins in Rome, all those myths. All these paintings?"

"This is what I love. History. Art. A good story," June had said. With one exception, she was the kind of girl who fell in love with paintings instead of people. In reality, her father didn't understand much more than her mother. It just never seemed to bother him that he didn't.

"So, this is what you do? Fix paintings like her?" He had gestured out and June pulled his hand from reaching too far in case the guards were watching.

"In London, sort of." She wiggled her hand. "I help the experts who restore paintings or the supervisors monitor my work."

Her father leaned his arm on her shoulder.

"Still impressive," he said, adding, "I'm proud of you." Her father always worked that in, his pride. She had anticipated him saying it much later, near the end of the trip, but he also never seemed to like to say when she expected it.

"Yeah, I know," she sighed.

"You're growing up on me, girl."

"I'll be liver spotted and wrinkly in a day's time."

"Gettin' close." He grinned and she smacked his hand away with a pretend annoyance. "No, I think I'm going to tell everybody you're getting good looking like your daddy."

"Don't spread mean lies about me," June had shot back.

He had laughed hard at that one. It was a running joke back home. The Owens girls looked nothing like their parents, both with brown hair and brown eyes. June and her sister got it all recessively, pale blue eyes from their paternal grandpa. She got his auburn hair too. Her sister was blonde, nearly white in the summer like their mother's mother. It all trickled down in the genes, forgotten but never gone. The Owens girls looked more like the dead than any of the living.

"Nope, you don't look much like me. Maybe as a kid. Actually, you look more like them now."

"Like who?"

"Them." Her father nodded his chin toward Mona Lisa and then the crowds around them, who never stayed more than a second to pose with a famous chunk of art. "You can pass for French, English, any of it. Something about your face. Your accent is gone. And you dress differently. You just look different. Still my girl though." He ruffled her bangs, negating part of

the moment, maybe sensing the revelation wasn't something she wanted to hear. She wasn't sure how she felt about someone seeing more of her than she did, even if it was her father.

Now, Cal gave her the same implication. "Look at you," he said, scratching his beard. Cal stared several steps back, the way people pulled away from a Monet to make sense of the picture to the point that they miss the beauty in the lines. There was a vague stir of vindication. One didn't travel the world to stay the same but June had expected her soul to change, not her appearance. It felt superficial, but that was the only change people could see. People looked toward the surface for the truth. The way Cal looked at her flung her father's suggestion back to mind and the idea of perception. She wasn't sure she could see herself and she really did feel like a Monet. A foreign piece, something to be examined. There was a sense of the ground being torn from her feet. The sense of loss was suddenly so irreparable, she wanted once again to be six years old. She wanted the heat to hug her and keep company through the dark.

"I still bite my nails," June said, offering the trait the way some people give condolences.

"So does your sister." Cal smiled big and broad before he clapped his hands against the truck. "C'mon. Let's get you home."

He opened the passenger door to the cab and the worn leather seats where she spent half of her childhood. He had kept the engine running and the radio poured out a slow guitar melody with a singer and his southern drawl. It was an old Hank Williams song. There were more country stations than mosquitoes here. The music cut in over the engine and her forethoughts. Years resided between this song and her ears. The only country music she had heard at all in London was from a leather merchant's stall in Camden Town. That was the thing with music, time didn't matter much. As she stood at the edge of the truck's step-up, all the words came back to her, catapulting to the front of her brain from a long neglected place. If she wanted, she could

roll the lyrics off her tongue with each measure.

"Six more miles," June mouthed unconsciously.

"More like sixty," Cal said. "We should get a move on."

There were no more delays. No going back, June admitted to herself. She had nowhere else to go but where Cal was going to take her. She kicked off the self-pity the isolation at the airport had allowed her to wallow in, and jumped in the truck, leveraging herself on the door handle. The air conditioning gust hard and rough, like a sore throat from the tiny vents. It carried a mist of sawdust into her face and Cal closed the door behind her.

Toward the entrance of the highway, the lights illuminating the road gradually thinned. It took them to a yarn ball of intersecting roads through the city, which Cal swung though smoothly. The traffic was minimal, only the sparse semi-trucks keeping to their schedules. As they crossed the river, the Bateman building and the rest of the skyline glowed. They headed north on Interstate-65, where the lanes dwindled down and everything went dark except for the headlights of her father's truck.

Despite repeating it in her head for the last 48 hours, June felt the fact that she was going home start to sink in around her with the solid curtain of heavy black that even the stars and vacant moon couldn't attempt to rip away. She was going back to Three Forks. It was more than spinning tire propelling her there, a force stronger than momentum.

"How's Sissy?" June asked, after a long stretch of silent driving took them past the White House exit.

Cal cracked his neck as he shifted in his seat, regaining a comfortable position.

"As good as can be expected," he said. June hated Southern manners. "It's been hard on everybody. She wanted to come with me. You know, to get you. But she's stayed with your dad

at the funeral home all day. I told her to stay and get some rest. Things should get better after tomorrow," Cal broke his eyes away briefly from the road to look at her. "Knowing you're going to be there, it's been a relief. She's misses her little sister."

Unsure of a proper response, June murmured a few agreeable sounds and turned to the window, tilting her forehead onto the cold glass. She tried propping her feet up on the dashboard but then left them back in the floorboard. They used to barely reach. Now there wasn't even room without meeting her knees.

June wanted to say that she missed her sister as well. She knew that's what she should have said to Cal, but she wasn't sure it was true. It wasn't that she didn't want to see Laurel. If anything, she was anxious to see her. It was an unfortunate fallout that June's penchant for consistently flying away meant that she saw her sister as little as she did their mother. But, she'd grown used to the feeling of missing people, to the point she almost didn't feel it anymore. Besides, there was a lot of distance between June and her sister than had nothing to do with miles. Their lives had veered as drastically as their ages, despite how closely they used to be tethered together. She remembered when people used to mistake Laurel for her mother, the hazard of having a sister more than a decade older than her.

It had been a long time since that had happened though.

Small talk and music continued to fill the hour and half drive from Nashville to Three Forks. Every couple of miles, June and Cal traded a few more questions, banal and polite ones. He asked about her flight and the food. She asked about his carpentry work, not about the fire department. He didn't ask her how it felt to be home. But then, she always considered Cal a smart man. From White House up to Greenville, they never talked about anything deeper than the weather.

"Everybody's worried about the dry lightning," Cal said, tapping his fingers on the wheel with the music. "Been in a drought two years now. It rains all the time, just never reaches us. The lightning cracks and the ground stays bone dry. This damn heat. It sucks every bit of moisture away before a drop can get close. During the day, you got workers dropping left and right. Keeps us running. Especially, out here. The state's been "upgrading" the interstate." He pointed out the windshield with a roll of his eyes. Offside, the security lights kept the fresh plowed land and crane equipment lit up like Main Street. Round orange and white striped cylinders marked off the borders of the lanes.

"They're doing chunks here at the Greenville exits and closer to home. That bit runs all the way from the parkway to another two miles past Three Forks. You'll see. It more of a mess than here. Half the lanes are uneven or split to pencil thin lanes by those big stone barriers. Dangerous as hell and it's all a waste of money. Been working on it for a year and now the pavement just cooks 'em like fried eggs."

June's stomach growled. Cal suppressed a laugh.

"Don't worry. We'll feed you soon enough. The fridge at your dad's is full of casseroles; potato, green bean, chicken, and this foul tuna something from Opal Edwards. One thing for certain," he added with a sigh. "No one can say the town doesn't care."

"Thanks," she replied, holding her stomach. She hated casseroles. Baked mush as far as she was concerned.

"No problem. It's not like I cooked them." Cal played with the tuning dials on the radio. "Any preferences?"

"Not at all."

He flipped through stations, but they all sounded the same to her. The easy topics ran

short. Neither of them pushed for longer conversation. They let their exchanges fall into the sum of one sentence banters, and then they settled into a comfortable quiet. For the last leg home, June watched the landscape sweeping past her. It was open fields and overgrown wilds, complete with single story homes, decaying barns, and billboards with fast food logos or fetuses with bible verses. The land in England was smaller, cultivated for centuries, each border hedge and tree cut and clean. The contours of the lands weren't so different, but, for all the roads and homes scattered across the south, it was wild here, unkempt. All the construction nearing the town, which left the machines parked haphazardly in the midways, couldn't fix it. Cal was right, the mess was worse here. It changed nothing.

Yet in the dark, June could still predict the miles like the song lyrics that came back to her, down to each curve and ditch, and she hated every inch. The edges of the road beside the truck blurred like a Pollock piece. The whipping guardrails started to make her head hurt and she stared off into the distance as they came up on a large group of hills that the road had blasted through, exposing the layers of rock beds. A set of radio towers blinked red from the top, and, at the bottom of their rounded mountain, black and fuzzy with trees, sat a green sign.

EXIT 46

THREE FORKS / NOLIN

FIVE MILES

She sat up straighter.

And then the clear call came.

Years of experience had ingrained the two of them in the truck with the same reaction. Some people hear it as just an interruption, a random screech. The kind of thing that makes dogs howl. June and Cal both tensed. He quickly muted the radio station. The sound made chills run

on her neck, even after all this time. She knew it was just a warning. It was just a matter of to whom it was directed.

From her brother-in-law's hip, the clear call ended, and the pager trilled like a tortured bird. She clamped her hands to ears, and he rushed a hand to turn the volume down. A round of static broke through, and a woman's voice took over. Everything else stopped so they could listen.

"Attention," the dispatcher called out evenly. "Three Forks Department please respond to accident with possible injury Interstate 65. Mile Marker 43. 1:55AM."

In the crackling frequency, June found it sounded like code, a slur of numbers and instruction. But Cal groaned, he understood perfectly. His face set hard the way her father's did when a call came in for their department. The saying goes that a girl marries a man like her father. Maybe that was what Laurel saw in him. Cal did look like their father, more so than ever in that frame. There was a certain resolve that went from his jaw through his eyes.

"The rookies," her father used to say, "they hear those words and get excited. But the old guys like me. We grunt and get up anyway." She used to tell him that he wasn't old. Sometimes, she'd add that if it was that bad, he didn't have to go. It was volunteer. "Yes. I do," he would frown, shoving his feet in back into his boots. He would never tie the laces. He would go even in the middle of the night. On the weekends she spent with her father, the clear call was as regular as a lullaby, just like the footsteps that trudged their way out the door of the house.

She knew why he went. He made money as a logger, a carpenter. He cut down trees and then built something new like his own house. But his real profession was fire. It made him burn like it did. On his European tour, she couldn't even get him to leave a single city before they saw a fire department. The hardest to find and the nicest was the one in Paris. They wandered for an

hour around the Panthéon on the bad directions from an Irish pub because he didn't want to break their streak, not after the London Brigade and the Vigili del Fuoco in Rome. Once they found it, only one fireman spoke some broken English. Between that and her French, they managed a tour of the facilities before the crew began running exercises. She only understood half of what she translated of the technical procedures. The most interesting moment for her had been the blonde guy in his gear asking if she had a petit-ami. "Peut-étre," she had shrugged. While she had grown bored, her father had followed from room to room with utter piety. At the end, she had been pretty sure he was more impressed with their fancy helmets and air sealed masks than he was the Sistine Chapel.

"I bet you haven't missed this," Cal said, levying his foot harder to the gas.

The truck sped up and bounced on the uneven road, the front right wheel hitting a pot hole in the construction. Her stomach swooned like a dip in a rollercoaster. He was right. She hadn't. She clutched onto the handle above the window to hold place. From the cubby in the driver's side door, he pulled out his radio.

"Dispatch. Three Forks 3 already in route. ETA two minutes."

"Copy. We have you in route. Three Forks 4 also in route. ETA seven minutes. Please be advised overturned tractor trailer unknown contents with possible casualty. Mile marker 43. 1:59AM."

Cal left the speed limit behind. The previous miles seemed to have crawled as the last ones flew past. June disliked the sudden run, even less the reveal as the endless black sheen over the road started to curve with disjointed forms ahead. The dispatcher, the responders, they addressed it all in quick, steady words. Even when she was growing up, they never did justice for the destruction and chaos that lay on the other end of those calls. The urgency that had made it

impossible for her father to turn or drop her off over the years before gunning it to a scene was something subtle, implied through a learned behavior. And sitting in that passenger seat of her father's truck, she had seen static announcements lead to vehicles smoking before blowing up on the side of the highway, trailers burning while the family huddled beyond the yellow tape and neighbors gawked. She'd seen children blue in the face thrown into roaring ambulances. She'd seen body bags. All of it from this same seat. Her own protective cage. That was always the rule, she learned at a young age: Don't leave the truck.

"Got it?" Cal seemed to repeat to her.

"Huh?"

"I need you to stay here." He shifted into park as he pulled off to the emergency shoulder. The blinkers flashing red around them, lighting up the vicinity at the Three Forks exit, including the tractor trailer and a second unmentioned one. The construction had limited the space from the on-ramp, and instead of slipping smoothly into traffic they had merged into each other. In the bright headlights, the carnage looked like background noise for a tornado movie. One trailer was overturned and crumpled. The other was obliterated like a busted piñata with the white cab completely detached and head first in the ditch right in front of her. Whoever had called in the accident was either one of the victims or had long gone, either way she and Cal were alone at the scene.

"I'm going to go check on the drivers. I need you to stay put."

"Yeah," she mumbled, her jaw limp as she scanned the full mess.

Then she shook her head. "Yes," June repeated.

From the backseat, Cal pulled out a red medical bag and jogged to the first trucker. He left her with the door ajar and keys dangling from the ignition. The air conditioner whirred hard,

fighting against the settling heat moving in. She watched from her safe seat while Cal ventured before the headlights. He crawled to the pavement, checking under the flipped truck for signs of life. She couldn't hear anything, but the way Cal remained, reaching himself farther into the cracked out window shield, she assumed the driver was still alive. Then the sirens broke in and the illusion of quiet shattered.

Red lights and screeching alarms, the fire engine and medical vehicle charged up the off ramp. They immediately blocked the routes of oncoming traffic, not that there was any at the moment.

Older, robust men, June recognized like yearbook photos, rushed in. Gary, Nelson, Carter and John. Each of them nodded from under their gear as they passed by the truck. She waved back, saving the inevitable and proper hellos for tomorrow. They split into tasks, two joining Cal, more to the white cab. She wished for microphones, filling in their wordless exchanges with her own guesswork. It was all urgent, the pacing around, the tossing of bandages and equipment, the tribunal gatherings as they debated method execution. She wanted to know what they were doing, crawling and talking to the drivers. She wanted to know if they were dying or dead.

"Looks pretty bad huh?" a young man interrupted.

June jumped in her seat, jerking her laser sharp gaze from the accident to the unknown fifth man standing in the open door of her father's Ford. With his age and the running she had seen the veterans send him on, going back and forth from the trucks, she pegged him for a rookie. Especially now, if he had been sent to be her babysitter. When she was little, they came in fifteen or thirty minute rotations, checking on her like a stable patient waiting for extraction. Sometimes the older fellows would come by with a joke or an update, but mostly the rookies had gotten the pleasure of her company for the longer runs. During his first years, Cal had taken the

duty a little too seriously, afraid to leave her alone for five minutes while her father worked the scene. Eventually, he figured out the game when she would refuse to lower her book. Looking over the guy, she wondered if this was a joke or a genuine overprotective gesture on Cal's part. Knowing him, it could be either.

"What are the injuries?" she asked him.

"Nothing to serious. Most of the damage is to the trucks. One guy is pretty banged up. The other one is just pinned. It's gonna take a while to cut him out without actually hurting him. That's what they're working on now."

"Alright. Thank you for letting me know."

The rookie didn't move. She tried to focus back on the firemen, but her eyes kept flicking to the corner where he stayed, waiting for something. June shifted all the way in her seat to face him straight on as he stared at her.

"You can tell Cal, I'm fine," she finally said.

"Actually, he said I should drive you to your dad's house. Seeing as how it's late and you've been traveling awhile." He addressed the reasoning, shrugging and then leaning his arm on the steering wheel. There was something teasing about his delivery.

She didn't like his smile. Though his nose garnered most of her attention. It wasn't particularly unattractive, but it was large with a flat bridge like he'd ran into the door a few too many times as a kid. Her head tilted. It was familiar, a shape like that wasn't easily forgotten.

"I'm sorry. Do I know you?" It sounded more like an accusation than a question.

"Andrew Bowles." He jabbed a finger to his chest, pointing directly in the middle, between the red suspenders holding up his florescent yellow pants. "We went to high school together."

June would have groaned out loud if it wouldn't have been obvious. Well, and rude, of course. In London, she had gotten the invitation to her five-year reunion, a mass Facebook message inviting everyone to Cedar Mountain Park for hot dogs and corn hole. June hadn't seen the point, not just for flying in, but for the whole gathering. Five years was nothing in the scheme of things and nearly everyone still lived within thirty miles. A reunion wasn't necessary, merely a trip to the gas station or local Wal-Mart. Or in June's case, parking on the side of the interstate.

Then her stomach twisted with another thought. Now that she had returned. She wondered who else she might run into from high school. Before she lingered too long on her sudden musing, Andrew interrupted her thoughts.

"So, do you want me to give you a ride home?"

"It's nice to see you again, Andrew," she lied the way social convention required. "But I'll wait for Cal."

He bent in farther over the seat. She leaned back to the door.

"They are literally cutting the metal seat out in quarters of an inch at a time. It's going to take at least two hours. Let me give you a ride." She didn't reply. "It's a three-minute drive. It would be stupid to wait here. And it was Cal's idea anyway."

"Give me your radio." June flipped out her hand, waving it over. Andrew scrambled to toss it over, pulling it out from his big, fire resistant clothes. "Three Forks 3 please respond," she clicked and called. The reply was immediate through the snowy noise. She wasn't given a chance to argue nor request a different driver or other solution.

"Let Andrew drop you off, June. He can bring my truck back," Cal's voice came through, stomping out the objection she didn't even say out loud. And there were two things she knew well, her brother-in-law enough to know when a discussion was finished and that a department

run was no place to stir a debate on anything.

"Well, let's go." June sighed and flung the Bowles kid's radio back across. He caught it like a football and jumped into the truck. Andrew lay his arm over the back of the seats, twisting his head to back out.

As soon as they started to pull away, he asked the question. The one that made her skin flame up and torso constrict. The whole reason she didn't want another human being around her that wasn't Cal. She knew it would be coming over and over again, the resilient Luftwaffe with the question hitting like the blitz.

"How does it feel to be home?" He had no idea the self-control she exercised. She envisioned her own storming of Normandy with a series of blows to his already smashed up nose. Her father taught her how to throw a punch when she was thirteen, a requirement before she ever started dating. The causalities would be great. She relished the image of blood pouring down the jacked up cartilage. June took a breath.

"It's fine," she said. Andrew sized her up in a side glance.

"You look good, June. The big cities treated you well."

"So, did I look bad before?"

"No, I just... um..." She preferred him stammering. The final wave of emergency vehicles passed by the pair as they took a right heading down the road into Three Forks. Police, tow truck, the county ambulance. Their lights flashed soundlessly. The urgency somewhat abated. "I mean you look good," he finished.

"Thanks," she said, veering back to polite norms.

June clicked her thumb nail against her front teeth, then her pointer and the middle. She clicked them all in repetitive pattern, trying not the bite off the thin edges. Three Forks was

beginning to build up around her. Street poles lights made the town more visible than the interstate scenery. Andrew took her past the town's solitary gas station and the old Star motel, owned by an Indian family who had converted the rooms into storage lockers for hire.

"You know, I've been on the Fire Department two years now," Andrew said.

"Uh, huh." She wasn't really listening to him anymore. The sounds came without a reflex in her mouth, which was slightly gaped as she watched the pictures she carried haphazardly in her suitcase, or delicately in her passport, returned to life.

"Two years isn't as long as the other guys, I get that," Andrew was still talking. "But it was still plenty of time to get to know everybody. Cal is great help and if it wasn't for the Chief, I would never have passed my training. Doesn't matter to me what the talk is that goes around. Your family is good people."

There was a change in Andrew's tone. His voice bottomed out, getting deep and losing the playful quality from before. It got her attention away from the view. June listened and now watching him instead. The boy's hands were both held tight to the wheel. His posture was close to rigor mortis. She had a feeling where this was going. She didn't like it and she breathed a little raspier. The claustrophobic feeling set in like it had at the flat in the city. The interior seemed to be creeping in, sealing them up.

"Maybe I don't know you that well," he continued. "You were always with that Reed Hollis, so we weren't close friends in school, which is why I offered to take you home. I hope this isn't over stepping or too personal." Cal was right, June thought. People around here couldn't mind their own business. They seemed to do it despite themselves. Why didn't she just punch his nose already? June crushed her short nails against metal door handle as her hand wrapped around it. Her heart was beating all the way through the center of her ears but she could

still hear Andrew's drudging confession. She couldn't breathe.

"I just wanted the opportunity, before tomorrow got complicated." June wanted to scream. The way she didn't in London. "To say that I'm sorry about your dad. I just want you to know it comes from someone who he really did mean a lot to."

But she didn't.

"Thank you," she said, each word like swallowing fire ants, biting and stinging from her tongue to her stomach. "Daddy would have appreciated that, I'm sure."

"He was a great man," Andrew kept going. "You know there was this one time, we were doing training over at South Ballard..."

June stopped listening. Whether it was sobering up or Andrew's unwanted anecdote, the alcohol that had she'd tried to drown in was churning and spinning in her gut like the fire ants wanted out again. It bubbled, rising up like the pressure of a burp, but she could feel the wetness in back of her throat.

Talking, and oblivious to her clamping her mouth, Andrew slowed for the stop sign up ahead. Before coming to a complete stop, she opened the truck door. The overhead light came on and the dinging warned them of the open door while the key was in the ignition. The whiskey, the kamikaze shots, and the wine poured back on in a splotchy path to the intersection.

"Oh crap, are you okay?" Andrew slammed the brakes the rest of way, shifting into park. She waved him off.

"Fine," she said, panting. She spit one more time, making sure to remove the last bitter acid taste from her mouth. She wiped the strained tears from her eyes and sat up. Then, grabbing at the Jesus handle above the door frame, she jumped out of the truck, using the leverage to ensure she cleared the mess her drinks had made.

"Whoa, wait, where are you going?"

"I'm going to walk. I need the fresh air." She needed air free from stories about her father. Without any more thought, she grabbed her purse from the floorboard and slammed the door shut on Andrew's further objections. She wondered if he would crawl beside her all the way home. However, proving his ability to catch on to at least some degree of social cues that she wanted to be alone, he waited until she was past the stop sign before turning around in the motel parking lot. Once she was clear of his view, he looped the empty pool and went back to the accident.

The heat was on her again, the lighting little better, and the desertion somewhat worse despite being in her destination. She had gone from apocalypse to ghost town. Her dry skin had lasted long enough. Between the cold air and Andrew Bowles' sympathy, she would contend better against the elements and walking was rapidly settling her stomach.

June click clacked her heels this time down Old Louisville Road, the main drag and an homage to the town's history. The sidewalks, cracked and overgrown with weeds and yellow dandelions, were barely wide enough for her feet. They were in a common state of disuse, seeing as how no one walked around here. Everyone took their car, sometimes just to get the mail at the end of the driveway. She was used to her own feet as primary form of transportation since the underground in London could be a hassle. Even in the rain, she didn't mind a trek through the city. She enjoyed it. It could feel like a movie, all the parks and internationally famed structures tucked pseudo-surreptitiously in the background so the audience could never forget the location.

The scenic route through this poor town didn't compare. It was a thousand feet straight stretch of trees bigger than the buildings and homes that would suit the background for a modern redneck Grant Wood painting. Crickets trumpeted with the pacing of her anxious steps as she

passed the first New First Baptist. Three Forks may lack in cathedrals, but it did have churches. It was a squat tan brick building with a lighted sign out front which sayings that changed at the Pastor's whim. Tonight it read: "Lost? Try G.P.S.—God's Plan of Salvation." She failed to see how poor religious puns would draw in the crowds, but she supposed they had to be competitive. With five square miles to play in, Three Forks had one of the top ten per capita rates for churches, something besides the National Park that gained it a fair bit of attention. There were ten in the town limits, everything from Methodist and Presbyterian to Church of Christ and Jehovah's Witness.

Religious structures nearly outnumbered the public. While the churches were spread out, most of the businesses condensed around one caution light. In June's direct path, the heart of Three Forks was a yellow flashing beacon. The town didn't even rate a full stoplight. Each corner of the intersection was taken: Tisha's Diner, Farmer Bank, the U.S. Post Office, and Square Deal Lumber Co, est. 1891. Nothing more than a hop and skip apart. Behind the diner were the rest of the community locations, the one room town library and the jail of which one policeman was employed to operate and also regulate Three Forks behind the diner. The elementary school and fire station could be found another block down the street. The most congested area of town was a split square. Everything else expanded and thinned out from here, the houses getting farther apart, the farms larger, and roads thinner. "Blink and you'll miss it," her father used to say of Three Forks. Most people probably didn't even realize they'd passed by.

If London existed as the center of her universe, her hometown worked like a black hole. The town was small, average and where only mindless gossip happened. June had started making plans to leave before she had started school. Back then, Laurel had wanted to leave as well. They were kids inspired by Thelma and Louise, talking about packed bags and endless roads trips. In

the end, only she had left, escaping the gravity. She had packed a bag to her grandparents and never stopped moving. Laurel married Cal instead, living opposite of their father's driveway.

If she walked straight past the yellow caution, June could reach either her sister's or father's house in ten minutes' time. She slowed. That wasn't where she was going. To the right, behind the bank and the post office, lay the railroad tracks. They were still in use, a reminder of Three Forks brief name change to Louisville Junction back in the early 1900s. She stumbled in the gravel as she hopped the wooden crossties and steel rails. There a bit farther, hidden by trees and train cars covered with graffiti, was Bell Tavern in all its ruined glory. The oldest thing in all of Three Forks and even after 2am and no sleep, that's where she wanted to be.

It stood like a gravestone. And it was the only thing she still liked here.

June ran her fingers over the historic places of Kentucky sign like it was Braille. She'd memorized the epitaph long ago. Made in a solid stone structure, the tavern had a long, L-shaped foundation. The walls reached up in varying levels, several arches survived, long tablet stones marked the window ledges. It was a toppled pile of rocks. The ones not wrapped in ivy or carpeted in moss had been scorched black. She stepped over the rope barriers and leaned on one of the low walls, peeking over into the sunken earth. The tavern's cellars, which used to be the kitchen and food stores, seemed now a sanctuary for collapsed portions of stone and stray creatures. It made a perfect shelter for them, dense with thorns and poison oak because it was too dangerous for the heritage committee to manage the depths. When she and her father would come here, they walked the edges of the walls. She had been so small then, even for her age. He would have to pick her up onto his shoulders so she could glimpse the bottom. He was always lifting her up with those thick arms, so hairy sawdust could stick all day. Her father never minded the rule to stay back.

June slid her hand up the wall, pulling herself into the window where one of the arches curved above her with candy corn shaped stones. Everything seemed to hang so precariously. She used to be so afraid to touch it, worried it would fall from the slightest touch. She didn't understand architecture. The jutting rocks didn't shake as she climbed. It was destroyed but sturdy. The drop into the pit looked even farther now that she was older, taller with her pointed heels, not that she felt any more grown up with them. She dangled one foot over, daring herself to fall. She wasn't suicidal, but just curious. If she was going to spend the rest of her life restoring the souls of dead men and their art, she thought she ought to know what death was really like.

The family bible at her grandparents had pictured bright clouds and spotlight beams as Jesus ascended to heaven while the apostles watched. Death was a reward. That had never set well with her. She didn't have a problem with God or Jesus, Moses seemed like a good guy too. But death, it baffled her. If it was so great afterwards why did artists like Da Vinci paint? Why did they write? Or think or create anything to leave behind? If dead was the better option, why was she so damn angry?

The last time June had seen her father, she told him they could go anywhere in Europe. She didn't care as long as he came. Paris had been her pick. But Rome had been her father's choice.

At the end of his first day in Italy, after traipsing through the ancient forums and edifices to neglected gods, they had found an outdoor café to split a bottle of wine and tiramisu. The Temple of Castor and Pollux, or at least the remaining three columns topped with a broken entablature, sat a short distance down the street.

Rome is a city famous for its ruins. June liked that the stones seemed to lie as they fell,

not carted away to glass box pedestals. To her, they were like a painting turned into puzzles pieces "It's the great irony of Rome. The most beautiful thing you can see is a mess," she had said, tipsy on wine before the sun set on the colosseum. "There's something inspiring about its ability to survive in pieces."

"It is a testament," he had agreed. She noticed that he took more pictures there than anywhere else, even his fire stations. "A whole empire of people left this behind. We're a long way from milkshakes and the tavern, aren't we?" he had asked. It was then she had understood his choice, why Rome. They had been far by all the things that didn't matter, time, age, distance. In a way, that vacation was exactly the same, an escape from everyone else. Where they had talked long into the night, then through train rides and lengthy queues or walks down the Seine and the Thames, using two weeks to catch up on years. It was just like being a kid again. It was just like their Sunday ritual. Except, how could that be enough time with her father before he died, how could two weeks ever have been enough?

The answer, it wasn't.

There in the silence, standing on the moss along the abyss of the cellar, June screamed, pushing each last bit of shrill air from her diaphragm. All that she'd been holding in since London spewed out. Some far off dogs barked and howled in response, but she kept screaming until her sternum felt pressed onto her heart. Out of breath, her vision swam for a moment, she nearly slipped off the window, slinging her outstretched foot back under her as she grabbed the wall. She expected it to buckle against her weight, but it held her up until she slid down to lie along the flat stone, which was cool like a splash of water to her skin, easing the flush and the summer heat.

Everything was out, the liquor, the scream, and so June lay there, returned to empty the

way she liked.

She had been told the service would begin tomorrow, technically today, at the Hutton Funeral Home. A six-foot hole was already waiting for him next to the grandparents she never knew. Laurel had made the arrangements. Then she had telephoned, calling June back to Three Forks like a wayward pup, inciting an odyssey of trains, planes, and automobiles. The details were sealed and squared away like her father's coffin before she even began to slingshot her way to this place. All that was expected of her was to show up. With dirt on her face, the tang of acid on her tongue, and sweat pooling on her back, she couldn't even do that right.

"Are you trying to wake the whole neighborhood, missy?" a surly, old man's voice asked from behind June. She scrambled up, facing the man as he leaned against the wall next to her. "People already think this place is haunted without you hollering like some banshee." Though he chastised her, June had an urge to hug him, which she resisted. Three Forks' secretly tolerated drug dealer wasn't the affectionate type. But she didn't need to touch him to feel a sense of relief at his presence. She wondered if he'd heard her scream from his apartment across the road, or if he'd already been out here in the dark, drawn to the tavern for the same reasons she had, because her father had loved it here.

Drury pulled a hand-rolled cigarette from his shirt pocket, lighting it up with a silver lighter. As soon as the smoked trickled out of his mouth, she smelled a whiff of something besides tobacco.

"Is that...?" she pointed.

He nodded, pinching at the end near his lips, handing it over. He blew out. She hesitated at the offer. She hadn't smoked regularly since undergrad. The last time she'd smoked anything had been during a reading week trip to Amsterdam. She'd gotten blasted on a cake and a bowl

she shared with two Germans at one of the Bulldog cafes before heading to the Van Gogh and Rijks Museums. Looking at even the yellow sunflowers had made her hungry. Afterward, she'd ate her weight in stroopwafels.

With nausea waiting to rear its head again and the aftertaste of vomit lingering, June was ready to feel hungry again, so she took the joint.

"I guess I don't have to warn you anymore not to tell your daddy I'm doing this."

"No, I guess you don't." She puffed and handed it back. "You aren't coming tomorrow, are you?"

"Nora would never let me through the door. She'd chase me out like she did the last funeral," Drury said, squinting in the smoke gather around them. "That's assuming Laurel would even let me in the first place. She puts up with plenty. I'm not looking to overstep with her."

"I'm sorry," June said. "For your loss." A strange half-smiled flicked on Drury's face before it returned to his nearly stagnant frown.

"Isn't that supposed to be my line?" They continued to puff and pass, the joint burning down quickly.

"You knew Daddy longer than anyone else in this town."

"But he wasn't my family like he's yours, not technically anyway," he said, throwing down the tail end of the roach, rubbing it out with his boots into the ground. "Reed might show up though tomorrow. I told him not to, he told me he wouldn't, which means he probably will. That kid, sometimes I think he don't how to leave well enough alone. It's like he enjoys torturing himself." Drury seemed to notice that June had grown quiet, her feet stopped kicking aimlessly. He cleared his throat. "I just figured you might want to know, to prepare yourself. Your daddy told me about...Well, he just told me. You've got enough tomorrow without having that

sideswiping you."

"Do I dare? Do I dare?" June whispered as Drury watched her. "I appreciate the warning," she said after a pause.

As if reading her thoughts, Drury pulled out another joint, giving it and the lighter over to June. On the second round, the burn started to get to her and she coughed, choking a little as she inhaled too deeply.

"You forget how to do this dirty stuff in your fancy England?" His white whiskers twitched as Drury snickered at her. It didn't bother her though. She was surprised at how nice it felt to hear him laugh. It felt almost normal, like a life she could get used to again.

June bounced his heavy lighter in her palm.

"I'm impressed you still have this," she told him.

"Figures, the only lighter I've never lost is the one thrown at my head." He sighed. "Though worse things have been thrown at me."

Bombs, bullets, hate, June thought, filling in the blank. Drury was an old man now. But he'd been a young one in the backwoods of the Kentucky mountains and still young when he went to Vietnam. People thought he was reclusive because the war had gotten to him. June knew better. War was the reason he smoked like a fire pit. People were the reason he didn't like people. She didn't altogether disagree with his premise either.

"I should walk you home," Drury eventually said.

"Yeah," June agreed. It was late, and she was exhausted, the buzz having made her eyelashes feel like lead weights. Yet the thought of working her way up that hill, standing in front of her father's cabin, kept her planted like the moss on the stones. She'd been all around the world. June had still never seen a house she'd thought more beautiful than her father's. She

wasn't ready to see her home with him, to see the two stories of perfectly laid logs that he'd cut himself over decades, that he'd stacked up with his own hands the way the Bell family had built their tavern. She didn't have the nerve yet to see the house filled with his collections of antiques and his armchair where she knew Laurel had found him, no longer breathing. He'd just stopped. No one told her why. He just had.

Her detour was more than a queasy stomach. She wasn't ready to go home. Her father wasn't there and she'd have to start missing him. And she liked not missing anybody. If she started missing one, that ache would come back for everyone else too. Leaving again would be easier if she didn't feel that.

"Just not yet," she said. "Can we stay her for a little while, just me and you?"

Drury softly grunted as he inhaled, signaling his agreement. Neither said much else after that. They smoked, finishing the weed, remaining in relative silence for another hour. He didn't try to end the quiet with filler small talk like Cal had. He let them both just be, existing in the dark at the ruins. No one else could have done that for her. But she knew it wasn't merely for her. Like a lot of things in Three Forks, he did it because of whose daughter she was. And no one had loved her father like Drury did, not even Juniper.

And the Hole

The grave diggers came the morning before, cutting their time close. The funeral was in a few hours. Before the viewing began, Mr. Hutton was there in Bell Cemetery showing the men where to dig. It was important they didn't get to close to the plots on the left, where Charlie Owen's parents were, or too far to the right and into an unfilled plot, whose future occupant had yet to be named. Once the funeral director gave them the marks, he left, returning to his more pristine duties in the air conditioned building closer to town. On the walk to his car, he tapped away at his forehead with a white handkerchief, blotting out the sweat that came simply from standing in the humidity. Though the ground was parched for the last few years, the air in the South, which rarely lacked moisture, almost teasingly withheld it from the ground in Three Forks.

The diggers had no escape. Jagged, wet 'v's discolored the backs of their tan shirts almost as soon as they began cutting away the sod and peeling it off like a piece of dead skin. They set aside the grass and its roots, and one digger drove over a tiny backhoe, a miniature version of the kind Charlie had used logging in the woods. Compared to the old fashioned shovels and manpower, the machine was a cold touch. But it was also swift in its work, which had allowed the diggers to start so late. Metal handfuls of red soil came up every few minutes. They deposited them to the side in a pile they later covered with a tarp to make it less unsightly for the mourners.

Within a couple hours, the grave diggers had reached six feet, set up the mechanisms that would lower the coffin, and erected the pavilion to provide shade for a small collection of close family and friends with seats by the graveside. The men were nothing if not efficient. They had plenty of experience.

Charlie Owens was not their first corpse and would not be their last.

Laurel and the Funeral

Laurel Owens didn't care much for flowers, even before today. All weekend they had been coming in. The clustered, pollen-filled rooms made her normally non-existent allergies go haywire with over-exposure and turn into a nose running, eyes burning, watery sort of misery, which luckily coincided with her expected appearance. They were everywhere, irritating her face and her mood.

Two years ago, once she and Cal got the mortgage for the new house, she had tried to grow her own flowers and create a garden in the backyard, now that they finally had one. Her husband tilled up the weeds and dry grass giving her a fresh pallet and, in three days, he built her a picket fence like something out of a TV Land show to keep out Robbie Forbis' pack of mutts. No patch of land was safe from their piss and shit. Their wild tendency to dig like rodents drew consistent complaints from the neighbors on the block.

With the borders standing, Laurel started with seeds, scooping out the land and burying little drops, patting down the dirt. Then, she waited for rain that never came. It was a dry summer, the first of many dry seasons, down to the winters where snow would pass them by. How was she to know, she often thought, that she picked the beginning of a drought to plant a garden? The yard remained brown and bare. By the time she decided to give it another try, or ignore the water use warnings and irrigate with a garden hose, autumn had already pulled the orange leaves from her neighbors' trees to litter in the wind. So, her second chance waited until spring.

When the tax check came, Laurel knew she needed new work shoes and a backpack for school. Instead, she decided to let her blisters grow to calluses over few more months and carry her books to campus. She and her half of the return went to Lowe's Garden Center. This time,

she skipped the seeds and went for the potted plants. The squeaky buggy overflowed with tulips, mums, snapdragons, and three colors of tea roses. Everything she could justify a dollar for, except a little ceramic frog that also found its way into the mix. Spotted on the sale rack at the back, he had bulging black eyes and a bright red tongue flicking a fly on the "Welcome to the Pond" sign that was part of his lily pad. A chip off his green color had knocked the price down and something about him made her smile. 'Just for fun,' she told herself, slipping him into the child seat of the buggy with her purse. She held her breath all the way as she rolled up to the checkout and until her total glowed on the screen. The remaining few bucks went to a pack of Camels.

The spoils went back to the house, and Laurel spent a month's worth of spare afternoons covering the bald patches of earth and scrapping away the sprouts of onion grass. But when she finally stood up, clapping the dirt off her yard sale jeans and a sense of finish overtook her, the exhaustion didn't matter. The house from the inside out seemed brighter, less brick and more color. She peeked out of windows more than she looked at mirrors and smoked more in those first few days just to have a reason to sit outside. Even the girls, Alyssa and Hayden, who usually wandered in and out more like traveling vagrants than inhabitants of the one-story wheel-less home, managed notice, pausing long enough to offer congratulations to their step-mother.

"Looks sorta like you grew a bag of skittles," Hayden had said, peeking out the kitchen window as she rustled through for a bag of chips to feed her friends after school. "It's not horrible."

Pleased with her success and no longer ashamed of the scraggily landscape that encompassed her home, Laurel planned her first Memorial Day cookout. Cal called guys at the fire department and some of the neighbors. She issued Facebook invites to her co-workers from

the gas station and a few classmates she had met in her first semester at college. The next weekend, the house was full and the yard buzzing. Her dad, Charlie, brought his signature pulled pork. Cal pulled out the charcoal grill, and the porch was covered in casserole dishes and two-liter cokes. The whole event seemed a success to Laurel. Even her step-daughters kept to a minimum with critiques. The guests played poker, Cal taking in the majority of the pot, or horseshoes across the lush green yard, which all the girls from work complimented her on and the neighbors envied, still victims of the Forbis dogs. It all finished with a prayer before dusk and a trip to the local cemetery. She took the last plastic case of Scarlet O'Hara peonies to plant at her grandparents' shared tombstone. The dark pink petals framed their dates of death and the engraved wedding rings on the back marble.

That night, Laurel slept with a smile, not caring about the wrinkles it was making. With Cal's heavy arm on her hips keeping her warm, she never noticed the dropping temperatures. The weatherman on the local news with his red tie and pasted smile was background noise as she poured her morning coffee. She was barely listening, assuming the air conditioner was working overtime until the man spoke about frost, a sudden chill.

"June may be just around the corner but seems like spring decided to give us one last cold front after a warm and sunny Memorial Day. That's global warming for ya, folks." He shrugged with a laugh that cut Laurel down to the bone. "Be sure to give your cars plenty of time to heat up," he warned.

The car was the last thing on her mind. Laurel nearly smashed her mug to the counter and burst outside to see a crystal sheen covered everything, the weight of it dragging down the buds so they looked like heavy hanging heads. The weather raised the goose bumps along her half-dressed body. Her bare feet stayed on the wet, cold porch steps, while her garden looked like a

scene from a snow globe. One that she wanted to turn upside down and shake away like a bad dream.

Laurel skipped class, her first absence in a year, not that Math 110 missed her, and picked off dead heads until noon, when she did have to go to work. She couldn't miss paychecks. Laurel hoped that with pruning when the heat returned the flowers would perk again. But it did no good. They stayed stunted green stems until September when they went brown and crisp. Each blossom had frozen and died. All that remained was her frog in the corner. Even his cheap green polish had become weather stripped and faded. Still, she had held hope for the annuals, for the next spring bloom. But when the season came around, nothing came back, even the rain was still missing. She soon realized she'd spent 200 bucks for a week and half of color. She quickly resigned herself to that fact that nothing was going to grow for her. It never did.

Her mother, rather than let her eldest accept the ignominy of a decrepit garden, continued telling Laurel to try again, giving her tips and suggestions, the ways how she, Nora, would do it. "You may not have a green thumb, but it's not like it can't be learned," the older woman had pushed the way she always did. Nora, of course, had three flourishing gardens around her trailer: flower, herb, and vegetable, all with little painted tin signs adorning the edges with biblical verses. Over the years, she'd pawned off so many canned tomatoes to Laurel that the rising garage door caused them to jitter and fall from the crowded shelves in the garage leaving red splatter stains on the concrete that even the power washer couldn't get out.

Laurel's family never ate the repeated offerings brought, but they were never refused either. To Laurel, the thrusting of pruned and dried herbs into bottles for her pantry or mason jars of pickled cucumbers at each of her mother's periodic visits felt like ritualistic barbs. After years of waiting, her mother's chestnut tree was starting to produce to the point that Nora handed over

grocery bags of shells like alms for the poor, while Laurel couldn't get a damn marigold to survive.

As her mother pushed in painful optimism, it was her father who had suggested fire.

"Just burn the yard," he had said a few months ago while the three of them sat outside, overlooking the object of disdain and sipping on moonshine some cousins sent over from Eastern Kentucky. The two men still smelled of smoke from the department's late run, and Laurel refused to let them sit inside. "It might be the ground," he suggested. "A good control burn might help it out."

"I'm not settin' a fire near my house, Daddy."

Charlie shrugged.

"It was a thought. Oh well, if it grows it grows. If not, I don't see the big deal."

Laurel rolled her eyes, not surprised. The only plants her dad ever cared for were the trees he cut for a living or the potted aloe vera he had kept in the bathroom window, where he broke the thick, rubbery leaves for his daughters' cuts and burns. Laurel's father was a realist if she had ever met one. At seven, she had lost the argument for a pet after he asked what the point would be. Seven year olds are not particularly eloquent and "because they're cute and Sarah Bailey has one" were not, according to her father, logical reasons to buy anything.

"I don't see why people want to spend their money on something temporary," he continued. "I mean, you can't eat flowers. They just die. I say, save your money. There are better things to spend it on, like school. You know, I never once wasted money buying flowers for your mother."

"Ever think that's why she divorced you, Charlie? Cause you never brought her roses?" Cal laughed hard, shaking the porch. Her dad smiled as well at the joke. Only her lips had stayed

terse. Very subtly, Charlie rubbed his daughter's hand as it held tight to the arm of the metal folding chair.

"Maybe," he said. "Nora did have a fascination for useless, pretty things. Me, I find something's gotta have a purpose. Only idiots buy flowers."

That was the last night Laurel had looked out the windows. It took time, perhaps a bit of denial that land even existed beyond the back porch, but, eventually, she stopped worrying about the flat, colorless garden. She knew Charlie was right. She hated it like she always did when he was, but she didn't want to be an idiot either. Only idiots bought flowers.

Thinking about his words now drew Laurel to the edge of laughter, especially the longer she had to watch the armfuls of bouquets carried through the viewing room by Mr. Hutton and his employees. They moved like a trail of ants carrying crumbs to the hill. In and out of the back door, emptying their hands of the baskets and vases that seemed never ending.

Mr. Hutton had informed her last night that they were officially out of stands. There was no more desk space, nor shelf space as the rods that lined the walls were packed from floor to ceiling. The flowers would begin to be crushed if layered any further. Yet, still more came. All the things she couldn't grow were stationed like guards around the guestbook stand and along the entrance, laid between couches and adorning the end of each row of yellow leather and bronze studded folding chairs. Or else, the bouquets were dropped to the floor, spread around the walls, lining so thick it was nearly impossible to read the cards of the ones farther back.

Each night since it started, Nora had decided to count the arrangements. They had passed 100 within a day, everything from carnations to peace lilies, wreaths and stone filled glass bowls. The lumber mill had sent a small bonsai tree while the ladies at the county dispatch had commissioned a full fire engine made of yellow, red, and white roses. It sat on a wire stand at the

foot end of the casket. She appreciated the sentiment, but her dad's expression on that late, tired night kept floating up in her head—only idiots buy flowers. She couldn't help but guess at the hundreds of dollars in petals, fiber optic angels, remembrance candles and prayer plagues from those who seemed to forget her father's lack of faith affiliation. In her head, Laurel replaced every petal with a dollar. She probably could have paid her mortgage for at least two months with foliage in the funeral home.

Then she wondered about funeral etiquette. Was she going to have to send thank you notes? For each of them? Did they make "thank you for your overpriced and pointless gifts of acknowledgement for the death of my father" notes? If they didn't, Laurel thought someone was missing a valuable business opportunity. If they did, how much was it going to cost her? She decided that, if it was more than ten bucks at the Dollar Store, she would just send a mass e-mail. Surely that was okay these days.

What would she say in them, anyway? "Thank you for sending me more things that would die?" Because Laurel knew that in her hands, all of these plants would be mulch within a week. A month tops. Even the arrangement the funeral home brokered, white and yellow flowers that sat like an artful brush pile atop the bottom half of the casket, would be part of the decay. Though perhaps not the ribbons. They flowed out from the stems with sparkling words, breaking down her father into concise, generic terms. She didn't imagine synthetic fiber strips and glitter would degrade in the exactly the same way. Not that they would endure either, with a mere graze over the fabric, her fingernail broke off part of the "f" in "father," more resembling "lather."

Laurel found all the trappings garish when compared to the simple furnishings. The casket was cheap, of course. Not necessarily hideous or unsturdy, but basic. She didn't think Charlie would have approved of spending a fortune on a one-time use box. When making

arrangements with Mr. Hutton, Nora had suggested Laurel choose the silver, citing its "heavenly" look and the substantial insurance policy that would cover the funeral costs. Unsure how much of her decision was to spite her mother or to follow her father's wishes, Laurel chose the mahogany with brass handles.

"Might as well stick him in a cardboard box," Nora had commented outside the building after the arrangements were made, waving the smoke away as Laurel had her cigarette.

"Why do you even care what he's buried in?" Laurel asked in a rare moment of curious bravery. Honestly, she hadn't understood it. Her parents had been separated nearly 18 years, and, even before the divorce, the amount of kind words Nora had for Charlie were few and far between. Anything she didn't like about her daughters she immediately blamed on him: their smart mouths, their bad attitudes, their godlessness, and, worst of all, her sister's constant traveling. Nora cited her youngest daughter's ever changing location as Charlie's fault for filling June's head with cockamamie ideas and giving her money.

He had come to Laurel, when some of the comments had managed to filter sideways through the town to him, asking if she was okay with the help he gave her sister. She nearly bit her tongue, wanting to scream at him for even doubting she was. Instead, she simply nodded her head. Years and years ago, it might have made her angry, but, in those days, she hated everything he did. But she had started to forgive him a long time before, the moment she realized that, when it came to June, they both wanted the same thing — to get her out. For her, it was hard to hate someone who loved the same person she did. The same did not apply to her mother.

Laurel still wasn't sure what shocked her more in the last two days, that her father had died or that her mother had already been parked and waiting in her driveway to take her to the funeral home, then stood behind her shoulder every step of the arrangements, commenting over

every choice as though it was an occasion. She had to stop her from saying "yes" to every ceremony tack-on that would cost another hefty penny. Mr. Hutton was a respected mortician, but even he was trying to make a buck. Initially, Laurel planned to go for cremation like they had when Cal's mother had died. Nora's interference required a full body presentation and hole in the ground, so the body was resurrection ready, not like Nora had assured everyone for decades that Charlie was going to burn in hell for his backsliding ways. All that was forgotten when it came to a public event.

Her mother was always concerned about what two people thought: Jesus and everyone. "What would Jesus think if there wasn't a moment of prayer? What would everyone say if you didn't have a nice casket?" Laurel didn't care, she didn't give a flying fuck-all when the thing would be buried six feet down, never to be seen again. She caught Mr. Hutton in the corner and put a nix on all her mother's comments while Nora was in the bathroom. She had relaxed then, knowing that Nora could suppose all she wanted over candles vs. lights or slideshow vs. picture board, and it affected nothing. What killed her watching Nora fuss over details was more that she was doing it for an ex-husband she seemed to despise.

"Why do you care about any of it?" she asked again.

"I'm here for you," Nora replied in stark form. "I wasn't going to let you do this alone. Besides," she added, rubbing a tissue on her allergy-induced red nose, "he's the father of my children. I'll always love Charlie for giving me you and Juniper. He was a good daddy to you girls. I'm showing my gratitude." Laurel had wanted to comment on this sudden twisted opinion, but then she thought better of it and finished her smoke in silence. She knew why her mother lied. It was a sin to speak ill of the dead. Lest God strike her down. That was the rule— probably

by virtue that threatening a man with hell fire lost its appeal when he couldn't argue back— in death, we all become saints.

It bothered her then, as her mother's humble lie sunk in and now, as she was alone in the parlor. What good was dying if it only made people more dishonest? Laurel could imagine some choice ill words for her father. Charlie Owens was no saint. She slid her hand from the flowers to the white linen rim of the casket, sniffling back the pollen-loosed snot in her sinuses. More so with him dead, she felt a fury deep down to her bones and toes. It was more than she had ever felt for her father when she was young. It was a kind of anger that broke her heart. She blamed him for being gone, for being right at her fingertips but not really there. This was how she would be forced to remember him, quiet, perfect, dead. This is how the whole town would speak of him, in memory, on display among the flowers, their venerated version of him.

Laurel picked at a loose stitch of the casket lining. He shouldn't look so peaceful, she thought. It made it seem less true. After years on the fire department, Charlie was a chronic insomniac. He never slept soundly. But here he lay flat in an uncomfortable looking suit, his eyes closed softly yet unflinching. The red flag of the fire department lay folded and tucked under his crossed arms like a child taking a teddy bear to sleep. His expression should frown and clinch more, his eyes should be tighter, emphasizing the wrinkles in his face. So many chemicals and layers of thick makeup had smoothed away most of the discoloration of death and flattened the appearance of his skin, a false, even tone. She didn't like the stage mask or how young it made him look.

The foundations and cover-up tried to hide the creases under his eyes, the erosion cracks that ran across his forehead, the laugh lines and his stubble, where only recently the grey had started to dot his face. She thought it cruel to make it look as though even more years of

opportunities had been waiting. Not that the touchups were the only thing that reminded her of that. Charlie was only 53. He didn't need to look youthful to know that he shouldn't be in the box. He still looked the same as she always thought of him, tall, rugged skin, a general worn look like the mystery books she loved after reading them over and over. His funeral wasn't a day she had pictured with much thought, but she supposed she had imagined him as a raisin, puckered and wrinkled all the way through, already half wasted away and washed of color except for liver spots. She imagined it like when Pap died, withered and riddled by cancer and a bum heart. When people look down on the dead, the dead should look done. Charlie didn't. He appeared unfinished.

Part of her wanted to reach out and make sure. She had never touched a dead body before, but Cal had told her once there was never another moment like it. "You can't imagine it. There's nothing that can tell you how a body is gonna feel with the soul gone. It's a make or break moment, either you can handle that you're holding a person who's no longer a person, just cold flesh with a smell that leaves an aftertaste for hours, remindin' you exactly what we're made of...or you can't. There's no middle ground." He had been talking about strangers, the victims of car accidents and fires. And then it took years before Cal would tell her about the runs, about the torn-apart people. She knew that was a different kind of hard seeing the death fresh. But a body was a body. Laurel wanted her moment, something to make her less angry. She wanted to feel it, to brush away the ghost that lingered on her other shoulder. She dragged her fingers along his jacket sleeve but, before she could reach far enough in to hold his hand, something shifted in the room. A presence approached quietly on the carpet behind her. It was too early for people. She didn't feel ready, but that didn't matter. The careful footsteps and breathing told her this wasn't Hutton or the workers.

Immediately, Laurel turned, her greeting face whipped on as fast as her hair spun, a delicate balance of somber yet welcoming. It turned out to be just a boy, somewhere around June's age and dressed nice despite his youth. Most of the male visitors dressed in their Sunday best which was clean Wranglers and a plaid Dickies shirt. This one wore jeans but dark and better fit, joined with a blue suit jacket which sat slightly big on the shoulders. The jacket belonged to someone else. She recognized the fit of second-hand clothes, but not the wearer. She didn't recall a name, but something about his face seemed familiar, even in its petrified state.

"Hi," she said, holding her hand out towards him now. "I'm sorry. Mr. Hutton didn't tell me it was time to unlock the front doors. But thank you for coming."

"You're uh, Laurel, right?" he asked, then answered for her, reciting quietly yesterday's obituary. "Charlie Owens is survived by his daughters, Laurel Harper and Juniper Owens. You and June are sisters," he added more soundly. "And that's your dad?" the boy's mouth expulsed. He swallowed hard while he fixated his eyes entirely to her father's corpse.

"Yes," Laurel answered.

"I was waiting in the parking lot," he continued without regard to her response. The funeral program, stamped on the front with Charlie's picture at the last department chili supper, contracted and rippled in the boy's crumpled and damp grip, leaving Laurel's handshake ignored. "I'm too early, aren't I? Timing was never my strong suit," he laughed, in a painful, forced sort of way. Laurel dropped her gesture, and this time the visitor broke his attention away from the dead body in the room.

"And manners, I forget those sometimes." He managed to smile and grimace at the same time, finally returning the hello. "I'm Charlie." They both froze briefly. The faint grin on his face faded instantly, and he stumbled further correcting his error. "No, I mean…I'm not. I'm…I'm

just Reed. I'm sorry. I just..." Now, the boy, Reed, refused to even nod toward the center of the room, his gaze avoiding even Laurel. His complexion had a sickly white tone, the sudden drain. It was the kind of look the girls had when the stomach flu hit the school last year, and they camped on the couch for a week, the look right before she would dive in with the trashcan. Cal had compared the girls to the rookies on the fire department, that same face when they saw their first body.

"You've never been to a funeral before have you?" she asked.

"Just one," Reed said, staring at the ground. "I was little. I don't remember it well."

"It doesn't really get easier. When I was little, my momma told me to just pretend they were sleeping really hard. It would help for a minute."

"Right...right," he muttered to himself, then lifted up his head. The slight tremor in his body stopped. "I'm so sorry for your loss," Reed said to her. There was a shine to his blue eyes under the spotlight fixtures.

The emotion surprised her. Laurel felt some meaning to the words again. Last night, she heard them on repeat until the expression became banal sounds seemingly stripped of letter and definition.

"Thank you," she replied, "I hate to ask, but do I know you?"

"No, you wouldn't," he admitted while he tried to flatten back out the funeral program over his jeans. "But, I know June. Juniper, I mean. We went to high school together. We were in the same class. And then I saw in the paper, about, well you know. No picture in the paper though."

There hadn't been time, Laurel thought to herself. Charlie had a bad habit of not smiling in photos. He simply refused on the basis that he wasn't going to put on anything other than his

"natural" look. It wasn't until Verna Troy called yesterday morning they even had one for the programs. Everyone had searched photos finding the same blank stance until Verna discovered she had caught Charlie mid-laugh at the last Lion's Club Christmas dinner.

"So, I wasn't sure if it was the right one, cause I wasn't sure if...," he paused. "But then I thought, how many Junipers are there?"

"None in Ballard County. Sometimes, though, there's one."

"And Juniper was...is, of course. Juniper is a great girl. I decided to pay my respects. So, I'm very sorry."

"She's not here, yet," Laurel told him. "If you want to wait to give your condolences, I'm sure she'd be very happy to see a friend from school. My mom is supposed to bring her in a little while."

"I can't stay," Reed said, taking a step back. "I've got to...Well, I just can't stay."

Laurel was tempted to reach for him. An instinct hit to hold him here, or to just hold him until the shake left his body, like Laurel used to do for June when their parents would fight. She would cradle the little girl in her arms until she fell asleep, rocking her back and forth as they hid in the back of the closet among shoes, forgotten toys, and a box of moth balls. Laurel couldn't help the same sudden need to protect him. Something in his eyes seemed like it was more than a death haunting them. But the boy left her no chance to catch him, much less to reply. He turned swiftly back down the aisle of empty chairs. A woman, whose face was hidden underneath a large arrangement, traveled up behind him. His bulky jacket shoulders sideswiped the vase of pink gladiolus in her hands. He repeated another apology and disappeared out the double front doors.

Laurel, instead, caught the wobbling white vase. She scooped her hands under and lifted it from the stick thin arms of the small woman spitting a trail of rash comments at the boy who was already gone. Earlene Burgess was barely an inch taller than the sixth graders at Three Forks Elementary, but her mouth moved a lot faster than her short gait.

"I mean it. Who lit the damned fire under his hind-end?" the elderly women grumbled as she readjusted the blooms Laurel had transferred to the nearest chair. "Young people. Don't know how to take their blasted time with anything." Earlene paused, propping her sun-dried hands on the hips of her lavender pants. "These petals look damaged to you?" she turned and asked.

There wasn't a lick of difference between the flowers that Laurel saw, but Earlene was a stickler. The senior citizen had passed retirement age a decade ago but still refused to pass on the Flower and Antique Shop to any of her grandkids. Before she left, June said that Earlene planned to die in that store. She'd only let God take her after she finished her own funeral wreath, and then she wanted to go out somewhere between the mink coat from 1943 and the wet plate portrait collection of civil war soldiers. Laurel used to think it was a joke from her sister after spending too many weekends in archaic dust and flower preservatives while working for that old woman. Once she got to know Earlene better, it was clear there was no humor intended.

"They look fine to me," Laurel said, dabbing her watery eyes on the edge of her dress collar. Earlene didn't respond but tilted her head. Laurel cricked her neck into the same angle, wondering what they were looking for. The flower lady then sighed.

"A few stems look weaker, slightly creased." Earlene picked off a few buds. "But I suppose it will have to do. I got three other deliveries to make today, one up in E-town. This is the last for your daddy though. Hutton and his boys brought in the rest before me. Not that you

needed anymore flowers," she whistled, twisting around. "More than there were last night. It's something like the Hanging Gardens of Babylon went and threw up in here. Hutton really oughta re-think that yella' color in his walls and chairs."

"I'll be sure to tell him that."

"You do. You tell him Earlene Burgess said it too. I spent enough time doing business here I don't want to keep looking at this ol'puke yella." She huffed and lifted up the vase, waddling it over to the rest of the wall piles. They both went quiet for a moment, and the speakers in the ceilings crackled, soft banjo and fiddle music played, signaling the end of privacy. Mr. Hutton was prepping the home for visitors.

"So, Laurel Lee," Earlene grunted, pushing herself back upright. "How are you and the Junebug holding up?"

"As well as can be expected. Thank you for asking."

"Don't spit that horseshit at me," Earlene popped off, shaking a finger at Laurel. "I buried three husbands and two sons. "Well" is no word to being using in a place like this. Where is June anyway? I heard tell she was coming home for the ceremony."

"Our mother has her at the house. She wanted quality time with June first."

"You think that was wise?" Earlene asked, stepping over a row of flowers to a seat. "Lots of years and unspoken thoughts between those two. Anybody got money on which one is coming out alive?" Laurel crossed her arms, and Earlene quickly apologized. "I'm sorry, I'm sure your mother and sister are having a lovely time catching up. But you and I both know, she only came back for your daddy. Once he's put away, any word on how long the Junebug will stay?"

Laurel had no idea about her sister's plans. June was just up the road, a half mile away, and she hadn't even seen her yet. For all she knew, her sister would be back on a plane

tomorrow. In the only call they'd shared in months, it had been brief, to the point. "Daddy died. Come home." June hadn't asked questions, just answered and arrived. Laurel didn't know what was going on in that girl's head. And, if she was honest, Laurel wasn't sure she even wanted her sister to stay. She missed June, missed her every day, but sometimes missing her was easier than dealing with her. June didn't try to be particularly difficult, it's just that she was particularly intelligent.

When June was a kid, still in bows and barrettes, people in Three Forks were in awe of her, everyone from the fire station to the truck stop. She'd look at them with those big blue Owens eyes and speak better than half the adults and read books as big as her head. Laurel's mother-in-law nearly pissed herself meeting Juniper the first time. "How does a seven-year-old have a better vocabulary than me? I'm ancient," Mama Harper had whispered in the kitchen before then asking Laurel to bring June more often. They all wanted the little girl's attention when she was so young, so bright. The school eventually let her skip a grade. But then, it changed during the divorce, once June got older. The wisdom and gall that made her speak to adults with authority as a child became less endearing when she was actually big enough to embarrass them. Her nature to choose books over people, thought cute and clever, left her mostly friendless and antisocial through grade school and high school. Over the years, June went from being a treasure to an anomaly. She was still loved of course, both the daughters of Charlie Owens were, but with more apprehension. It was no matter though, June's desire to leave dampened any hope for a life in town. Escape had been the motto for them as children, but for Laurel it had been about situation not location. For her sister, escape was not complete without both. It was a hard lesson she learned through June. That it was nearly impossible to keep smart

people from being bored and worse still to make them happy, especially in a place like Three Forks.

"I don't imagine June will stay any longer than necessary," Laurel finally said, using her thumb to twist the wedding band around her finger. "It shouldn't take long to settle Daddy's will." If she stays for that at all, Laurel added to herself.

"What about that house?" Earlene whispered as though scandalized to mention it. "You gonna leave that big, empty place on the hill just sitting to the end of days?"

"June is staying at Daddy's while she's here. But the decision will be made, when we go over the will and it finishes probate."

The florist stood back up and clutched her miniature hands over Laurel's fidgeting ones. There was a click in the back of the woman's throat.

"It is long, hard road, my dear. But remember, as Paul said to the Romans, "the sufferings of this present time are not worthy to be compared with the glory that is to be revealed to us." Earlene smiled, reaching up to pat Laurel on the cheeks. "Tell June she's in my prayers as well. Your daddy was as good as fella as there ever were," she said.

Not always, Laurel thought to herself, but she nodded and smiled anyway. Earlene took a poke at her damaged arrangement one last time before she made for the door. Laurel followed politely behind her, escorting her out.

"You know, if Dana Branstetter says a word about those gladioli, I have half a mind to send a bill to that boy. You gotta a name for him, hun? He looked familiar but I couldn't quite place him."

"Um, Reed something. A friend of June's from high school."

Earlene stopped on her heels, giving a shocked whap to Laurel's arm.

"That boy? Was that "the" Reed?"

"Who's "the" Reed," Laurel said, rubbing her freckled arm. "How do you know him?"

"Laurel Lee Owens, you're telling me you don't know the boy who broke your sister's heart?"

For a moment, Laurel couldn't even fathom the question. Of course, she didn't know him because that had never happened. The only thing harder to imagine than Juniper living in Three Forks was her being in love with a boy who lived there.

"What do you mean?" Laurel asked.

The old woman stared hard at Laurel's face while her own changed as well, gradually from surprise to clear elation at the idea of gossip, but then she abruptly replaced it all with a shake of the tight white curls on her head.

"No," Earlene answered to a question that wasn't quite spoken. "It's not my story to tell, which I know normally don't stop me. But June never cared much for her business being public, so I'm gonna respect that, even if you are her family. Just something you're gonna have to ask yourself. And that's where we're leaving it. Understand?"

Laurel nodded. Her tongue itched to ask again, ask as long as it took. She had only accepted the way June held her secrets in as she assumed it was how she treated everyone. Even as close as they were as girls, it always seemed like June held so much back in her head. It made her wonder why a woman like Earlene could know more about her sister than she did. More than that, what else did Laurel not know about her? But Earlene was not going to tell her today, and she wasn't sure it was the day to find out either.

"I'm prayin' for you, but my truck won't deliver itself." The old woman stood on the toes of her sneakers and wrapped Laurel in a hug. Her arms were thin but held tight and for that

moment, they felt like the only thing holding Laurel to her body. She could have floated away after Earlene let go and part of her wanted that. Because once Earlene left, it didn't take long for Hutton's Funeral Home to become swarmed.

Like locusts in their Sunday clothes, the town of Three Forks and half of Ballard County came carrying food and condolences. They buzzed, louder and louder, like a ringing in her ears, causing her temples to throb. Laurel scratched and tugged at her ears, hoping to soften the sound smothering the rest of her senses. Children screamed and giggled as they played on the couches toward the back. Pap's family from the mountains crammed together by the piano, sitting and clinking on the keys. The ugly yellow chairs filled up. Mr. Hutton and the boys brought in plastic folding chairs to add more rows. Those filled up too. People started to stand. The empty spaces not filled in by flowers were slowly taken up. The locusts flitted between each other, crawled over the potted fields to check the names attached to the plants, devoured the food from the kitchen, and chirped their jokes and songs. All the while, Laurel remained at the front of the room with the body, letting the casket anchor her vague drifting as she greeted guests.

In high school, she had worked at the diner in town as hostess and cashier until she was old enough to wait tables. Standing there felt like that, like a job, like waiting on other people. In their own sweet time, they all came to her, jerking her close with sticky palms. She listened to the stories and tears that came from them with the same attention she had used when taking orders, bare and forced. She finally trained her ears hard to the soft music playing in the background. With the chorus of "Go Rest High," her anger slowed, and Laurel just felt surrounded by distance from everyone, living and dead, which altogether made her tired and lost, and as quiet as her father's corpse.

"Doesn't he look good," Sarah Richards said sadly, juggling a baby girl on her hip.

Laurel wondered why everyone said that. Not that it was ever really question because there was only one appropriate answer. Yes, he does. Heaven forbid he look as dead as he is. Heaven forbid that there was any honesty in decay.

"They did a real good job on him," the young mother added with a grunt, shifting the pink wrapped bundle of flesh to her other side. At the two women's feet, a little boy twisted the ends of Sarah's Wal-Mart dress around his knuckles. Tyler, his name is Tyler, Laurel said to herself, checking before any faux-pas were made. His third birthday was last month. She remembered because she lied to Sarah about not getting the invitation in the mail.

"Thank you," Laurel replied to the woman, but her eyes kept flicking down towards Tyler. She could feel him staring at her. Children were always staring at her. Part of her knew it was the way small people were, captivated by the new and the strange. They liked her long blonde hair, the spray of tiny brown spots across her face and arms, or the gold and silver rings she kept stacked in layers on each finger. Sometimes though, she thought maybe there was something else, if maybe they stared because they knew the way animals sensed fear. Perhaps it was just curiosity. She thought it felt like judgment.

"I still remember when we were small and your daddy coached Bitty Ball. You remember being on the Red Hornets?" Sarah sighed. "I loved playing for him. He never missed a game or practice. My younger brothers all had him as a coach after us and then your sister. I remember her being a little firecracker on his team. You remember that?" She did. Tyler started chewing on the hem in his hands. "I really thought he'd coach our kids one day. But I guess we take the future for granted."

"Hayden and Alyssa were both Hornets," Laurel corrected, returning her gaze upwards.

The other woman's face blanked, and then she pursed her lips, leaning in to whisper, "You know what I mean." Sarah continued at regular volume, "But, it's a shame. Your daddy will be missed. If you and Cal need anything, just let me and Mark know. These are the times to lean on friends."

"I know," Laurel said, feeling a tightness in her left jaw. Behind Sarah, the line of the bereaved was growing longer. All of them patiently waited for a better glimpse into the box, to shake Laurel's hand, to repeat the same tired comments and sympathies. She thought about excusing herself, wondering how many bathroom and smoke breaks she could take before it became obvious she was avoiding everyone. Last night, she got away with five, but she had Cal and the girls to take her place, even Nora had stepped in once or twice to hold the formation. Without help, she couldn't bring herself to abandon the post, to leave her father's body open to the plague of locusts. They wanted to eat him up, Laurel knew it, and she wouldn't give them the satisfaction.

Finally, though, Laurel heard a voice cut through the crowd that made a smile crease the lines on her face. She saw her husband barely past the front doors, actually in his suit and looking rather handsome despite the red tie that hung loose from his collar. She was so grateful to see him, the haphazard presentation didn't even bother her. Roger Williams had stopped Cal at the entrance and was gripping his hand, with the other propped on his shoulder. She met her husband's eyes. The crowd would keep him busy, but it was enough to know he was here now. He jerked his head to the right, gesturing to his side, and she saw the girls followed inches behind Cal, using him as a body shield from the guests who stood up from their seats, stopping their father for a handshake or a question. She felt relief looking over Hayden and Alyssa. They wore the dresses she had picked out, and she wondered how much screeching went on between

them and Cal to get them in clothes that didn't look sloppy or revealing like last night's ensembles of jeans and t-shirts. She didn't even entertain the idea they would have accepted the outfits for her sake, admittedly perhaps for Charlie. From day one, Pa Charlie had earned both fear and adoration from the girls. Laurel had them nearly their entire lives and managed to get apathy on the best days. But that was Charlie, he had no patience for children, never played with them, but she had never seen a child not fall immediately in love with him.

"Thank you again for coming," she said to Sarah. With her family arriving, she tried to move the woman and her children along, but her former classmate wasn't paying attention. Instead, she was remarkably silent with her head turned towards the front of the room. Laurel followed the line, noticing that a large portion of the visitors had begun staring as well, though not nearly as shamelessly as Sarah Richards with her bulging eyes and gaped mouth, ignoring the little boy soaking her dress in salvia and snot. Laurel glanced back and forth trying to determine what they were all watching from the corner of their eyes. It took a second to search the scene, but then she realized that Cal had not been trying to get her attention to his daughters but to someone else entirely.

"Oh my god, is that…?" Sarah started to ask before being interrupted.

"Juniper." Laurel sighed like there was a kick to her chest. "Yes, that's her."

Behind Cal and the girls, the young woman stood like a dark cloud, at the least because she was the only person in the building dressed in black. It was a beautiful dress with a wide neckline and short sleeves and poured over the slender girl like a rich, chocolate coating, stopping short of her knees. But it seemed so out of place, so chic and elegant combined with high heels and her copper-tone hair smoothed perfectly and pinned at the sides by gold clips that it made clear she belonged here even less than before. It was as though everything that had

propelled her from Three Forks had sifted to the surface during her absence, manifesting in her physical form in everything from the way she held her shoulders back, instead of hunched forward to hide her like when she was little, to the skill with which she strolled away from Laurel's daughters to sign the guestbook. Nora had never allowed her daughters to wear even the slightest arch or heel in fear for their feet and spines. Yet, June's ankles didn't even waver on the thin inches, as though they had molded to her feet. Nothing could topple her. And now, everyone could see it, they could see this exotic touch to her. The Queen of Sheba could have stepped in and garnered less abstract confusion for she was Biblically familiar.

June seemed oblivious to the way they watched her, and it was a testament to the awe-striking figure that no one approached her, perhaps out of shock, or more so out of uncertainty. They didn't see Charlie's youngest daughter; they saw a stranger.

Anymore, Laurel herself knew her sister only from pictures and postcards—at the top of the Empire State Building, with friends at the Eiffel Tower, on a boat in Venice, eating gelato in Florence, or recently, in Rome with Charlie. She read the Facebook posts about the schools and the internships, searching between the status updates for hints to the personal, to more about her sister than the paintings she trekked around the world to see. She got even less on the web chats that happened literally once for every blue moon. Barely, but Laurel could recognize her. But she couldn't have guaranteed it was June if it weren't for the eyes, sharp, blue and suddenly staring straight at her over the heads of everyone between them. The younger sister smiled at her, forced, but a smile nonetheless, and kept her gaze straight as she pushed her way through the locusts. Laurel felt the knot in her throat. They were Pap's eyes watching her.

When Laurel and her sister were little, Pap would tell them every day how they held the sky in their eyes, that it was the color of the fog at the highest point of the Appalachia right

where it met the clouds. Pap claimed that he wanted to take a piece of home with him to Vietnam, so he climbed for three days through the woods until he reached the top and he sat there until the sun rose, when the colors are always strongest. At first, he tried to capture the fog in his flask. But, if he opened the top to take a look, it escaped, clear and quick. "No point n' holdin' somethin' that beautiful where you cain't never see it," he would tell them every time, always clicking the lid of his Zippo lighter like a tune as he smoked away the tobacco that would eventually riddle his body with disease and kill him.

So, Pap said he grabbed the biggest handfuls he could, clutching so tight not even a wisp could escape, and he rubbed his eyes until the fog sunk into his eyes, there for the whole world to see. "And when you and the Junebug was born, I kissed each of yuns' eyes, breathin' a bit uh that fog onto 'em. That's where that blue comes from. You got a piece of Appalachia and the sky anywhere you go."

It may have taken a few years and science classes before Laurel found out it was just a story, but she let Pap keep telling it, all the way until he died. It was good story. She wondered if June could remember it or where her eyes came from. She was so young when Pap went, taking the story with him, too young to even know she was supposed to cry. Four years old, and she didn't spit a bit. Nora though had balled louder than everyone, not that Pap ever cared much for her. "Your momma is a loving woman," he used to say, "but she gives too dang much of it to a dead man. She's harder to navigate than them Commie minefields, and I'd rather lose a leg to one uh them there than a one of her blowups." To the adolescent Laurel, her mother's display was something kind, something to mimic out of respect to the dead. But not June. She had sat in Charlie's lap, both of them still and dry-eyed through the whole service. That was Laurel's first funeral, hers and June's both. It was twenty years ago, and she still missed Pap. He cursed and

spit tobacco too much and watching him on the chemo was like watching war play out on his body, but she missed him anyway.

"Juniper, look at you girl, so grown up," Sarah cooed as the girl made her way past some of the pallbearers who were lining up with Mr. Hutton to attach their matching rose boutonnières.

"Thank you, that tends to happen with time," June answered, the look she gave Sarah akin to one reserved for gutting a catfish. Her sister glanced at her, searching for a social cue. Laurel shrugged, leaning back against her father's casket. She was more concerned with taking in the image before her, letting herself accept that June was inches away. She could touch her. She could grab on and never let go, hold her down and keep her here forever, if she wanted. But at the moment, Laurel wasn't sure if she wanted to even hug her or not, or if she should.

"Where's Mom? I thought she was bringing you," Laurel asked.

"Said she had an errand. So, I called Cal."

"I bet you don't remember me," Sarah jumped back in. "But I was good friends with your sister in school. I'm Sarah Richards, well you probably remember me as a Bailey, that was my maiden name. This is Lindy," she said, waving the chubby baby's arm at June, "and my little man, Tyler." The boy cowered even farther into his mother's dress as she pushed him forwards to the new woman. "It's just so nice that you could travel all the way back for your family."

"You're right," June said after a pause. "I don't remember you."

Laurel watched the welcoming grin on Sarah's face get tighter. The strain in her skin made the wrinkles look harder, like cracked desert. Sarah wore too much foundation.

"Your sister and I were just talking about the Bitty Ball days, when your dad coached all of us. It's just such a shame he never got the chance to coach any of his grandkids, you know. But who would have thought he'd go so young."

"My nieces were on his team."

"Well, that's not really the same, is it?" Sarah said it with such sincerity there was no question to the unneeded pity she seemed to feel for them. Laurel bit her tongue again, but June's reaction was less demure or polite. Her sister narrowed her eyes on the other woman as she continued, "I'm sure he would have liked to have coached yours or Laurel's actual kids. He would have been a great grandpa. I know Tyler just loved seeing him at the Fire House."

"Sarah Bailey," June suddenly echoed, a dark, red lipped smile widening over her crooked canines. "You used to go out to the Ridge with Sissy, drove a Lincoln, right?"

"That's right. It was my brother's old car. Had to nearly flood the engine to ever get it started. Boy, I'd almost forgot that." Sarah laughed.

"Oh, I didn't forget."

"Juniper," Laurel said in a meager attempt to stop whatever lurked underneath those teeth, but her sister didn't hesitate.

"In fact, I remember that night on the Ridge you got so drunk on some cheap malt liquor you shit in your acid wash jeans. Got poison oak all over your hands and ass trying to clean it up with some leaves before anybody realized. Didn't work out too well, did it?"

"Juniper, what the hell?" Laurel hissed at her this time, grabbing her arm, jerking the laughing girl closer to her side.

"What? It's a funny story. Right, Sarah? Just something to laugh about all these years later? After all, you've got *actual* kids now. What does it matter?"

But Sarah wasn't laughing. A white sheen ran underneath her makeup. Some of the closer guests in line had stopped talking about the flower arrangements and were inauspiciously looking the mother up and down. Laurel felt a handful of washer weights drop through her chest. It felt wrong. Even when it was just a few faces, she knew the stares hurt. She had felt enough of them to know. June, however, seemed to be relishing her triumph.

"Of course, it was just a joke," Sarah trembled. "Well, it's time to get Lindy home for feeding before she gets fussy."

"You're not staying?"

"No, I…I don't think the kids would sit through it. And I'd hate for them to cause a ruckus. But I'll be thinking of you guys, and your father. I'm sure I'll see you later."

"That was mean," Laurel whispered to her sister as they both watched Sarah burn a path out the door with poor Tyler, perpetually clinging to her.

"It was deserved," she replied. "These people don't care what they say to each other. Why should I?"

"Because they're all here for us. Because we're better than that."

"No, you just let people walk all over you. You hated Sarah in high school. I can't imagine you like her any better now," she said, finally turning with Laurel back towards the waiting line. June took the place directly next to the casket, resting her hand at the corner. "Actual kids," she added quietly as George and Harriet Turner moved up. "What a twat."

True, Laurel disliked the woman for a multitude of reasons. They did not, however, vindicate her sister's humiliation. She wanted to ask what a "twat" was, but there were people waiting, and she had a pretty good idea already. It was such a bizarre reunion, which left Laurel somewhere between admiration for her sister and a distinct uneasiness. This was a new June.

One that she felt as lost navigating as Pap did with their mother. It did feel like a bomb at her back, in the guise of a girl in her little black dress and with no clue as to when the next explosive moment would occur. As June no longer lived here, her sister seemed blasé toward the concept of friendly fire.

Regardless, the two of them stood together. June stayed at her side, and she noticed that her sister didn't look down, either willfully unbothered or unshaken by their father's body. She also didn't smile, she didn't shake hands, and she didn't even pretend to know the people who came up despite most of them knowing her since infancy. Laurel felt like an intermediary, perhaps even a court announcer, rolling the names out with each new face, attempting to offer a connection.

"Ozella used to baby-sit us…

"Ralph was school superintendent…

"Bonnie, she's Pap's sister. You met her at his funeral."

Every time, June shrugged, nodded, and said "Thank you for coming." It was extremely mannered. The kind of manners that made her look rude. Laurel thought about pulling her aside, sending her off on an errand or putting her in her place, except her sister's cold reception made the stream of mourners easier to endure. They were more curious about the young Owens and her return. Charlie became regulated to a centerpiece, a reason to present themselves to his daughters. And when the answers to their questions were curt monosyllables, they stopped lingering, they stopped touching, and they stopped telling stories. At first, Laurel feared the repercussions, but then she heard the old women, Great Aunts Bonnie and Bethany, whisper a "poor things, poor things, taking it so hard," as they waddled back to their seats in the section reserved for family. There were more seats than they needed. After Pap left Appalachia, the

family had never been close, some falling out. So, the front row remained empty, waiting for Laure and June.

"How much longer before this thing gets started?" The line had begun to wane, and June fidgeted back and forth, scratching her nails along the edge of the casket. Everyone seemingly had their fill of staring down at the dead body. It was a sign that the ceremony should begin fairly soon, although their mother still hadn't arrived, and Nora was usually embarrassingly early to events.

"I don't know," Laurel replied. "What time is it?"

"No clue. There are no clocks," her sister observed. Laurel swept the room. It was a quick gaze, but it produced no time pieces. The walls had only flowers and cheap paintings, probably from the 80s. It seemed time had died here too.

"And I don't have a watch," she said. "I'll ask Cal. He's around here somewhere."

"It starts at noon, right?"

Laurel nodded, now searching for her husband instead of a clock. The girls sat in the back with a few friends, all of them playing on their phones. He had probably disappeared to find the new food trays or to find Mr. Hutton and the other pallbearers in the office, going over the steps one last time.

"So, don't worry about it. Forget I asked. It'll start when it starts."

"No, you're right. We should know. We're responsible."

"That's not really why I asked," June said, rolling her eyes. Laurel hated that. The girls did that to her all the time. It made her want to slap them and make their eyes stick that way. "I thought that, if there was time, we could take a break."

"Yeah, of course," she said, feeling a little less annoyed with her sister's suggestion. Instead, her concern kicked in. "Did you get to have breakfast? Are you hungry? There's a whole buffet in the kitchen or drinks if you want. Of if you just want to sit. I can't imagine those shoes are comfortable."

"No, I... Wait, why don't my shoes look comfortable?" her sister frowned, stretching around to look at her bent up leg to determine what she was missing.

"Well, I mean, they look like you could stab someone's eye out."

"Only if they were lying on the ground," June grinned, setting her foot back down. "I'm fine though. No food, no drink, no sitting. Actually, I wondered if you wanted to go outside and have a smoke."

"Juniper Mae," Laurel whispered, after her jaw jutted out hook as it dropped. She started jabbing her finger into her sister's arm, backing her towards the podium in the corner. "You are not a smoker."

"Technically."

"Daddy would kill you."

"Hello, pot. I'm kettle. And for the record, Daddy's not in a position to kill anyone." They both glanced down at the head cradled in white cushions next to them. No, he wasn't. "Look, I just want to go outside. Tell me you don't want to breathe some air that isn't fortified with salt and pollen."

Laurel couldn't think of any real reason to say "no."

"You can step outside. I'll stay here. Someone should anyway."

"What? Are you worried someone's going to steal the body?" June asked, lacing her fingers through Laurel's hand, and she started tugging as she twisted them both away from their

father. "I'm pretty sure there are plenty of witnesses. No one's waiting. Just come out with me, please."

It was a familiar face her sister wore now, the same treacherous grin she had when convincing Laurel to steal a butter knife from the kitchen so she could play French Revolution with her Barbie dolls. She was a hard force to deny, even as a child. She felt curious to see what June would do when given the things she asked for, which was why she had snuck the knife for her. Nora had bemoaned for weeks over the wasted money, vowing never to buy her daughter another toy if she was just going to behead them. Charlie had laughed and then built her a real miniature guillotine with some scrap wood from work and one of his shaving razors. The little girl never told either parent how she got the knife.

Laurel didn't follow blindly, but, as June clutched her hand, pulling her towards the doors, she didn't wrench away either. She kept her head down, fearing the curious stares as they broke past the rows of people, as though they were exiting the stage before the curtain closed. When they reached outside, it was like life coming back. After being buried inside the building, Laurel felt like a morning glory under the sun. She stepped out onto the rainbow heat wave over the black pavement and was about to take a cigarette from the pocket of her sweater jacket, but June didn't let go of her other hand.

"Not here," her sister said.

"Not here what?"

"There's still the little parking lot in the back right?"

"Well, yeah, but…" Laurel didn't finish because of the attempted ripping of her arm from the shoulder. "Jesus, June, what does it matter?"

"I want privacy."

Laurel gave up the argument in favor of her sister's strange predilections, letting June lead her to the back of the funeral home. It was the side that faced the little used railroad tracks, a stone's throw away from the Lion's Club building and the ruins of the old Bell's Tavern. The parking area was too small for the hearse, which was out front in the large lot, prepped and ready for transport. There was space enough for maybe four cars, usually Mr. Hutton's and any handicap vehicles. Blocked in by picket fences, the gargantuan air conditioning unit, and a dumpster full of old flowers and green Styrofoam; it was certainly private though far from picturesque.

"I'm not giving you one of my cigarettes," Laurel said, assuming this was satisfactory, and crouched down on one of the concrete steps to the deliveries door.

"Don't need it anyway," her sister replied, smoothing the ends of her dress under before she took a seat on the step below.

"Good, I'm glad you're not smoking. Our family history does not bode well for smokers." Laurel flicked open her purple Zippo, a gift from Cal last Christmas.

When she finished with it, she bounced the metal lighter in her palm for a moment. It was new and pretty with the date of her and Cal's anniversary, but it felt like a replacement. The plastic Bic lighters never reminded her that she was supposed to have Pap's old Zippo. After his funeral, the family had scoured the house searching for the thing. It was supposed to go to her; she was the oldest. But, despite that Pap never let it stray any farther from his pocket than the closest table, the flint lighter never turned up. Charlie had promised to find it for her one day. She used to think he hid it in order to discourage her from smoking. To spite him and to get the lighter anyway, Laurel had kept smoking until she honestly couldn't stop. But it didn't help her get it back. Running her fingers over her anniversary, she recalled the engraving on Pap's. He

would let her hold it as he told stories, but only if Nora wasn't around. She thought it was inappropriate for children with its skull and quote: "When I die I'll go to Heaven, cause I've spent my time in Hell."

"Can I borrow the lighter?"

"You aren't going to set fire to the dumpster, are you?" Laurel asked, clamping her fingers around it before June could pinch it.

"No," June said in a way that made Laurel worry that she had given a dangerous idea. "I want it for this," she added, pulling a long, brown roll from her tiny clutch purse.

"A cigar, seriously?"

"This is not a cigar. It's a gift. From Drury."

Laurel's cigarette stopped midway to her mouth.

"What are you doing seeing Drury?" she asked, and then backtracked before June could sense the panic. "I mean, I wouldn't think you would remember him anyway. He stopped coming around when you were still little. Besides…" Laurel flashed around, checking for any bystanders or neighbors. "He's a drug dealer. He's not worth your time."

"You know, that's a really mean thing to say about a friend of our family."

"He stopped being a friend of the family a long time ago."

"No, he didn't." The ease at which her sister offered this correction, tempted Laurel to throw something, maybe even her lighter. She had a habit of throwing things because of Drury. It shouldn't rile her. She knew it shouldn't because it wasn't possible for June to know that history. But still, Drury brought out a feeling of guilt in her, wrenching and toxic like the weed in her sister's hand.

When she was young, Laurel knew Drury like an uncle, an ever present figure in her childhood, her father and grandfather's best friend. Drury had showed up to every bitty ball game she played in, sitting behind Charlie on the team bench. She remembered the cabin too where Charlie and Drury spent summer afternoons on the porch and let her hunt Easter eggs in the woods each year. She had loved Drury like family, and now he was a man who knew he wasn't welcome, or he would have brought the condolences to the funeral home. With her father's death, Laurel felt guilt and regret about a lot of things, and Drury was one of them that she didn't want to think about today.

"Don't worry though," June continued. "He knows he's not welcome. So he won't be crashing the party today." Sarcasm seemed to be a second language for June. "Lord knows it's going to be a real shindig. Well, at least it's about to be," she said, bringing the blunt to her deep, lipstick red lips.

"You have officially lost your ever-lovin' mind," Laurel declared, trying to distract the gnawing feeling in her own stomach. She swiped at the air trying to grab the illicit substance from her sister, but June tucked it around her back. They had regressed into a bizarre and childish game of keep away. "There is no reason you should be hanging around Drury."

"Oh, so says the former pot head," June scoffed at her, using one hand to smack away Laurel's reaching.

"Excuse me?" Laurel felt the freckles flame up across her face, and she slouched back from her sister.

"You heard me. I skipped a grade for Christ's sake," June said with a sigh, letting her head loll backwards towards to the sky. "Why do you people think I was so stupid I couldn't

figure things out? You do realize I was there *with you* for most of those nights on the Ridge? And Mom only thought I was asleep before she would tear into you."

"Yeah, but..." she trailed off. There was no "but". Laurel felt rather stupid that June had her. Back then, she suffered from a common adolescent delusion that if she raged out like the grunge music she loved, it would hurt her parents more than it would her. Those were the dark days, the one before the divorce, before Cal got wrapped up in her life like a fresh thread pulling it all together. That was when she discovered Drury's business side as well, like the rest of the delinquents around town and at the Ridge. She wanted to be anywhere but home, sometimes anywhere but her own head too. But all she really wanted was to save June from the same realizations she had about Nora and Charlie, from that moment when parents become humans and the only person they have more trouble fixing than you is themselves.

It worried her about what else June might know. But if she knew her sister like she used it, she wouldn't tell her anyway.

"It doesn't seem right. It's Charlie's funeral."

"Yeah, it's a funeral," June said. "Daddy is fucking dead. Can you think of a better excuse?"

"Language," Laurel said reflexively like she was talking to one of the girls instead of a grown woman. "Why do you even want to do this? When have you ever smoked?"

"Amsterdam," she replied stoically, as if this was something Laurel should already know. She did not have time to keep up with all of her sister's map pins. "And maybe some other times before that," she whispered before adding the rest more loudly. "Come on. I've just spent days traveling from London to this god forsaken hole and you look like you've been living in a hole. Picasso's blue period had more color than you."

"I don't know what that means, Juniper." She didn't think it wasn't a compliment.

"It means that we're about to sit through a memorial to our father in a room full of self-righteous know-it-alls and gossipmongers. Frankly, clarity of the moment is not the first thing I'm going for."

As with most arguments with her sister, fighting June now was beginning to feel pointless. Laurel was about to unclasp her hand, when it occurred to her that she had a bargaining chip. She jerked the lighter up to her shoulder protectively. "Who's Reed?"

"No one," June said without the slightest flinch, except her eyes stopped looking directly at Laurel.

"He came here today. I think he was looking for you," she said, flipping the Zippo between her fingers.

"That's strange since I barely know him."

"I thought he was no one."

"We graduated together. That doesn't make him someone to me."

"Is anyone someone to you?" Laurel asked, not fishing so much as just curious.

"No, actually. I don't really like people."

"That sounds very lonely."

"I think you're confusing you with me."

"So, you're not lonely?" There was no immediate answer, just a quiet, frustrated groan. Instead of reaching for the lighter, June stretched out her hand with the brown cigarillo, waving it under Laurel's face.

"Ask me again, after we bury our dad," she said.

Laurel snatched it from her sister. Her immediate thought was a debate between crushing the drugs or throwing them in the dumpster. Then she held it under her nose, the smell pungent sweet. For some reason, it reminded her of Charlie, reminiscent of the sawdust he would carry home in his hair. It was a singular scent that cut through her clogged sinuses.

"Fuck it," she said as the familiar click and strike of her lighter echoed in the contained lot.

"Language, Laurel Lee," her sister mocked.

"Shut up, you little brat," she said, her voice muffled, holding in the hit. It cut at her throat much harder than her cigarettes. She gave a haggard cough and handed it back to June, who sucked it down before sputtering like a tired lawnmower. Laurel couldn't help it. She laughed.

"Because you're such a pro," her sister scratched out, returning the blunt.

Laurel shrugged, realizing that for the first time in days she was really smiling. They continued drawing down, passing it back and forth a couple times between hard coughs that left her feeling light headed and happily detached from her own neck. Her sister stretched out along the steps, kicking off her strappy heels and bracing back on her elbows. It made her look young again, closer to the girl Laurel remembered, the one who would run with her anywhere. They would skip school together more often than they would go and the whole day was free for them. She would drive around town until the gas got low or they would spend the day wandering through the aisles at the local Wal-Mart, playing with the toys and stealing candy from the bags. Strangers would mistake June for her daughter, so they were never questioned, never bothered.

"I missed you," she said, interrupting the gradual silence that had fallen as the high overtook them.

"I know," June replied and leaned her head against Laurel's arm.

The exchanges stopped again as they grew close to the end of the cigarillo. Time had slowed once more, but now it was a welcome relief. The world felt fuzzy and edges softer, like in old black and white movies where people glowed in the close-ups. Laurel had reached a point that she could almost forget where they were, or why. Almost, until Cal found them.

They both heard the clips of hard soles on the concrete getting louder like their panicked hearts. Immediately, the two of them scrambled up, June tripping as her toes tangled back into her shoes. Laurel searched for a safe place to abandon the butt, finally tossing it into the gravel behind the air conditioner as the sister spun to face the intruding presence.

"There you are," Cal said. "We've been looking everywhere for..." Her husband paused, embracing the sight in front of him. Laurel felt like a pair of deer caught in his Ford headlights. His nose twitched. "What's that smell?" he asked like it was a question, but she knew he was well aware of the answer.

Instantly, June buckled over with a series of unrepentant giggles.

"Don't be mad," Laurel blurted out, tugging on her sister's arm to keep her from crouching all the way back down to the ground.

"Where did...how...?" Cal trailed off, shaking his head. "Forget it. I don't want to know," he said and pulled a pack of cinnamon gum from his suit pocket. "This is all I got." He slid out a couple of silver wrappers and held them out to Laurel and her sister, who tried to compose herself. They started chewing quickly.

"How do we look?"

"Like a couple of red-eyed beasts," he said, brushing a few blonde strands from Laurel's face. "But fine for the occasion. Just keep the gum for a while. How do you feel?"

"Not bad, actually," Laurel told him, trying to repress a shameful smile. She wasn't lying, the knots in her body felt loose all over. Truth be, she was about one chuckle away from joining her sister's rampaging laughter. It was horrifyingly ridiculous that she felt like a teenager caught.

"Good, you hold onto to that. Cause your mother is finally here."

"Oh, Jesus," June groaned, popping a bubble over her faded lipstick.

"Why did you say it like that?" Laurel asked him, her voice pitch higher than normal.

"Your mother decided to bring a friend."

"Who? Who did she bring, Cal?" Her husband wouldn't look at her.

"How about we just get you guys inside? Good to go or do you need another minute?" Once again, he paused. "June, can you even walk?"

The little Owens cracked her neck and gave her shoulders a roll and shake before clapping her hands. She stood straight and smiled, the red gum mashed inside her teeth.

"Yeah, let's do this thing."

"Cal," Laurel said, pulling on her husband. She didn't want to go in unprepared. She didn't want to go in period and that was probably the problem. It baffled her how her brain could flicker so fast between mixed and paranoid emotions but felt too slow to absorb the realistic possibilities of her mother's guest.

"Trust me, you want to see her first." He kissed her forehead and wrapped an arm around her waist, guiding her back towards the front doors and the waiting congregation inside. June trekked a few steps behind them. The tick tack of her heels was less rhythmic but didn't lag behind. Laurel wasn't sure if the twisting in her stomach was nerves or a high-induced hunger.

As they rounded the long wall to the entrance, another screw hit her gut.

"Charlie Owens is not dead!" an old man screamed as he stumbled away from the small porch down between the lines of parked cars. A minor crowd was watching along the sides, obviously too scared actually to go up to Gerald "Jerry" Weatherbee. Only one middle-aged man followed close to him, calling at him. "Dad, stop it. Dad!"

"Charlie boy is not dead," he repeated just as loudly, swinging his arms wildly each time his son Samuel attempted to grab him. He gave Sam a good shove into another car, sending the alarms screeching and giving himself some distance as his son climbed back up. Jerry may have been old, but he was still a solid figure to try to take down.

For thirty some odd years, before Charlie was elected, the job of Three Forks Fire Chief had belonged to Jerry Weatherbee. He had handpicked and trained Charlie once he was tired of dreaming of dead bodies and burnt homes. "It's not because I'm too old," he had claimed before anyone had even asked. And everyone believed him, after all, Jerry had kept his job in the factory over in Horse Cave. He worked those twelve hour shifts until last year. He wouldn't have stopped at all except he started having problems remembering things. They were very small things at first, his parking spot or a button on the machines. But then they turned into big things, like what day it was or that his wife Cheryl had died five years back. The diagnosis had come in the fall, Alzheimer's.

"This isn't happening," Laurel whispered, dumbfounded.

"Stay put," Cal said, letting go of her to help Sam. The two men took a slow pace around the other cars toward Jerry, who was trying to navigate his way across the large, packed lot.

"I'm sorry, Cal. I'm so sorry." Laurel heard Sam say. "I thought we were having a good day. He said he wanted to come."

"I wanted to come when I thought the bastard was dead," Jerry yelled across the hood of Merle Ballard's Jeep Cherokee. "But he's not dead! I saw him. Saw him 'fore we even went in. Right there!" the old chief pointed to the far side of the cars, towards the crossing guard of the railroad tracks down the road. "Just watching and young as the day I met him. I'm not crazy today. I'm telling you, I saw Charlie Owens living like you and me."

"This is...this is..." Laurel murmured over and over, searching for the proper words to encompass a poor old man seeing a ghost that wasn't there. Or worse, that maybe was there. What if Charlie was still watching everything? She curled the ends of her hair around her fingers, so tightly the tips went red. It was a bad habit she'd broken years ago, or so she thought.

"I'm thirsty," June stated from behind, smacking her tongue in her mouth. "Are you thirsty?"

Her sister didn't wait for an answer. She had already taken off, weaving through the spectators towards the doors before Laurel got the chance to turn around. Quickly, she weighed the options of abandoning her husband and the chaotic scene outside to the danger of letting June have free reign in the building. Laurel followed her sister.

The venture forward required pacifying the crowd, which grabbed at her hands and arms like living vines, with brief smiles and nods or assuring them Cal and Sam had the situation under control. She watched the back of June's auburn hair disappear between the McMurtry brothers as they and others sealed up the path of the doorway trying unsuccessfully to get a better view of Jerry Weatherbee.

"Excuse me," she murmured, sucking in her gut to squeeze inside. She made her way through the foyer, looking around the guestbook table for June, who had disappeared despite the

somewhat small spaces. "Juniper," Laurel called. She heard her own name called back, but not by her sister.

Nora Reynolds, formerly Owens, had indeed arrived, along with her current husband, Ray and Laurel's other grandparents, the only ones still living. They sat in the second row of the family section, catching up with Pap's family. Neither side had seen each other since their relative relatives had divorced. Nora though stood with a man in a tan suit jacket and khakis, the lines of his white undershirt showing through his even thinner white button down. He held a black Bible at his side. Laurel searched for the name she knew that she knew but came up blank. The only thing she could remember about him was that she'd seen him preach at White Oak Baptist on one of the rare visits that kept Nora from calling every Sunday morning. She didn't understand why he was here, but she knew she was about to find out. Her mother waved and called her name again.

She couldn't have told anyone how she moved to greet them, as moments started skipping from her memory, a familiar side effect of being high that she had forgotten about. Without intervention, thinking and moving seem controlled by two separate forces. Willing herself not to sway, Laurel stood to meet them in the aisle, staring at a marker in the man's Bible made by Charlie's funeral program. His name and the top of his balding head poked out above the golden edges of the book.

"Brother Freddie, you remember my eldest," Nora said, placing a hand on her back, a seemingly comforting gesture that instead served to push Laurel closer to the man, who held out his free hand. Her elbow popped with his handshake.

"I'm so sorry for your loss. We're all praying for you and your family," he said, his palms unbearably soft and sticky. His hands felt like those of a fat child. Laurel thought of Charlie's hands. They were like sandpaper, always full of splinters and distinct with burn scars.

"Thank you for coming," Laurel repeated like she had for the past few days, letting go of his hand.

"I'm happy to be here. And if there is anything you would like, a special scripture or if the Lord leads you to a testimony, I would be happy to allow you that before my sermon."

"What?" she asked, stuck between shock and surety that it was some kind of joke.

"It's okay," Nora said, gently unwinding Laurel's fingers from her twisted hair. She hadn't realized she was doing it again. "I already spoke to Mr. Hutton. He said that time was no issue, and he could delay the procession to the cemetery if we wanted Brother Freddie to preach."

"But we don't," Laurel slipped out. "Sorry," she said to the preacher after a pause. Like June before, she clacked her tongue against the roof of her mouth, fighting the dry cotton touch and her own nerves. "Charlie wasn't very religious."

"This isn't for Charlie," Nora said softly. "Funerals are for the living. You know Heather Brown got saved during the service at her grandmother's funeral a few years ago. There are lost souls everywhere, Laurel Lee. Would you really deny them the chance to hear the word of God?"

Laurel's mother was now a small woman, smaller every time she saw her as though gravity was taking its toll, and the years had begun to show on the soft skin of her face with crinkles in grass thin streaks around the eyes and on the stray gray hairs that caught the light riding through her short, black waves. Laurel imagined that to most people her mother was unimposing, a sweet, Southern woman who read the Bible and quilted in her spare time. Some

days she was, except for when the small woman had the fire of avenging angels in her belly, wide from childbirth and home-cooking. Nora always felt swift and dangerous to Laurel. People who believed the omnipotent heavens were on their side usually did, which was why she began to nod.

"Whatever. Okay," Laurel whispered.

"Okay, what?" June suddenly asked, her voice mumbled as she chewed on a piece of fried chicken. Crumbs were fixed in the corners of her lips, and the half eaten leg was on a plate that rested on her clutch purse like a tray. She also came up carrying two mini plastic cups of water in her other hand. She held them out to Laurel, who took one. It wasn't much, but she chugged it down anyway.

"This is the baby of the family, Juniper," Nora practically cooed while attempting to take the plate away so her youngest daughter could shake hands as well. But June held fast, staring skeptically at both the man and the random hand in front of her.

"Who are you?"

"This is Brother Freddie. He's the preacher out at White Oak."

"It's a pleasure to meet you," he said, gradually letting his gesture drop with minimal awkwardness. "Your mother talks about you all the time. We've prayed for your safe travels. Perhaps now that you're home, we can expect you next Sunday."

"I doubt it," June delivered with a short, sarcastic smile before she kicked her chin at Laurel and asked, "What's going on?"

"Brother Freddie is going to be kind enough to give a sermon for the service," Nora answered instead.

Laurel watched her sister's throat bulge as she swallowed the mouthful of food.

"No," she said as though there had been a question.

"Juniper Mae," Nora began, but June quickly repeated the same, unyielding "no" and finished her cup of water. Laurel clutched her own so hard the clear, plastic went white with cracks. "Listen here, young lady..."

"Are you dead?" her sister interrupted by asking their mother.

"Well, I never..."

"You're not. When you're dead, we will let the preacher have all afternoon. But you're not the one who is dead today. Am I not making this clear?" she seemed to ask with genuine concern, looking between Laurel and the preacher, who was looking increasingly uncomfortable. Laurel would have felt bad for him, but she wasn't sure it wasn't about to get worse yet.

"Brother Freddie is doing us a favor by being here," Nora said, her voice tight and even. Laurel recognized the tone, the one where public circumstances were keeping her mother in control. If June was a few years younger and this wasn't a funeral home, she imagined Nora would have gone outside to get a switch, one of her primary threats while her daughters were growing up.

"Excuse me." June turned to the preacher. "Did you know my father?"

"We're all brothers and sisters in the eyes of God," he seemed to recite.

"You could have just said, No. Like I am. No. If you aren't happy with this decision, you are more than welcome to leave, Mum." It wasn't even mean. June didn't raise her voice at Nora, and she didn't sound angry, even though their mother was clearly about as happy as if she'd been thrown in the ground six feet down herself. Laurel waited for it, for Nora to yell or to cry, to play some card like June's consistent absence or the stronghold of what would Jesus think. Her face

swelled up, red and tense. But nothing happened. Only Mr. Hutton came behind them, placing a hand on a shoulder of both Laurel and June.

"It's time," the director said.

All the sound emptied out around Laurel until she was left with only her heartbeat in the depths of her ears. Mr. Hutton continued to speak, but the pounding drowned him out. She followed June and his guiding touch as he led them to their seats. Her sister tossed her plate and cup under the chair, but Laurel held onto her crumpled piece, oblivious to the clicking of her rings against the plastic. Nora and the preacher took their seats directly behind. The argument was apparently over. Her sister's win still inexplicable.

The room grew still as people settled into their final places. Children stopped running and conversations ceased. Laurel craned around to watch for her husband and saw the flutter of tissues being prepared, the bored eyes watching the ceiling, late-comers posting themselves against the walls. Finally, Cal came back in, rushing to his seat at the head of the pallbearers. Across the aisle, he mouthed to her, "I love you." She mouthed it back, and, with a deep breath, she made herself face ahead to her father's casket.

With a wave from Mr. Hutton, the McMurtry brothers and Lonnie Harlow headed up front, carrying their instruments: two guitars and a fiddle. It took a few moments to tune and a couple nervous coughs for them to start. The group had played fire house dinners and Christmas fundraisers, but this was their first funeral. They started with Laurel's request. The opening chords brought her back home.

"Oh, the rain is slowly fallin' and my heart is so sore," Lonnie's husky, country voice began. There was a slight hitch, which evened out after a few bars, and Lonnie started to sound like Hank to her. "Six more miles and leave my darlin', never on this earth to meet no more."

Charlie never talked about what he wanted at his funeral, which was normal. It wasn't something Laurel ever brought up herself. She figured it was human to ignore the only guarantee in life. The only thing her dad had left was the insurance policy to cover the costs, whatever they may be. It had all been guesswork, pretending to know well enough to make decisions for him. Most of the decor was a joke, the coffin, the flowers, the picture board and the quotes in the program, even the placard at Bell Cemetery that would fill in until Laurel could get a tombstone ordered. All just fillers because they seemed like things Laurel was supposed to arrange for him. In truth, there were only two things she felt right about, things that Charlie had made clear. The plot had been decided years ago when he bought it right after Pap died. He wanted to go in right next to Pap and Grandmother Undine. The other was a more recent comment he'd made not long after he wanted to burn Laurel's yard.

"Flowers have a point," she had argued, pulling away her hand from his a little out of spite. "They're symbolic, they express things like love and remembrance. That's why I put the peonies at Pap's tombstone. Figures the only plants I get to live are where the dead are," she griped, taking another sip of moonshine and staring at the black beyond the porch.

"They're just pretty weeds," Charlie joked. "I don't know why you're all tore up about them."

"Fine. No flowers for you. See if I plant anything on your grave then," Laurel teased, the way people do when they can't grasp the truth they say.

"I don't need flowers or anything fancy. You can toss me in that hole as soon as I get cold. All you need to send me off is a stone and a song."

"Which one's that?" she asked.

"Pap's song," he said. It was left at that since they didn't talk about Pap much. Charlie never quite got over the idea of his father's death. But her own father didn't need to explain any more. Laurel had known exactly what song because the only thing Pap loved more than his lighter and his smokes was his Hank Williams. He hated that "hippie-shit music," preferring old country singers. But they had played only one Hank song at Pap's funeral, just as they closed him up for the last time and carried him out.

"Oh, I hear the train a-comin', bringin' my darlin' back home. Six more miles to the graveyard and I'll be left here alone," Lonnie kept singing.

Laurel started to hear more than the song however. It was the sound of sorrow, the welling up of chests and constant sniffles. It was crying, a whole herd of tears in sharp contrast to the moments ago of happy chatter. She glanced back to see the rows of pink flushed faces. Even the grown men weren't exempt, holding their hands up to their moustachés to partially hide their grief. The sound of the salt floods and the struggled breathing made her face feel warm as well. The swell was contagious like any mob emotion. She rolled her lips over her teeth as her vision started to blur further while watching the McMurtry brothers' quick fingers on their strings, Tom on the guitar and Robbie on the fiddle.

"Don't," June whispered to Laurel, grabbing her hand and squeezing it so tightly the pain distracted her.

"Why not?" she asked, looking at her sister, who sat as stoic as she did when a child at Pap's funeral. Her eyes were red but as dry as Laurel's mouth still felt.

"Because there's no point," June said. She sounded like Charlie.

"Fine. No crying. I can do that," Laurel said, licking her lips. She took a few long breaths and blinked her eyes until the burning stopped. She felt better, calmer. It also stopped bothering her the way Nora was wheezing at their back, the loudest mourner as always.

When the song ended, Laurel thought she was prepared for the rest. Charlie was dead, and people were going to speak about him and cry over him and never really know him like she did. Even she and June knew two very different men, and she wasn't angry about that right now. Instead, she knew that despite the past, she was going to miss him. She was going to miss Charlie like she missed Pap, in imperfect forms.

As the last note faded out, there was a moment of clarity, one soothed by the song and the rolling calm of her buzz. Laurel had her sister's hand holding her together, and for the time, grief seemed bearable and natural. She was ready to bury her father, but then in the brief seconds as the men gathered their instruments a sharp, unnatural whistle broke through the quiet.

While most of the crowd searched in wonder for the sound, pausing from the serenity of mourning, the pallbearers, the musicians, and other men scatted throughout the seats reached for their sides, attempting to deaden the noise but a woman's voice echoed in unison from all of their pagers. Laurel wasn't surprised they weren't off.

"Attention Three Forks. Uncontrolled hay fire at 615 Bell Haven Road. Immediate service is requested."

Bell Haven was the road behind the cemetery. Laurel realized they would probably be able to see the smoke from the burial site. Cal was half off his seat out of habit when he looked at his wife, slightly panicked. The other pallbearers glanced around confused, unsure whether to stay or go. Even the firemen guests didn't move immediately. Everyone else paused their

sobbing just long enough to whisper about their confusion, except June, who squeezed her hand again.

"Go," Laurel told her husband. "All of you, go."

In a hustle, the volunteers left, and Cal was already responding to the dispatcher before they were completely out. With the pallbearers gone, Laurel and June were left sitting in solitude from the rest of the mourners, just a few feet away from their father. Laurel wasn't sure of its exact weight, but she knew caskets weren't the lightest things in the world. What was the protocol here? How did one find back-up pallbearers? What were the requirements? And frankly, what was the point of basically having special lifters? Did it matter?

Once more, Laurel couldn't help it. That's what she would tell herself later and anyone else who asked. She wouldn't mention still being high off her ass. She wouldn't tell anyone that the sudden question of who would carry dead Charlie to the car was the most hilarious moment of her life. Instead, Laurel Owens would just say she couldn't help the range of emotions that caused her to laugh at her father's funeral.

It was a soft giggle at first, easily mistakable for crying, until June checked her face, ready to call her out again Laurel was sure. She tried to hold it in, skate by and hope they all thought it was crying. But her sister's gradual smile of realization, followed by a similar failingly, suppressed giggle, made it worse. Together, their sputtering escalated. In a few moments, both Owens sisters were hunched over, laughing wildly as Laurel's stomach started to hurt.

"Girls, stop it! Girls!" Nora hissed at them quietly, smacking at their backs to simultaneously get their attention and perhaps also to shock them back to normal. It didn't work.

Every time she hit them, they laughed harder. "Stop it! Show your daddy some respect. What are people going to say?"

Personally, Laurel didn't care this time. But, between gasps for air and Mr. Hutton's attempt to steer the service back on track by waving Stella Warren, the local librarian and a former classmate of Charlie's, to do the official eulogy, she did overhear Great Aunts Bonnie and Bethany in a row back.

"Look at the poor things," Bonnie loudly whispered to the half deaf Bethany. "Plum mad with grief." The other woman murmured in agreement.

But the sisters just laughed. They laughed until they cried.

And the Stone

There were other, fancier gravestones in Bell Cemetery than those at the head of the Owens' plots. The Bell family, owners of the old tavern which had burned long ago, resided in mausoleums near the back of the cemetery with cast iron doors where carved ivy and roses decorated the metal. Some of the dead had obelisks towering like the trees around the land. Monuments dark like polished coal dotted the ground, as well those with intricate images of rolling farms, prized cars, or football games etched onto the back. As each memorial differed in size and color, all the same their identities were preserved, not just by name. They were beloved sisters, brothers, sons, daughters, mothers, fathers, wives, and husbands.

The gravestone for Earl Frank Owens, born 1939, died 1995, shared with Undine Morgan Owens, died 1965. It was a simple chalky marble stone, a traditional arch over the middle, which connected the husband and wife, linked weddings rings between their names. Thirty years without her, five with her, and Earl Frank was still buried next to his only wife. So dedicated to her that he'd purchased the duel gravestone the same month of Undine's death, leaving his own final date blank. It had also been cheaper that way. Earl Frank, beloved friend, brother, father, and husband.

No stone had been placed for Charlie Owens yet. In the shadow of his father's gravestone, a bronze colored placard had been hastily jammed into the grass at the head of his freshly dug hole. It listed just his name and the years of birth and death. He wasn't beloved yet. His identity not quite cemented.

Cal and the Fire

Calvin Harper was not originally from Three Forks. He grew up two counties over in Sonora with a single mom who worked multiple waitress jobs and a telemarketing gig to get him through school. After that, he didn't really belong to any place. Once he had his diploma, he went to work as a truck driver, which kept him on the road, always between exits. By the time he thought about quitting, claiming a somewhere that felt like home, he had a wife and kid who depended on his income. Cal just wished he'd realized sooner where most of the money was actually going. Or maybe not, because then things might have gone differently. He might not have met Laurel. And, despite a long stretch of difficult, that included a divorce, overdue bills, custody hearings, and more career changes than a normal man should have, at forty-five years old he was satisfied with the place his life had reached.

Cal held onto that thought he held onto as he peeled off the layers of his nice suit, throwing them without care into the open locker. The pink carnation boutonniere crumbled underneath his fresh shined shoes. But there was no time to salvage it, or to keep anything in its crisp, clean form. Besides, chances were no one was coming back in time to be pallbearer, probably not even for the burial. The suit didn't matter because, regardless, he was going to miss his best friend's funeral.

But that was the job, even though it didn't pay. Charlie had warned him of that years ago during his first tour of the Three Forks Fire Department.

"This is not something you do for compensation, monetary or spiritual. People don't always say thank you either," Charlie had said as Cal weaved around the trucks, following him through the garage, past storage and the basic wood shelves along the walls that served as their

lockers. "You're giving your time and risking your life because you want to, for no other reason than the fact you live here and no one else is gonna do it. So, are you sure?"

"Yes sir," he had answered immediately as they stopped.

"You've married my daughter, Cal. You don't have to call me sir, anymore." Charlie had smiled and then clapped a hand against one of the wood dividers. Hanging inside was a set of gear and a name already painted on the top beam: C. Harper, parallel to the next locker which was C. Owens, Chief. With a laugh and a slap on the back, Charlie continued, "well, let's see how fast you can suit up. And try not to hurt yourself."

Nearly two decades later, Cal pulled up the yellow fire-retardant pants from their fold at the bottom of the shelf, sliding on the red suspenders over his white undershirt, all like it was putting on a second skin. He'd become as quick as Charlie. He glanced down at the row of other men, rustling into their gear. The rookie Andrew still struggled to get out of his shoes and into his boots, which hadn't been properly set up from the last run. The one place he didn't glance was to his left, where the helmet and jacket under C. Owens was missing.

"What's the word on Winston?" Cal asked the guys at his side.

Gary Jones shrugged into his turnout gear. "Sheila was at the service. Said he was still down with the flu." The other man gave a half-hearted smile. "Guess that makes this your show."

"Do you…" Cal started to whisper back to him.

"Nope."

"You've been doing this longer."

"And Charlie made *you* department number three."

Both men paused, and Gary moved in closer as he pulled on his helmet.

"I get it. This is our first real run without Charlie. No Chief. No Assistant Chief. But someone has to be charge and you might as well get used to it."

"What's that supposed to mean?"

The older fireman didn't answer. Instead he yelled out towards the rest of the garage. "Harris, you're with me on pump 24. Cal's orders," he added, turning back this time with a full, shit eating smile.

There was no opportunity to object as the two men rushed to the truck, leaving Cal to swallow down the knots in his jaws. He pulled down his helmet from the shelf with a grunting sigh and called out to the rest of the crew.

"Nelson, on tanker 23. Carter, John, Michael and Doug, ya'll are with him. And Andrew..." The boy nearly snapped his neck off as he jerked up, his eyes wide and shaky. Only two months ago, he had finished his initial training. The kid hadn't even faced his first fire, much less encountered a hay fire. Cal wanted to keep him close. "You're with me."

"Yes, sir," he mumbled, still half-dressed and grabbing at the rest of his gear to follow the senior officer.

The pair of them jumped into the truck as the aluminum doors rolled up and away. Cal was at the wheel. He strapped his tank on in the seat with Andrew trying to mimic. Rather than wait, Cal flipped on the siren, the lights swirling and refracting off the white concrete walls before they exited the department, peeling out past the flag pole and onto the empty small town road. Andrew clutched the side of the door.

"Hey, just breathe," he said to the boy, as he reached for the radio. "Attention dispatch, Three Forks brush 22 on route to hay fire at 615 Bell Haven Road."

"Be advised, we have reports of ten bales on fire, approaching nearby barn structure," a female voice replied.

"Go ahead and knock out North Ballard for assistance," Cal requested.

"Is ten bales a lot?" Andrew asked.

"It's not small. But it could be worse," he said. "The problem isn't the amount. The problem is that hay always wins." That was something Charlie used to tell him.

"How do you mean? So, what do we do out there?"

"You'll see."

At least once a year, more so in the last few as the drought took its toll, a field of hay would catch fire. Square bales had a tendency to spontaneously combust, no outside force or drought needed. But fighting those fires was a whole different beast. When Cal started on the department, he was warmed up on house and trailer fires, a few exploded cars. The point was always to stop those incidents and to kill the flames. He'd gone at his first hay fire out in Billy Morgan's field with the same gusto, as though it was something to defeat. Charlie had told him that he was wasting his energy.

"Once it starts, you have to let it burn. There's no putting it out," Charlie had said, pulling him aside from the smoke and hoses. "We can get it to burn out quicker. We can save the rest from being touched. We can control the damage. But we can't stop it. This kind of fire wins. Pick the right battle."

Cal learned more from Charlie than from most of his training sessions.

About a hundred yards away, Three Forks' only police cruiser sat in the middle of the road, just in front of Hutton Funeral Home. Officer Woody's own blue lights were flashing as he stood along the yellow lines, directing traffic while waiting for the procession to start. He

stopped some of the oncoming cars and waved the brush truck through, along with the two others that followed right behind.

Part of Cal wanted to slow down, to see if the crowds were coming out, if it wouldn't be long before the hearse and its line of cars would be heading down the same curvy roads by Bell Cemetery. But time wasn't something to waste on a run. If he knew the address like he thought, they would be in the field just behind the Baptist church. Not much more than trees would be separating the fire and the gravesite.

"It sucks we had to leave," Andrew commented. "Do you think Laurel and June are alright?"

"I'm not too worried. Those girls know how to take care of themselves. It takes a lot to knock them down," Cal replied, twisting the wheel hard to the left, taking them over the railroad tracks and past the tavern ruins.

Laurel hated it when Cal compared her to her parents, but he knew that she got that stubborn streak from them. The Owens family had backbones likes the oak trees that Charlie cut down so he could actually make a living outside of volunteer firework. The house that he built for his family was made of the same logs and timber. Like the house, they had something unyielding about all of them. That strength was one of the reasons Cal first fell in love with his wife.

She wasn't even eighteen when he saw her working at a diner off the interstate in Three Forks, dressed in a white t-shirt, nearly baggy enough for someone to mistake it for a bed sheet on her thin frame and a pair of tight, faded jeans that were more ripped out holes than material. With her blonde hair loose around her and a face full of bright bronze freckles, she just looked

like trouble and angry at the world. But that didn't stop some of the rougher looking guys she was serving at the pool table from grabbing her ass.

Cal was off from his latest long haul up to Indiana. He was heading back to an empty home with his divorce freshly ended but the custody dispute brought back up and complicated by his ex-wife's new pregnancy. His life couldn't have been any more of a mess at the time, and he certainly wasn't looking for someone new to bring into it. But Laurel was hard to miss when, right in the middle of all the customers, she took the same arm that had been used to grope her and twisted it up the man's back, driving his forehead to the metal edge of the pool table. She threw their food at them as she kicked him and his friends out.

A few people clapped, some just laughed. Cal leaned over to one of his trucker buddies who was more local and asked who she was.

"That's Laurel Lee," the trucker had muttered through a mouth full of fries.

"You got anything more than that?"

"Yeah, if I were you I'd stop looking at her like that. She's Charlie Owens' girl and she's too young for you."

"That's sweet, you worried he'll shoot me?"

"No, I'm more worried she will."

Which was precisely the reason Cal couldn't even finish his mini-burgers before he went up to her at the cashier stand. When she asked for his money, he asked for her number. Instantly, he was caught in her eyes. In that moment, he couldn't understand how the softest blue could feel like chainsaws to his gut.

"You're old," was all she said, stating it purely as fact, not with any disgust or even apprehension.

"I'm not that old. And you aren't that young."

"Do you even know who I am?"

"Yes, you're the girl I'm taking out Friday night. Does seven sound alright?" He saw the smallest flicker at the corners of her mouth, the blink of a smile. It made him think that she didn't often wear such an expression, which made him want to make her do it more. "So, how did you learn that arm thing?"

"My Pap was in Vietnam. He taught my daddy some stuff. My daddy taught me," she said handing Cal his change. "You'll have to meet him first by the way."

"First? As in before what?" She rolled her eyes at him but he didn't care because she also handed him back his receipt with her number on the back. "So, Friday it is."

Laurel was hard work. For the first few months, he was pretty sure she only kept him around for the same reason she chained smoke like it was a job, because it pissed her mother off to no end and she was relentlessly hoping that eventually her dad would have the same reaction. Maybe it was because they were closer in age, but Charlie never seemed to have a problem with Cal. When they met, the man had shrugged his large, lumberjack arms, expressed his relief that "at least this one doesn't have piercings" and just warned Cal never to drink when he was with Laurel. The more he and Charlie got along, the more afraid he was Laurel might break up with him. It was Juniper who inadvertently saved his skin, letting him into the secret.

The little girl had snuck out of her bedroom in the middle of the night and was sitting under the carport in a pair of Ariel pajamas waiting for the two of them to come home from a date. They didn't get back until midnight, Laurel's curfew, but there was June like a shadow on the concrete with her blanket, a book, and a tiny flashlight. Immediately, Laurel opened the car door, and the girl ran into the Beretta and her older sister's arms.

Before that night, by Laurel's rules, Cal hadn't been allowed to meet Juniper. It startled him to see someone so young look so intense, because even as a child, June had the same eyes. When they looked at him they seemed to cut away the surface, as though digging at something deeper, something other people never really looked at. After a brief acknowledgment, the little one looked away from him, burying her face into her sister's collarbone.

"It was loud again. I think they killed each other. I think they're dead." Cal heard June whisper. Because she wasn't crying, it took a second for him to realize she meant their parents. That was all that was said, but it was enough. He caught on quickly, for the first time understanding why it seemed like their parents never quite looked at each other, why Laurel would never leave with him until after her sister's bedtime. They weren't just strong because of their nature, but because they had to be. They had each other to take care of.

Instead of leaving like Laurel tried to tell him, he took the keys out of the ignition, and they stayed parked in the driveway. He told stories to June, taught her how to whistle like he was still trying to do with his own daughter, and held Laurel's hand until morning when her parents came out in a panic looking for their daughters. It was one of the best nights of his life, as though the three of them were hiding out from the rest of the world. And, for the first time, Cal didn't have to ask when he could see Laurel again because before she left him to go inside, she told him to come back for dinner.

It still took three more years to convince her to marry him, harder to do when the cause of her fear, her parents' marriage and eventual divorce, was a taboo discussion. In fact, the only one who ever talked about it was Charlie. He was an open book kind of guy, especially with Cal, maybe because they both spent so much time in the same position of struggling for their daughters. Sometimes it would come up after a run, sometimes it was like now, just riding in the

truck but with Cal in shotgun instead of Andrew. The first time was years ago, when even after the divorce it was tense between Laurel and her father. They were on a run to a car accident out by the National Park, and Charlie cut through an awkward silence.

"I don't blame her for being angry," he said. "It's hard to let go of things. Even harder when you have to admit that a choice you made for your child's life was the wrong one. But it's all guesswork as a parent, and the most you can do is hope they forgive you." Cal had nodded like he understood and he thought he did. He meant to ask some other time about the choice Charlie was talking about, if it was the staying or the leaving.

Cal never did ask. There would never be an answer. Feeling the past at his shoulder and the funeral at his back, his eyes started to feel warm and wet. He wanted to be in his dress suit, back across the aisle from his wife. It made him feel guilty, knowing that, when his mother had died, Laurel had arranged everything and took on the role of executor of the estate, a choice dictated in his mother's will much to Cal's surprise and, sad to say, relief. This was supposed to be the occasion to make it up to Laurel, to be her rock. He didn't even get off work in time to pick out the casket, not that she acted upset.

For the last few days, she had been fairly calm. It was like a return to those cutting stares. Cal could tell that Charlie's death was shifting history into the present. Laurel was facing a lifetime of emotions. He knew she loved Charlie more than she clearly ever cared to admit, even with him dead. While over the years the father and daughter had come a long way, they shared a reluctance that was understandable. Though Laurel wasn't aware he did, Cal knew why their relationship was strained.

He knew that Charlie cheated on their mother.

Charlie had told Cal himself. On that same run by the park, he said he thought it was only fair since he knew Laurel never would. The details were never explicit, but those weren't Cal's business really. He wasn't sure how much else Laurel knew beyond that. But realizing a ticking bomb when he saw it, he never asked for more, and he didn't need it. It wasn't as hard for him as it was for Laurel to reconcile the idea that a good man could do a bad thing.

Which is why, as much as he missed being at the funeral for Laurel, he wanted to be there to carry Charlie those last few feet. Though if he was being honest, he selfishly wished Charlie was still here to carry him.

As the fire trucks passed Bell Cemetery, where a green pavilion and chairs were set up, thick black smoke was rolling up from behind the horizon of the trees. The heavy engines turned fast on the next, sharp curve. The scene opened up to a long gravel driveway that led next to a small white house and farther still to the rolling countryside fields which were alight like plumage from hell.

Either the reports were wrong or the wind that strong, but ten bales had easily turned into a hundred. Hunger was the only thing that drove a fire, fierce and swift hunger that consumed without pause. The hay acted like a banquet spread, open and inviting, and so the fire ate. Set up in three long rows, the bales burned only a third of the way down, but the fire was still the length of several tractor trailers. The flames climbed twice the height of the hay, though the smoke truly filled the sky, turning the bright afternoon sun into gloomy overcast.

Pulling upwind from the black current, the Three Forks trucks parked just behind the owners' home. The family stood outside, watching the fire overtake their land. The farmer was young, close to Andrew's age, but he had an arm wrapped around his wife and a small son. Cal recognized them but couldn't quite pull out a name.

"It's gotta be a mile long. Have you ever seen a fire this big? I mean this is big, right," Andrew started muttering. It was a skewed perception of length by a rookie's eyes. Cal could tell the earlier anxiety was giving way to excitement, as though the bigger the Goliath, the stronger the David. Cal could remember that rush. He could feel it now, but it was different, an aged and tempered reflex of the heart. Especially today, he had more to do than rush and fight.

"Keep calm," Cal warned as he picked the radio back up. "Dispatch. This is Three Forks brush 22 on scene. Hay fire has extended to more than fifty bales. We need further mutual aid. Knock out Happy Valley and Nolin Volunteer Departments as well."

"Copy brush 22."

"Alright, let's go. Stick close to me until I say otherwise. Understood?"

Cal waited until Andrew nodded back at him before they opened their doors. Immediately, the air felt choked and dry. He could smell the ash. Even the fire itself had an almost heavy sweet taste. The rest of the men piled out of their trucks, heads wrapped up, and moved straight towards Cal. He did the only thing he could think of and stole words from a dead man. The commands came out like echoes from his memories.

"Start unfolding the one and three forth hose," he yelled over the monstrous hiss of the fire. "Michael and Doug, we need to mitigate the spread. I want you two on point for now to get the blaze under control. Remember guys we've been in a drought and this wind may not seem that strong. But it's got the right elements behind it to spread quick. So, watch your backs. Keep an eye on embers or changes in the wind. We aren't far from the church or the park.

"As for the rest of you, even with mutual aid we won't have enough water. Gary, you and John start searching for a hydrant or main access. Harris, Nelson, set up the pool for the water shuttle. We're gonna keep you running for refills. North Ballard is on the way. Hopefully they

bring their pressurized nozzle. We have a slim chance to kill some of the fire. But we've got to move the other bales. Carter, see if any neighbors can bring their bale spears. The more equipment, the more we can move, the more we can save. Let's go. Anything changes, update me immediately."

All the men dispersed, jogging under the weight of their gear. Already, Cal felt hot with sweat dripping around his ears.

"What about me? You didn't give me anything to do," Andrew said, trailing after Cal as they turned and walked over to the family, still standing and rattled watching strangers running around the large fire engines and flames.

"We're getting to it. You worked for your daddy, right? He had a farm near the county line if I recall?"

"Yes, sir, I did but what…"

"Hello, I'm Calvin Harper," he said cutting off Andrew and holding out his gloved hand to the other man.

"Thomas Young," he replied, giving a tight shake. Up close, he looked even younger than Cal initially thought. His eyes, like the rest of his family's, were bloodshot, probably from standing outside in the contaminated air too long.

"Mr. Young, could you tell me what equipment you have on the farm here? The men are trying to control the fire, but to stop it growing we need to move the rest of the hay."

"What do you need?"

"Tractors with bale spears, preferably."

"I've got two," Thomas swallowed and blinked rapidly. "My cousin left his here over the weekend. That's lucky, ain't it," he said. "They're both on the other side of the field, behind the barn there."

"It is. Andrew and I could operate them, but it would be a big help if you joined on one yourself."

"Yeah, course," he said, letting go of his wife.

"Thank you. Alright, Andrew, you go with Mr. Young. It's gonna be a long process. Try to move them down and across the driveway, the fire can't crawl across the rocks at least."

"I thought I was supposed to stick with you," Andrew said.

"I'm going to stay here and do a 360 and check the scene. Someone needs to intercept mutual aid. If there are any problems, come get me."

"Yes, sir." The rookie started to salute, but Cal caught his hand before it went up.

"Just go drive the tractor, Andrew."

He watched his man and Mr. Young take off down the gravel road, just as the first hose opened, the thick yellow band inflating down the line from the tanker to the nozzle as the water burst out, a white floating stream reaching out through the black. It didn't damper anything. There were a thousand gallons of water in one truck. In ten minutes, it'd be out. If they were lucky mutual aid would get here before they ran out completely, especially if they didn't find a hydrant. Cal knew that in the next few hours, maybe even days, or weeks, thousands and thousands of gallons of water would be sprayed out over this field. Really, it was just for show. Not even ten hoses, much less one, could stop this fire. It was going to burn however it wanted to burn. But there was no point in giving it more than it already had.

Cal was about to start walking the perimeter to determine how to continue handling the fire, when he felt a tug on the back of his coat. He turned back around to see the little boy, probably no more than six, waving his crooked finger at him to call him down. He knelt on one knee in front of the kid.

"Hi, what's your name little buddy?"

"Trevor," he said hoarsely, exposing the gaps in the bottom of his teeth.

"Well, Trevor, are you okay? You know, you don't have to be scared anymore. My friends and I are gonna help your daddy put out the fire."

"I'm not scared."

"Wow, you are very brave then," he said, glancing up to smile at the mother, who managed a strained grin back as she petted her son's sandy hair. "So, what can I do for you, buddy?"

"Are you gonna save the lonely man?" the boy asked, tilting his head.

"Who's the lonely man, Trevor?"

"He's the one who started the fire."

"Trevor, what have we told you about fibbing?" Mrs. Young said.

"I'm not fibbing!" he cried back.

"Wait, what's your son talking about?" Cal said standing up to face her.

"It's nothing. No one else was here," she assured him.

"Arson is a serious offense," he whispered this time. "I need more than that."

"We just got back from church maybe an hour ago," she said, her voice shaking. "When my husband and I started to smell the smoke, Trevor was playing outside alone." She started to stutter, "bu..but..but my son couldn't have started it. It's just not possible. He was sitting on his

bike just watching. He had no way to start it. He's just in this imaginary friend phase. That's all the man is. We don't know what happened. Everything just started burning," she finished as the tears started as well.

"It was the lonely man. He did it," the little boy repeated.

"Where did you see this man, Trevor?"

"Laying by the hay, singing."

"And do you know where he went?"

"I dunno," Trevor shrugged. "The lonely man disappeared. Then, the fire started."

"Tell me, why do you keep calling him the lonely man?"

"Because of his song. He said he was going to be all alone."

"I'm telling you, he's just making it up," Mrs. Young interrupted. "My son likes to tell stories. Why don't you go help the other men?"

"I'm not making it up!" he yelled, twisting his shoulders out of his mother's grip. "How far is it to the graveyard?" Trevor suddenly asked.

"The one by the church? I'm not exactly sure," Cal said hesitantly. "Why?"

"In his song, he was going there."

"What was this song?"

"I'd never heard it before, but the part I remember more, was him going six miles to the graveyard. Maybe he went there already?"

Cal had heard the song before and it felt like the ground was bottoming out underneath him. It wasn't the first time today he was faced with ghosts. He thought of Jerry Weatherbee at the funeral, finally calmed and in the passenger seat of his son Sam's truck. The old man had held on to Cal's wrist through the window, apologizing over and over.

"I shouldn't have made a ruckus. I know better. But I could have sworn it was him. I knew Charlie boy so long. He looked so young again, so pale. No, I know it was Charlie," Jerry said, shifting tone and looking past Cal again. "He's not finished with us yet. I can feel it. You don't have to be crazy like me to see ghosts, Cal. You just have to want to see them."

Cal could easily to write off the ramblings of man losing his mind. Technically, Cal could just as easily write off the stories of a small child. But it was too much at once, and he could almost hear the song again like he had at the funeral. He could hear that fiddle and the southern drawl. Sometimes, he had caught Laurel humming it over the soapy dishes, the only time her hands were bare of her rings, and staring out the window to the garden that would never grow anything but weeds. The song was something else she got from her father. Charlie would sing. At the end of a run, when everyone was too tired to speak, much less think, then the words to the same song often came flowing out, soft and off key. Six more miles long and sad, and he could almost hear Charlie singing it. No, he could hear it. Unsure whether his mind was hearing something or his ears, he searched the scene, wondering if he could follow the melody. He might have stayed lost there in the cold voice of a ghost, if not for the new sirens that cut through.

North Ballard's trucks were there, pulling up parallel to Three Fork's. The extra hands and water had arrived.

"Do you believe me?" Trevor asked, "About the lonely man? Will you save him?"

"I..." he swallowed. "Sure," Cal lied. "I'll save him. But for now, I have to go, okay."

He couldn't walk away fast enough, and to people he knew were real and solid. He shook off the song like a fading echo and pushed the lonely man back. He didn't time to deal with figments of a child's imagination.

"Who's incident command?" A bald man in gear asked as the men behind started to unravel hose from the truck.

"Me," Cal answered.

"You sure drew the short straw today," the older man grinned, tilting up the wide ends of his mustache. He shook Cal's hand hard enough to cut off circulation and pulled him in, patting his back with the same vigor. "What a day," he murmured. "You holding up?"

"Yeah, Cowboy, I'm fine," Cal said, pulling away. "How was the rest of the service?"

"Didn't see it. Still going on when you knocked us out," Cowboy said. "They did sort out the pallbearer thing. A couple of the cousins from the hills stepped up from what I heard. Nora was looking right miserable. Hope all my ex-wives look half that distraught when I kick it. Haven't seen that woman look so ill since...well," he stopped, seemingly cutting himself off from a thought. "So, tell me about this party. Where do you need my guys?"

"I need a safety officer if you're willing. I need men on the hoses and I've got two tractors that need some breathing room."

"Happy to oblige. Sounds like you're making good choices. You know, Charlie, well, I think he'd be real pleased seeing you like this," Cowboy added, looking out at the fire.

"Like what?"

"Like him," he said with another sharp clap to Cal's shoulder.

Immediately, the North Ballard chief turned to his men, the full force of his lungs barreled out in hard commands like drill sergeant. His face and the smooth top flushed red and some spit flew as he told one of the men to move faster or his grandmother might catch up.

Cowboy Dennison had only been chief for seven years, but he'd been just as intimidating as a regular fireman. Cal hated to admit it, but the man had scared him for years. It baffled him how someone so severe could be elected chief.

"Lots of reasons," Charlie had told him when the news came down. Three Forks was one of the first to hear since, being so close, the two departments ran mutual aid for each other for most events. "For one, he's all bark, no bite. The men know it. And they like it. Sometimes you need a voice that everyone will obey. But mostly, they trust Cowboy. He would never send another into trouble unless willing to go himself. A department needs that. That's why he's Chief. He yells, but he takes care of his men too. He's proved himself for years."

"Is that how you got elected?" Cal had asked as he followed Charlie around the station, running inventory for the medical truck.

"Not exactly," he laughed. "I got tricked into it. I knew Jerry was training me but the bastard waited until I was out of town for one of Laurel's basketball games. Resigned and got the mayor to call a special election all in the same meeting and they all voted for me. Some cause they didn't want the trouble themselves. But mostly, yeah, they trusted me. I've tried to give it up over the years. Let somebody else have it. But they keep voting me in. I think the only time they'll accept my resignation is when it's carved on my own tombstone."

It wasn't carved there. But, in the end, Charlie wasn't wrong. He had died as chief, which was part of the problem. No one wanted to take his place. Winston Evers was assistant chief, but he'd been assistant for Jerry Weatherbee too. The man didn't want it and, at this point, he was too old to take it. Cal didn't see any good bets for successor. Gary or Nelson, maybe. But Three Forks didn't have a Cowboy waiting in the wings for an opportunity.

Cal watched the other chief wrangle his men before sealing up his helmet, stalking around the scene, even taking lead on one of the hoses. He was a powerful man, the kind who took control, unlike Cal, who felt unsure in his steps. He remembered all those times watching Charlie direct the chaos as though everything had a place that just had to be found. Sometimes it was as though Charlie was everywhere and everything all at once, traffic director, pump operator, press liaison, and still the first one into any building.

Always there and always watching.

People owed their lives to Charlie for his omnipresence, from most of the men on the department as well. He would be just in time to pull them from back drafts or away from engine explosions. He had saved Cal once in an apartment fire, dragging him in front of a positive air pressure fan before he noticed the steam cloud about to roll through the living room they were trying to put out. Their helmets had melted, Cal's radio nothing more than a liquid streak down his leg, but the fan saved their skin and their lives. Charlie had saved him. People liked to say Charlie could predict the flames better than the weatherman could predict a storm. It's what made him so good at his job.

It was a trait that Cal knew he would never have. Still, he took deep breaths, trying to look at the growing hay fire with Charlie's eyes. He could feel the wind pushing Northeast towards the cemetery and the barn at the end of the field. Embers were flying through the air as the tractors began to move the farthest bales, one by one across the gravel driveway. Cal could only hope it would be far enough away, that the wind wouldn't change. He didn't feel certain of any of his choices, but as the rest of the mutual aid showed up and, as a couple neighbors appeared with their tractors and bale spears, he made them anyway.

Cal assigned tasks and jobs as soon as trucks pulled up. Four departments, including his own, were under his command. He paced around, trying to step in where needed as the chiefs reported to him every twenty minutes. Though Happy Valley's chief seemed more like a shadow. In subtle hints, then an outright question, Burr asked if Cal wanted him to take over. It was a tempting offer, especially as the first reporter van showed up with Ann-Margaret Beaufort at the helm. Ballard County had three local news stations, and a slow day brought them like gnats through a summer screen window, small pests gathering toward the light. Cal called up Cowboy to establish a boundary.

Cal would have to talk to them at some point, or not. Burr's suggestion swayed him momentarily. Hell yes, he considered it. The idea of letting someone else take incident command and all the responsibility felt like reprieve. Burr was a reliable chief. Unfortunately, he was also egomaniacal as hell, probably itching for a chance at the cameras. Cal'd give it over to Cowboy before he'd give the scene to Happy Valley. So, he turned Burr down. In reality, there was no giving it over to anybody. They were in Three Forks boundaries. Call it pride, but he was going to keep their department in control, even if that meant keeping himself in charge. He started moving faster around the field to shake off the other chief.

In an hour, there were at least two dozen people in the field, and seven fire trucks parked along the house. Personal vehicles crowded around in free spaces as more firemen showed up in those and their street clothes. Hoses crawled the ground, mud beginning to pile up around them and underfoot as the water collected. Gary and John never found a hydrant, so the shuttle started. Every ten minutes, a new truck came in and out with more water, which barely kept up with the rate it was being used.

Around the hay, a thick sort of slime was building up. Across the field, boots were covered with it. A few men on the nozzles slipped deeper into the mud. The tractors had trouble moving in the softer ground and around all the hoses and the firemen, stalling the repositioning of the safe bales. Eventually, one of the tractors got stuck in the muck. Cal and Cowboy sorted it out, using the rookie to help dig it out and back onto the gravel. But the Youngs' neighbor got nervous about using his equipment, taking them back down to three tractors and slowing the already sluggish pace.

When Mr. Young's cousin showed up to take over on his tractor, for a moment things started to run smoothly. The three farmers worked well together, staying out of the way of the water and hoses. It left the fireman clear to maintain the flames, and Andrew went happily back to following Cal around like he was the mother goose. At the least the rookie was a more compliant shadow than the Happy Valley chief. Together, he and Andrew checked water levels on the trucks to make sure the shuttle was keeping up. It was a brief moment, but it was the only moment where Cal felt confident and progress was smooth, until Cowboy found him again.

The hefty man ran up between the Three Forks brush truck and Nolin's pump, blurting out without no delicacy, "Your tanker can't get through."

"What?"

"There's no room. It's blocked off at the end of the driveway. It can't get close enough."

After a few choice words under his breath, Cal followed Cowboy, the boy trailing behind them both. Sure enough, the tanker, fresh and full of desperately needed water, sat with its lights flashing, half turned in the driveway and half still in the road. In front of it sat a maze of other vehicles and trucks, even the reporter vans narrowed the entrance. Gary waved from the driver's seat.

"Cal, you wanna help me out?" he yelled with his usual sarcastic grin. "We've hit something of a road block."

"We've got to start moving vehicles. It's all we can do." Cal sighed. "But we've got to move fast. The last truck up by the field is going to be out of water in about five minutes. Cowboy, you pull the farmers back. If we run out of water, I don't want them close to the hay. There's no telling how fast the fire will move. They don't need to be a risk. And make sure the guys stay ready. There are two more trucks on refill runs after Gary that will be coming up.

"Andrew, find Harris and have him move our engines out the way best he can. Get the other engineers to do the same and then start getting keys. Move all the personal vehicles you can and start parking them along the road. They aren't important. Tell the same to the reporters to move their vans across the street."

Once he had given the orders, Cal jumped up the tanker's side. He told Gary to hold his horses and tried to rearrange the trucks in his head to figure out the best path. It wasn't enough just to get Gary through. He needed clean lines in and out for all the trucks. Long runs tended to have problems like this. Lots of people but only so much space. But he was determined to fix it. Even Charlie had traffic jams. "It's just a matter of reorganization," he would say. "Prioritize vehicles. Anything that doesn't belong there, just get rid of it."

Sometimes, it also took patience.

Cal's very first run with the department was a mutual aid on a trailer fire in a park out in North Ballard. Charlie was driving and two of them had a full pump. They couldn't even see the fire they were blocked out so far back. The trailer on fire was in the middle of the park, with only one big lane running down the middle. With all the other trucks lined up and residents blocking the way with their own vehicles, they had no way in.

"First, we wait," Charlie said. "Give them time to get us through."

"And what if they don't, do we just go back?"

"If we have to, but let's not hope for it."

Cal never told Charlie, but he was hoping for it. In fact, he spent the entire thirty minutes in that truck, wondering how the hell he let himself get roped into the whole thing. His stomach churned to see the black smoke waiting up ahead. He remembered being a kid in school, how the other boys wanted to be police officers, astronauts, or firemen. He was never like that. He was concerned with the paycheck. Maybe it was watching his mother struggle to pay the bills, but he was more concerned with saving himself than other people. If he hadn't been for Charlie, he would have never considered firefighting, much less for free.

Cal had been dating Laurel for about a year when he first saw Charlie in action. Traffic had been backed up for a mile down the interstate. Cal worried about how to make up for the lost time on this delivery and didn't even think about what had caused the delay, until he recognized the white Ford truck parked ahead in the emergency lane.

One evening, while watching TV in Laurel's room with her and Juniper, they'd all overheard, but pretended to ignore, Nora yelling at Charlie about the truck. The longer he was with Laurel, the more he noticed how the false courtesy between her parents fell away. Charlie had purchased the truck a few months ago, only a few thousand miles on it. She didn't understand what was wrong with the old truck or why he needed one so new. Charlie said it was an investment to get something that would run for years, she said it was just another bill they didn't need. Three hours of screeching later, Charlie kept the truck anyway.

As soon as Cal saw it there, he was searching for Charlie, afraid that he had been in the accident that blocked the lanes. Instead, among the debris and next to a car crushed into the

concrete barrier, Charlie was hunched over a woman on the ground, both of them covered in blood. At a crawl, he passed by and saw Charlie's gloved hands pressing against her chest, alternating with another man who breathed into her mouth. It was a week before Cal got up the nerve to ask Charlie about it.

"Yeah, she lived," he had told Cal. "Lost lots of blood, broke several bones, but she's gonna live."

"Good. That's good. I didn't know firemen did stuff like that."

"Me and Gary, we're the only certified EMTs. Then a few others have first responder training. It's a lot of work, mind you. But yeah, we definitely do more than a few house fires. You interested in joining the department?"

"No," he answered a little too quickly. "I mean, no, thank you. I was just curious."

"Just as well," Charlie shrugged. "You have to live in the town limits."

Over the next couple years, Cal grew more attentive to Charlie's early departures from dinner or late arrivals to Juniper's basketball games. The two crossed paths at Laurel's curfew as Charlie would return home late, soot covered and groggy. He was living a second life everyone barely acknowledged and treated as such a norm, yet all Cal could ever think about anymore was that that man was risking his life, saving other lives, and it wasn't even his day job.

His thoughts and curiosity, however, didn't come back up again until he and Laurel moved in to a tiny apartment by the railroad tracks in Three Forks. It was another one of her prerequisites before she'd get engaged to him, six months of functional domestic life. He already had his own place, but Laurel refused to live that far from June and he wasn't about to make her. Besides, his girls loved June like a big sister. He didn't figure it would hurt if they were all a little closer, until Charlie pointed out he was now eligible to join the department.

The pager went off during the house warming. Crammed into the nook that served as kitchen and dining room, everyone winced as the clear call seemed louder in the echo. The little girls, dropping the book that June had brought to read to Hayden and Alyssa, clapped tiny hands to their ears.

"Come with me," Charlie suggested over the patio furniture table. "See what it's really like."

"I'd just get in the way," Cal deflected, tossing out the next round of hands for the card game. "I wouldn't be any good at it."

"How do you know until you try? It's not like I'm gonna send you into the fire the first go. You'll just be watching from the truck."

"I don't know," he mumbled.

"Just go, Cal," Laurel said, rolling her eyes. "Stop playing hard to get. You know you want to go. And if you stay, I'll be forced to see those sad puppy eyes you make every time he goes on a run, while I also just take more of your money." She grinned, turning her cards so he could peak at her full house.

"Fine. Yeah, okay," he said, trying to convince himself. "Let's go. Do I need anything?"

"Backbone," Laurel answered, giving him a kiss on the cheek. Grabbing his coat by the door, Cal followed Charlie out as they left their friends and Laurel, who cried out at their backs, "Don't let him do anything stupid!"

It felt like he was doing something stupid the moment he left his house. Laurel wasn't wrong that he wanted to go. He had for years. But it was one of those wants people didn't say because what they want more is to not embarrass themselves. It was easier to imagine he was brave enough or smart enough when it was all hypothetical. But when Laurel pushed, he would

move. He trusted her. He trusted Charlie too until he saw the commotion as they approached the trailer park. The longer they sat there the more Cal didn't trust himself. The blockade then seemed like a blessing. He was a twenty-six-year-old, single dad, who had scrapped by with a high school education. What business did he have out there?

He felt that question again, itching at the back of his mind like a bad case of poison oak. Only now he thought, what business did he have being in command? Just like at the trailer park, the tanker couldn't reach the fire and the water had run out. The flames were reclaiming what they'd been denied as Mr. Young and the others watched. Even little Trevor had returned outside, eyes fixed on the burning hay from the edge of the grip his mother had on his neck. She, however, like her husband, was more focused on the traffic jam in her backyard.

People had arranged and rearranged vehicles. There simply wasn't enough room. Cal had Cowboy turn men away, with their bulky extended cabs and SUVs. With the other engines empty of water and ready to leave for refills, Cal had hoped for progress. Instead he'd only discovered they couldn't leave either. The re-piled bales blocked off part of the side to the driveway. The house, fences and woods created further obstacles, but the Happy Valley brush truck cut off the only stable part of road, which was the driveway. As with the tractor before, the slime of soggy hay and water was slick and impossible for the other department's truck to escape, leaving its back end blocking off all access to the fire.

Cal stood with the other chiefs, trying to figure out the quickest solution to put matters back on track and unstick the truck, when the voices around the trapped engine began to escalate loudly. All the movement and the collection of people was enough to try everyone's patience, and some nerves were on their last test. A couple boys from Nolin and Happy Valley, splattered

up the hip with mud, were nose to nose. A few other brothers from their departments yanked at their shoulders to keep them that far apart.

Cal didn't pay attention to their screaming, he just rushed over. Cowboy and the other chiefs followed at his heels. But it was Cal's voice that cut through loud and demanding.

"Shut this down!" He screamed, thrusting his elbows between their chests. "Get off my scene, now. Both of you."

"He's the one…" Nolin's man began to interrupt.

"I don't care!" Cal said, giving them both another shove apart. Their respective department chiefs took extra hold on their turnout. "This is not the place to act like fucking children. Burr, Henry, get your guys out of here."

"The young ones, they don't have the same sort of respect we were taught," Cowboy said, as the offending parties were dragged off and apart to the closest vehicles that could take them back to their departments.

"I shouldn't have yelled," Cal replied between heavy breaths, trying to catch back up. He felt lightheaded from the blood rush.

"Hell yes, you should have. Charlie would have yelled at those fools."

"Charlie wasn't like that."

"Yes, he was. Your father-in-law was fearsome."

"I doubt he dealt with fights over a stupid truck."

"I doubt that was about a truck. That was Ross and James Thomas, pretty sure that was about a woman. What?" Cowboy asked as Cal's gave him a look. "Gossip, I tell you, the only thing in the department that spreads faster than fire in a drought."

"So what am I supposed to do?"

"About the woman? Hell, if I know. Let them sort out that mess."

"I meant about this fire and water issue," Cal said. He pulled off his helmet, trying to shake off some of the sweat from around his head and eyes. "How long do you think it will take to get this truck out?"

"Longer than we need it to."

Cal sighed, and then, suddenly, he held his breath. For a second, every muscle and joint stiffened.

"Did you hear that?" he asked Cowboy.

"Hear what?"

Cal didn't answer. He tried to breathe soft and shallow, as though he could scare away the sound. He stepped slowly back toward the hay fire, wondering what the flames might have hit, but nothing seemed to have changed. The fire danced over the rolls, the black smoke still climbed in the sky. Cal knew something was different.

"Don't you hear it?"

Cowboy turned up flat palms, clearly confused.

"It's a thump, or something else. It sounds like…" he trailed off, not quite sure what. "It sounds like…"

"Thunder," another voice finished for him.

The two men spun around.

"So, you don't have to worry about water anymore," the little boy Trevor said to them. "If there's thunder, there's rain. Just like the lonely man's song. He said the rain would fall. I told you he was real."

"Who's the lonely man?" Cowboy asked.

"You don't want to know," Cal told him. "Trevor, you hear it too? Can you tell where it's coming from?"

"Thunder comes from the sky," Trevor answered slowly, as though Cal had forgotten that fact.

"Yes, it does," Cal agreed. But, while it did sound like far-away thunder, he didn't think that it was a storm coming. For one, Ballard County had been in a drought for going on two years now. The rain that came down anymore was usually sprinkles that couldn't so much as sustain a man in the desert, much less put out a hay fire. For another, he wasn't that lucky. He could hear it, nonetheless, and it sounded like it was getting louder.

Finally, Cal saw the change, where the smoke was thicker because, even though it was a much thinner smoke, in the background it was being joined by another growing fire.

"Mr. Young!" he cried out. "What's in your barn?"

"Some equipment. Well, and livestock, um…some horses, sheep, and…and…" the young man stuttered.

"My calves," added the other farmer, who had been working on the tractors. "Two of them are in there while my barn is being rebuilt."

"Wait, why here?" Cal asked. "Your farm is on the other side of the cemetery. Wouldn't other farms be closer."

"Thomas and me share part of a field, our properties border the cemetery, before the park land starts."

"And you have fences?"

"Yes," the farmer replied cautiously.

"What does that have to do with anything. The embers have hit the barn, Cal. We've got to do something. Get the water through," Cowboy said, his voice rising like it did with his department.

"And that's what I'm trying to do," he said. "Do you ever let cattle graze on each other's property? What I mean is, do the fences have any places to open them?"

"Of course."

Cal finally knew what to do, because he'd done it before. When Charlie had taken him to the trailer fire, they'd went around. They had bypassed all the chaos and came through the back. That's what Cal was going to do now. He was going bring in water from the other side. He sent Cowboy off with the farmer to Gary and the other waiting trucks to get the gates opened and directions through. He told Cowboy to work with the others to keep moving trucks. He wanted the Happy Valley truck gone by the time he got back.

Bales were crumbling and collapsing as they grew closer to ash. Cal split men from the trucks to start unrolling them to burn out, a blessing of sorts. With no water and men stretched thin, he was going to the barn.

Shifting his helmet and gear back on properly, Cal called to the rookie, who was pretending not to stalk his every step.

"Andrew, you ready to go in?"

"I haven't been into a building yet." The boy swallowed. "Just in training, but that, well that wasn't real."

"You gotta start somewhere, kid." Cal added, "Don't worry, it's an open room, not many crooks and turns. Couldn't be easier. We just get the animals out. Open the stalls and stay out of their way. We're not cattle wranglers. Just let 'em go. Think you can handle that?"

"Yeah, sure," Andrew nodded, his eyes blinking rapidly.

There was something humorous about the rookie's nerves, but Cal did not laugh. Andrew was a smart kid, did well in training. This would be a good start for him. His amusement hid under his gear, Cal quick checked Andrew's pack, and the two hustled down the gravel. The thundering became deeper, echoing in the open field behind it and against the tree lines along side. The door of the barn was closed tight, but it shuttered and shook as something tried desperately to break it down.

The strings of smoke, which moments ago had been billowing out from the ends and a few open places in the roof, were thicker now as the fire began escaping. The red wood roof was alight, flames climbing out the edges and through slats in the walls. Cal could hear the crying animals, some crashing against the door in hopes of reprieve.

Keeping Andrew at his back, Cal stood them both parallel to one side of the shaking door, ready to use it as a shield against the coming exodus.

"If you fall, curl up, keep your head covered," Cal warned Andrew, his voice muffled and wet behind his mask, before he flipped open the latch. The door nearly flew from its simple hinges. A mare burst through first, hooves high and quick towards the trees, followed by the shorter gaits of a donkey and the other farmer's calves. Several sheep ran out, their short fleece singed, carrying the smell of burnt wool with them towards the safe, open field.

The firemen leaned hard to their side of the doors, until Cal was sure no more animals were loose. Panicked sounds of other livestock still came from inside. He waved on the rookie to follow him into the barn. They saw the open stalls first which the previous animals must have come, but beyond the entrance, little was visible. Wherever the fire had started here, it had moved fast. Smoke filled the ceiling, blurring the flames snaked up the posts and along the upper

beams. The square hay bales in the rafters acted as a bonfire, embers dropping down from them into the loose hay in the stalls and around the floor, generating more flames.

Cal turned around, checking on Andrew, who stood no farther than the edge of the doorway, staring up into the bright ceiling. The practice fires in classes and training were just that, practice. It was hard to explain to someone the sight of a true fire, not the minuscule sparks of a grill or a campfire. He'd tried to explain it to Laurel once, explain the concept that something small in her hands from her lighter, could be so large, so wild, and so beautiful in the most terrifying ways.

Charlie had never attempted an explanation in words either. That's what Cal assumed his first run was for. It was impossible to tell someone about the heat and the way it moved, the mass of it all. Charlie had shown it to him instead, taking him through thin, winding roads, littered with speed bumps until they found a space in the yards to cross through next to the trailer fire.

"Stay here," Charlie had told him, as he slipped out the truck to join the pack of geared up men behind the caution line that police officers were guarding. Cal would have stayed even without being told. It looked like the end of days he'd heard of in Sunday school as kid, at least for the few years his mother took him before she got tired of people judging how she raised her son.

A soot covered family was spread out between medical trucks and an ambulance. A little boy dressed in a superman onesie squalled in his mother's arms as a medic listened to his heart. The rest of the trailer park residents looked on with grim faces. It was like watching memories burn. A life charred down to the bare bones as the fire ate through the windows and curtains, scorching the white porch. The smell of burnt Astroturf and carpet polluted the air.

At that point, it was one of the saddest things Cal had ever seen. He felt ashamed that he had ever wanted to come and that he stayed safe within the truck while someone else lost their home. The knots of nerves in his gut gave way to a heavy sink of guilt until he started watching Charlie again. Unflinching to the grief around him, like the rest of the men, he went to work. Others came around Cal and the truck, hooking up the hoses. Some men led the nozzles into the trailer, stepping through a doorway lined orange and licking at their sleeves as though it was normal. While onlookers cried, the local men in their uniforms remained undaunted. They didn't hesitate to touch something untouchable.

"I know it's distracting," Cal said to Andrew, shaking the rookie back to movement. "But keep your eyes open. Check the stalls."

Cal shoved him to one side, and they both moved down the line, watching for debris and embers or any more frightened animals. But as they navigated through the smoke, most of the stalls appeared empty. Not just empty, he began to notice, flicking his light over the stall doors. All of them so far were open, on his side and Andrew's. But the doors were not broken. The wooden barriers remained intact, not a board fractured, despite the force of the animals who had escaped. As he looked closer, he could see that each latch was turned up. The animals weren't locked in to begin with, which seemed strange. A farmer might, in rare cases, forget one latch, never a whole barn full.

"Cal!" Andrew yelled, though it came more like a whisper through the voice box and radio. "I got one back here."

Cal turned to check it out, but the rookie was lost in the smoke, his flashlight refracting back. He tried to follow the voice and the angry sounds of an animal toward the other end of the barn, but, before he reached Andrew, he heard the slam of wood to wood as another stall door

flew open. He jumped back, flattening against the nearest post as the mule charged out. Its head thrashed back and forth and the hind legs kicked out repeatedly, all in worthless efforts to fling the fire from his back, which ran as a continuation of its short mane. The brown fur charred and the skin around the fire bubbled and ran red. The poor animal's sounds of agony echoed louder than the crackles of the flames. Cal tried to stay back as its wild whips hit against the poles and some of the walls, sending tremors through the increasingly unstable frames. It flailed its way towards the sunlight, and Cal hoped one of the men could catch it and subdue further burns.

Rather than chase the injured mule, Cal drove straight towards the back stalls.

"Andrew!" he said, searching edges. He thought he saw some movement in the corner of the barn behind the green hay baler. The shadow of a man running along the wall. "Andrew!"

"Over here!" Cal heard at his back. He turned to find the rookie behind him instead. Before he could question the running shadow, the sound of a long, painful creak brought a different unease to his stomach.

The barn was old. That was clear from the grey weathered wood and the termite dust that mingled at the ends of the ragged bottoms of the barn's boards. Creaks like the aches of arthritic bones were common for the age. The fire was moving, shifting the lay of the wood as it ate the strength away, and the nails warped under the heat. Creaks were normal, not every sound was to be feared. Still, Cal stood staring up and entranced by the flaming beams. There was an incandescent riot in the rafters, like heavy feet pounding. He could see the bowing, as the floors which held the burning hay began to slope. He followed the slant to a post between him and Andrew. A fire grew at its base, crawling up to the imprint of a hoof, where the mule had connected.

"Cal? Are there any more in here?" Andrew asked.

Cal didn't answer, unconcerned with animals, but worried instead with the fissure that radiated from the hoof print through the width of the post. It seemed to grow thicker, branching out through the wood. Then, he heard it again, the same creak as the beam above his rookie was losing its support.

"Cal?"

And then it was a crack, loud enough it was as though all other sound was sucked into the drop.

"Move! Move it!" Cal screamed, rushing forward. Both hands landed against Andrew's chest. He saw the rookie's eyes wide and shocked behind the plastic mask before hitting the floor. The force of the push sent him backwards, away from the rookie and the exit. Cal fell onto his pack and rolled away as the beams cluttered down, hot splinters bursting away on impact. He continued to roll as more of the upper floors began to fall away, stopping just as he hit the baler.

He could hear Andrew calling out beyond the crashed debris. He yelled back at him to leave, unsure how long the gaping hole of the second level would remain steady before crumbling to a larger diameter.

"I'm fine. Just get out of here. Get help! Get the RIT team."

Hoping the rookie listened, Cal crawled farther toward the back for safety. The spokes of a wheel-rake scratched at his air tank and his jacket. He pushed around, but the heavy equipment barely budged. The back entrance of the barn was blocked off by the baler, rake and even the thresher which sat directly in front of the doors. He tried reaching through the spoke gaps of the rake to the latch, but his arm was too thick. He sat on the ground, keeping his back off the hot metal.

With the tank full, air was not a concern, but the fire on the fallen beams across the barn floor was spreading quickly through the loose hay, encroaching on the bottoms of Cal's boots. He thought about climbing over the pile of wood, wondering if his gloves and gear would tolerate the heat long enough to get across. Though with the continuing creaks, he was wary of venturing into open area where more wood might fall. He kept searching for options when a shadow caught his eye. There, huddled beyond the end of the hay thresher, was the same shadow from before. A shadow shaped like a hunched man.

"Hello," Cal called out to it. The shadow jerked up, and Cal followed suit. "Are you hurt? Do you need help?"

No reply came, nor any gesture. The shadow seemed frozen despite the heat. Whatever was standing in front of him, Cal wasn't quite sure it was real. Maybe it was a reflection. Or maybe, Cal thought with a hard swallow, thinking of Trevor and the small boy's claim, it was something else. He didn't believe in ghosts, or visions of lonely men. But that didn't mean he didn't want to, especially when something or someone was certainly there.

"Charlie?" he choked out. This time, the shadow turned and ran. Without another thought, Cal took off around the posts back towards the stalls, losing it to the darkness. He paused, breathing heavily in the open corner, spinning every which way on his heels wondering how the shadow had disappeared. "Charlie!" Cal screamed in frustration.

Coughing answered him, a deep, hacking and strangled cough on the other side of one of the stall.

"Who's there? Who is it?" Cal asked, stepping toward the wall. His heart like hummingbird wings in his chest.

"There are a lot of demons to face in this job," Charlie had once warned him as they sat in the white truck, parked outside Cal's new front door. "I've seen blood and burns and more death than most people can handle. I've seen men breakdown on scene. We're no superheroes out there."

"I don't need to be a hero," Cal replied, staring at the door and the fresh coat of blue because Laurel couldn't stand the awful orange. "I just want to be a good man."

"Good answer."

Cal gripped the top of the stall, pulling himself and the weight of his gear up. The coughing still came and louder now, but before he could peek over, he heard another loud snap. The sky above came crashing down. Cal used his arms to guard his face as the rest of the barn loft collapsed on top of him. Stray boards smacked his body in the tumble but it was the weight of the hay that sent him to the ground and quickly buried him in straw and flames.

"It's from the Gods, you know," June had said to Cal when he and her father came home from the trailer fire that night. Half asleep with her head in her sister's lap, she had held onto consciousness in anticipation of their return. Laurel had asked how it had gone, but Cal couldn't find what to say. Instead, June did.

"Prometheus stole it from the Gods in Olympus," she yawned. "They kept and guarded it but he didn't think it was right. So, he stole it for us humans. Every day an eagle came to peck out his liver as punishment. Which was fair. People aren't supposed to have things that are meant for Gods. It's dangerous."

"How are you so smart, Junebug?" Charlie said, ruffling her hair as he scooped her up to take home to her own bed.

"Cause I am," she said, rubbing her face against his shoulder. "Is Cal going to be like you now? Is he a fireman?"

"Maybe," Charlie answered, but they all looked at Cal. Before the moment could turn into an awkward silence, he followed it up. "But we can sort all that out later. It's time for bed, my bug."

Once Charlie and June had left, Cal thought he'd escaped the decision just yet. But Laurel was not so quick to move on, haunting him as they tucked in the girls and got ready for their own bed.

"You're going to do it, aren't you? Join the department, I mean," she said, peeling back the covers. "That's a lot of training. And you have to leave at all hours of the night. You could get killed. You're not safe doing it. And it doesn't pay, you know that right? They do it for fun."

"It's not for fun," he said, cutting her off. "They do it to do something great, something good for other people."

"You don't care about other people."

"Well, maybe I should."

There was a long pause after that. Cal turned off the light. In the darkness, he could hear Laurel pretending to breathe like she was asleep. Deciding he didn't want to go to sleep in the midst of a fight for the first night in their new place, he lay on his side and kissed the center of her shoulders.

"Don't turn into him," she whispered. "Don't be him."

"What's so wrong with being like Charlie? He's a great dad. He takes care of you guys. He takes care of all kinds of people. He's a good man."

"No, he's not."

"Then why let him come over?" Laurel didn't answer. "I am going to join. Because I want to do this. But I'm not going to be him. I'm always going to be me. And we are not going to be your parents. We're going to get married and have more kids, and we're going to be happy, whether you like it or not. You're stuck with me Laurel Lee. Nothing, not even the allure of fighting fires could take me from you."

"Fine," she said, shifting under the covers to face him. "But I want a boy," she added after a pause. "And we'll call him CJ, for Cal Jr."

"What if it's a girl?"

"Rose. Rose Lee."

"You've got this planned out already, don't you?"

She shrugged in reply. But that time it was Cal who didn't let it go.

"You are! You're planning everything. You've already decided. You Laurel Lee Owens are going to marry me," he laughed hard, pinching playfully at her sides. "Good! It's about time. Because I love you," he said, adding the last much softer in her ear. He repeated it again, softer still and slower, again and again between kisses along her neck.

"I love you too," she replied quietly, wrapping a leg over his and pulling him close. Cal tugged up and away with her baggy t-shirt. Instead of ending with a fight, he and Laurel properly broke in their new bed until light peaked through the broken shades. They went to sleep with plans ahead of them and tired smiles on their faces. But by the time Hayden and Alyssa began the morning with their sharp yells and loud cartoons, all he had dreamt about was fire and ash. He dreamt that he was smothering and burning. He dreamt of Charlie, of a dead man, who wasn't quite dead, and of a fire that was real.

His daughters' noise wasn't waking him up now, but faraway voices of men calling his name. Someone dragged Cal across grass when he felt his feet snag on something. His eyes watered under the glare of the sun and the bright orange flames at legs that were being pulled like the rest of him through broken boards creating a gap in the barn wall. He stopped moving as someone darted to the boards, twisting his foot straight up to drag him the rest of the way out.

Dizzy and vision blurry, Cal tried to tilt his heavy head to see who had him. It was a solitary figure, the hands on his shoulders spattered with red, raw burns and black with ash, just like the edges of his suit jacket. The suit looked like it used to be a nice one, the kind a man could be buried in. He struggled through his dirty mask and the glare of the sun like a halo behind the other's head to make out distinct features of the face. He felt it was someone familiar, except for the eyes, which seemed too cold and blue like ice, like life had been drained from them.

Cal reached up to touch him but was abruptly dropped. Something glittered as it fell from the other man into the grass. He reached for it instead while the man gradually stumbled back and then seemed to disappear. He sat up with a groan and roughly unhooked his mask and helmet, throwing it down. He coughed and spit the dirt and char taste from his mouth. Then, he opened his hand. It held a silver lighter, engraved with a skull and quote that said, "When I die I'll go to Heaven cause I've spent my time in Hell." Odd enough, but the name carved on the lid made Cal stand up quickly, the blood rushing to his head and forcing him back down on his knees. He held an Owens in big block letters in his hand. He searched around him, praying silently, hoping to see him one more time. But Cal was alone, hurt and alone in the grassy space between the barn and the woods.

"I'm here!" Cal finally answered the voices that had come closer. He pocketed the lighter. The men led him back to the scene, where the water had finally managed to get through. While some of the men kept the flames down, others moved the last bales.

Before Cal could return to check the progress, Gary took him into the medical truck that had arrived just for him. The rookie paced back and forth outside, replaying the events like a sportscaster, while Gary checked Cal's blood pressure and other vitals.

"You pushed me out of the way in the nick of time. It was incredible. I could have died! But you like ninja-jumped!" Andrew exclaimed, reiterating to the point of nausea how Cal saved his life.

"Andrew, can you go…" Cal started, but he couldn't make up an assignment fast enough. "Just… somewhere else, please."

"Sure, boss. No problem. I'll go check in with Cowboy. He wanted to know your status."

"That's perfect. Thank you."

Cal sighed as soon as the kid was out of earshot.

"People might think it's rude that you aren't basking in the appreciation of saving someone's life," Gary said as he pulled up Cal's undershirt, checking for bruises or possible internal bleeding.

"He's exaggerating."

"Maybe. Maybe not."

Cal jerked his shirt back down.

"I'm fine. Can you just let me get back to work?" he snapped.

"Nope. Pretty sure you have a concussion. Just not sure how you got it. What all happened in there? Besides the clever bit where you busted out a wall to get out of a burning

building." Gary laughed to himself, adding, "And you wonder why the rookie thinks you're superman now."

"I didn't do that."

"Found the hole, made it. Not a big difference," the medic shrugged and then tugged on Cal's wrist to treat a small burn.

"I didn't find it either," he corrected. "I was out of it after the loft fell on me. Someone else was there and he did it. He pulled me out."

"Yeah, who was it? The lonely man?" Gary asked with a false sense of eeriness.

"Where did you hear that?" Cal asked, grabbing the other man's wrist.

"That kid, the creepy one. He's been asking every guy who gets close enough if he's seen the lonely man. But I was just kidding, unless...Wait. Cal," Gary said, losing all tones of humor. "Who do you think pulled you out?"

"Somebody," he said quietly, letting go of Gary. "I think...I'm not crazy but I could swear it was..."

The conversation didn't go any further. They were interrupted when the Three Forks mayor, Johnny Hall, stepped inside the medical truck.

"Hello, fellows," he greeted with his pearly capped teeth. "Mind if I have a moment with Calvin please?"

"I still have some burns to dress."

"You can finish those when I'm done with him," Mayor Hall said, his grin undisturbed.

"Yessir," Gary gritted, his shoulder smacking Hall's as he stepped out.

"What brings you down to our neck of the woods, Johnny?" Cal asked as the gentleman searched for a place to sit. The mayor shoved a few boxes of gloves and gauze down for a clear seat on the bench next to Cal.

"You know I always come by when I hear there's an accident like your little one. It just happens to work out I've got a few other things to discuss. Some good. Some bad."

"Is this where you ask me which one I want to hear first?"

"No," he retorted, crossing his legs as he smoothed the creases it made in his khakis. "We're going to start with the bad. The drought has been a problem for the last couple years."

"I'm well a..." The mayor held up a finger.

"Please, let me finish. You see, your father-in-law had a particular gift for dealing with dire situations. This drought is one of them and this hay fire has...complicated that even more. The bad news is that I've received reports from officials from the park. Did you know that pine and cedar trees burn easier than other trees?" Cal didn't attempt to answer. "They do. That was something I learned from Charlie too. I tell you, he had a gift." The mayor seemed to wander off briefly in his own head before he came back. "Hmm...well, it turns out most of the park on this side of town is pure pine and cedar and dry as dust, which seems to be why the embers from your hay fire have caught on so easily. Three separate fires have been found already. Two have been put out. One is growing and there are probably still more to come. The National Park is under our boundaries, which makes this Three Forks' responsibility."

"Absolutely, we will get right on it and call in mutual aid..."

Again, the other man cut Cal off.

"Patience, please," the mayor smiled, waiting for utter silence before he continued. "The other bad news is that Three Forks currently doesn't have a chief. Obviously this is through no

one's fault exactly, but still inconvenient. Winston Evers is a relic, much like Jerry Weatherbee, and makes for a poor interim chief in a situation like this."

"The special election was called for next Monday. You know this, you called it, Johnny."

"I'm not finished." He wasn't smiling now. "That was called before we had a possible wildfire spreading in our National Park next door. We can't wait for a bunch of votes to pick a random leader. But, I do have the good news, which is that I've decided to avoid all that mess and appoint your new chief myself."

"You don't have the right..." Cal growled.

"Actually, I do."

"The men won't like it."

"They'll come around. In fact, I think it was inevitable. Everyone knows he was grooming you for the job."

A slew of objections and choice words built up on his tongue. Before they tumbled out, his head caught up first, as though replaying Johnny's last statement, filtering it through sense. It took a second, but then Cal heard him, really heard what he said and what it meant. Johnny wanted him to be chief. He dug his nails into his rough palms as all the clever comebacks melted down. He'd been outraged, but now he was caught between rage and just wanting out. It was a tie at what made the veins in his neck tense up more, that Johnny was deciding this, or that Johnny was right.

Cal felt that embarrassment, the one that felt like glue in his throat, because someone else saw the obvious and he'd had no clue. It wasn't Johnny's decision. Charlie had been making it with all those runs, those long nights in the department going over procedures and equipment, those classes he pushed Cal into all across the country to get his training, even his medic

certification. How could he have been so stupid? Feeling memories slip around and fit into puzzle pieces, like a new glimpse into his own life and maybe at the innards of Charlie's head, he felt torn between laughing and crying. So, he did both as his denial resumed.

"Me?" he asked, chest heaving. "This is a joke, right?"

"Congratulations, Chief," Hall said. "This is how it's going to be," the man pushed, which made Cal push back, shutting down every speck of emotion spewing out.

"I don't want it," he replied. "I'm not…I'm not supposed to be chief," he said, stranding up, the short ceiling forcing him to hunch.

"Sit down, Calvin. You are supposed to be and you will be," Mayor Hall told him. "Or you can leave the department altogether. Those are your only options. What do you think Charlie would want you to choose?"

"That's low."

"C'mon," Hall said, slapping Cal's thigh, helping him sit back down. "We know I'll do whatever it takes, or as low as it takes. If you don't take it, I'll give it to the rookie. Allen or Adam, or whatever his name."

"You wouldn't."

"I certainly would."

"That would be a poor move."

"Except that it puts you deeper in the corner."

Cal stared in disbelief at the chic man beside him, trying to find the bluff somewhere in those crow's feet guarded eyes. But he knew it wasn't there to find. Johnny Hall wasn't an unreasonable person or purposefully cruel, but in Charlie's words, the mayor was a particular kind of snake, one that never struck without venom, which is what made the man a survivor and

without an election opponent for the last decade. "You want to hunt with a man like Johnny, not find him slinking around your background," Charlie had told him. But now, Cal wondered if it had just been a comment, or perhaps another guiding rule, a tidbit to help him lead.

"Alright," Cal whispered, holding his head. "Alright," he repeated louder.

"That's a good man," the mayor said, getting up to exit the truck. "I'm really glad we had this talk," he continued once he was back on the ground. "I hope you aren't too angry. Really, I'm doing what we all know Charlie would want, just speeding it up a bit. Congratulations again." He waved, walking away.

More unsteady than when pulled from the barn, Cal grabbed his gear from the floor and stumbled out the truck. He watched his men on the scene, embracing the idea that they really were his men now. He was responsible for them, for all of Three Forks, and eventually he would have to tell them. He wondered if they would be angry about losing the vote, or if they agreed like Johnny. Did everyone, except him, know what Charlie was on about? Why him? Why pick him?

He pulled the lighter from his pocket, clicking the lid open and closed while tracing the Owens name with his calloused thumb.

"I heard the men talking," a small voice said to him as Trevor Young peeked out from behind the medical truck. He looked eager and excited to emerge from his hiding place. "They were talking about you, and about the lonely man. Did you see him? Did you save him?" the boy asked, stepping closer and closer.

"No," Cal said sadly. "I didn't save him."

"But you promised."

"I know. But he saved me instead," Cal said, flicking the flint wheel. A tall flame shot out, the point a hard yellow. But the bottom of the fire was a sheer blue. Blue like the eyes he'd seen.

And the Spark

At the edge of death, there was life.

Beyond the cemetery, on the other sides of the gates and the trees there were families and homes. A farm bordered the east, an open field with hay bales like fat guards across the terrain, but they ignited in succession closer to the speed of falling dominos. Hundreds of feet of flames grew from the accidental flicker of a lighter. If it was an accident.

By the end of Charlie Owen's funeral, the forest of Cedar Mountain was on fire as well. Though the fire from the hay bales raged high and long, it didn't cause the other. Much as the bales didn't combust at once, the tall cedars, drought dry and like kindling, didn't burn from the monstrous roars of the hay but the small sparks carried in the air. A bright red dust, light like the dead skin it resembled, found home in the grass and in the branches even miles away.

And the cinders grew into monsters.

Nora and the Destruction: Synopsis

Though a source of tension for her daughters, Nora is a lonely, aging woman, who loves her children, just not in a way the serves any of them. Taking advantage of Charlie's death bringing them together, Nora ropes the two girls into a day out for the first time in years. She escorts them to the bank to open their father's safety deposit box, then on to the lawyer's office, where Juniper is name executor. The errands take a poor turn for Nora, however, when the lawyer, who also handled her divorce, warns her that the contents of Charlie's last wishes will reveal more than Nora would like. She ignores the lawyer's advice to come clean and instead delves further into a denial, trying to force a bond with her daughters over lunch, only to have them retreat further away the more her mannerisms and convictions in God conflict with their personalities.

Once she takes her girls back home, Nora breaks down in her car and then in her closet, praying to God and cursing the dead. Nora is frustrated that the past and her efforts to do what she thought was the Christian thing are now turning back against her. In her anger at Charlie, she goes to burn the letter he left her in the safety deposit box, which reveals a packet of photographs, including one of a young Reed Hollis. Nora's reminiscence of the boy and his mother give another perspective into the trauma of her first marriage and the bitterness that she cannot relinquish.

Reed in the Barrel: Synopsis

After finding remnants of a bottle with the Three Bells emblem, Cal and the arson investigator Edison speak with Reed Hollis, who is currently in charge of the distillery while his step-father is out of town. Despite implications towards his guilt for the wildfire that began on the Young property, Reed faces a more pressing conflict afterwards when Juniper Owens arrives unexpectedly at distillery.

While somewhat high after smoking with a co-worker, Reed confronts Juniper, hesitant to what her intent may be. When she's less than forthcoming, they begin a tour of the grounds and the buildings that leads Reed to reminisce about his relationship with Juniper, the changes between them and the secret he feels as though he's holding back from her. Their time together ends poorly when Juniper explains that there are provisions in her father's will for Reed. He angrily dismisses her and once they separate, he seeks out his wayward uncle for counsel, only to find Nora there, attempting to intervene before any revelations are made to Juniper.

Through this interaction, the reader discovers that it was Nora who prematurely ended the relationship between her daughter and Reed when she told him that he was a product of Charlie's affair with his mother, which his uncle refused to discuss when asked, leading Reed to believe it was true. Thus his relationship with Juniper was incestuous, making that the reason he did not leave Three Forks with her after graduation. But after seeing Nora, his frustration and disgust with her boils over and he vows he'll no longer harbor the secret before going off to search for his uncle. However, in the effort to find Drury, Reed is cut off near the park when the firefighters tell him that the fire has overtaken the boundaries and a residential area, which includes his uncle's cabin.

In the Bottle

With the whiskey gone, he moved to beer today. He grabbed a cold can from the fridge, chugging as soon as he popped the top. The cheap liquid was best in the first gulps while still perfectly chilled. He wiped his mouth on his sleeve, and the last swigs left sloshed in the bottom as he took the can with him outside.

The news lady had repeated segments since yesterday, losing luster after the big reveal. Arson didn't change much about the fire except that now people wanted blood. The flames, however, remained on course away from town. He stood on the porch, sniffing in the sweet morning air and felt angry. He wanted smoke, he wanted brimstone. In all, he wanted consequence that he'd missed in the barn.

He'd been waiting five days for it.

Cal in the Black

Cal lounged along the booth, tapping out a cigarette on the table. He lit up just as Kara the waitress took away their plates, yellowed with the yolk remains of their eggs. He was careful to keep his hand wrapped around the zippo, so no one could see the engraving. It tempted fate each time he used it, as though begging for someone to recognize it or question Cal about how he had a lighter from a dead man. Part of him wanted everyone to know, just in case someone could explain it without making him feel like he'd lost his mind that damn barn.

Fifteen years he'd spent on the fire department and Cal had seen things that would make most men lose their shit. Hell, he'd seen firemen lose it on scene. Trent Hunter had once gone wild with the Jaws of Life, ripping at a twisted up Volkswagen because he was positive a kid was still trapped in the back. It had taken Cal and two other guys to pull him off and assure him that everyone was out. A few days before, they'd lost a whole family, including three kids, when a semi-truck had flattened a couple cars after the driver fell asleep. No one had blamed Trent and they had understood when he stopped showing up to runs. Being on the Three Forks Department wasn't just volunteering time, sometimes it was one's sanity. Until recently, Cal had always thought his head was sturdier than most.

There had been big fires. There had been fields overtaken and a few wildfires between spread out neighbors. Cal had experienced those again and again. This time however, everything was so dry and delicate, the heat alone was enough to set the grass to scorch. Flames crawled determined from acre to acre, and embers navigated their way past fire lines and even natural barriers. This fire was hungrier than any Cal had ever seen. Charlie had always told him to remember that fire was a living thing. And this one wanted to live, badly. What burned over in

Cedar Cave National Park was like the dead clawing their way out of hell with vicious roars, unwilling to ever go back.

That was how Charlie felt to Cal too, like part of the reluctant deceased. He had yet to take the Jaws of Life on a rampage like Trent, but every night when Cal came home, stripping out of his smoky clothes, he dreamt of the shadow from the barn. He dreamt of a burned Charlie, color drained from the eyes, hovering above his face. Then the ground would sink underneath him, pulling Charlie and the fire far above, until Cal realized that the dirt walls that boxed him in were his own grave. He would wake just as smoke began to seal him up.

Sometimes it was hard from Cal to tell who couldn't let go, himself or Charlie.

Cal finally clicked the lid of the zippo back down, squeezing his hand against the smooth silver with the Owens name engraved, and slipped it into his jeans' pocket.

Before Kara could walk away, Edison Ham, asked for extra copies of the receipt, one for himself and the other for the Fire Marshal's office, which would foot the bill. Ever since the fire had spread to the park, Cal had been working with the arson investigator and, in that time, he had learned the man was good about two things: paperwork and making sure not a single penny came out of his pocket.

In some ways, the investigation was a pleasant distraction for Cal. It gave him occasional breaks from the park and added some sort of authority to his presence, something he still felt unsure of as the new chief. However, the investigation came with Edison, who looked like the grown up version of a kid who set ants on fire with a magnifying glass. The investigator also had a one track mind and Cal had made deal with him early on that whenever food was on the table, shop talk was off. Now that the plates were clear, Edison, as usual, got right back to their work.

"So, what do you think about that kid?" he asked, folding up his used napkin and brushing away the crumbs where his breakfast used to be.

"Dead end. It was a lucky find, but we knew the bottle was a long shot."

"Didn't he seem a little strange to you. Nervous maybe?"

"No, I wouldn't say nervous at all." Angry, Cal answered to himself, that's how Reed Hollis seemed. Though he did have two strange men invading his office without an appointment and making subtle accusations, a little agitation was not uncalled for. Cal had been curious if anything else was to blame, but it hadn't been his place to bring it up, certainly not with Edison Ham sitting next to him.

"You know a little bit about him, local boy like that. You said you knew his dad, right?"

"Step-dad," Cal corrected, pulling the tiny gray ashtray closer to his side of the table. "Neal used to ride the roads like me back in the day. Good trucker. Transported mostly on the bourbon trail until he opened up the distillery. But I don't know much more than that."

Except that Reed Hollis was suddenly causing a lot of trouble in his family.

Cal had just got in from the park, barely asleep when he heard the phone ring in the middle of the night. He had pretended to stay sleep, preferring eavesdropping to his own dark dreams, as Laurel crept into the bathtub and huddled there for hours, discussing Charlie's estate with her sister.

"What the do you mean someone else is in the will, Juniper?" his wife had asked in a whisper from the bathroom that adjoined their master bedroom. It might have been the longest conversation they'd had in a decade. It involved two people, Reed Hollis and their mother. "Well, we have to tell Momma...Because she'll find out anyway at some point. She's Momma. And you know she don't like any of the Hollises."

Cal wasn't a Three Forks guy. This place wasn't in his blood like it was for his wife. But the longer he lived in town the more he had picked up on the family histories that were wrapped up in every social interaction in town. He still didn't know everything, like why Nora hated the Hollis clan, but he knew that they and the Owens family went way back, several generations into the eastern Kentucky hills. Sometimes it bothered Cal that folks in town knew more about the family he married into than he did.

When he and Laurel moved into their first apartment in the same complex across the railroad tracks, she told stories about Drury Hollis, how she'd picked up weed from him in high school but before then he had been this constant figure in her childhood, her dad's best friend until some falling out. Every Christmas when they lived there, Laurel left a card taped to his door, as though part of some nostalgic friendship. Cal never had the heart to tell her that Charlie had never fallen out with Drury, or at least if he had, he hadn't told anyone that they had fallen back in. It had never felt like his place to mention seeing Charlie's truck parked outside late at night, or seeing Charlie drop Drury off from some sort of get together, usually with Drury carrying a rifle or two back inside. It seemed less worth mentioning when they moved out of the apartment into their own home that Charlie helped them buy. Whatever complicated family ties were going on seemed beyond Cal and not worth bothering Laurel about. Charlie however apparently had other expectations for his daughters' relationship with the Hollises, and that included sharing his death.

But this was all a personal matter and none of Edison's business, which was why Cal had remained almost silent at Three Bells, and instead spent the time looking over the office, trying to get a feel for the kid. Like his wife, he wanted to know who Charlie had made provisions for without telling anyone else in his family.

"Well, they're gonna want a suspect at the meeting," Edison said. "We've got the accelerant, the method of ignition, and the point of origin. But that don't mean squat. The State Police want someone to arrest. And they've been breathing down Harry's neck to take the case over, assuming the Feds from the Park don't beat them to it."

Cal paused from replying, leaving the cigarette perched on his lips as he found his wallet to pay Kara who came back with the bill. He laid down a couple fives on the table and pinched the filter again.

"We don't have anybody to give them. What do you want to do, make somebody up and send them on a wild goose chase?"

"I want to give them Reed Hollis."

"You're out of your damn mind," Cal said, immediately putting out his cigarette in the plastic ashtray. "He's just a kid and you've got no proof but a broken bottle that could belong to anybody."

"He's got burns on his hands," Edison reminded him.

"That's not proof either."

"You're the one who saw somebody in that barn," Edison whispered harshly, leaning over the table, jabbing it with his pointer finger for every other syllable. "You saw the arsonist. You've been looking for someone with burns on his hands. We've got Reed with burns, and he's connected to the accelerant."

"We've got nothing," Cal said, meeting him the other half of the way over the booth. "I don't know what you've heard but my statement is not on the record in the investigation, which means I didn't officially see anybody and it sure wasn't Reed fucking Hollis. I'm not gonna to perjure myself to put some innocent kid in jail."

"If it wasn't Reed, then who was it?" Edison asked. "I've only spent a week working this case and hundreds of acres have gone up in smoke trying to find who's responsible. How about you save us all some time and tell us who the hell started the damn thing."

A ghost. If Cal was honest, that's who he'd say did it. The Young's little boy had called it the lonely man, but Cal knew exactly who it was, even though he hadn't seen the face clearly, just those dead eyes. In his gut, he knew Charlie had been out there. But how did Cal say any of that without being crazy.

"I don't know who it was. I'm not sure I even really saw anybody," Cal lied like he'd been lying the last four days. "But I do know that if you bring up any of this gossip or Reed Hollis in the meeting. I'll make sure Harry hangs you out to dry from the Marshal's office."

Edison backed off, straightening his tie.

"Fine. Have it your way, Calvin," he said. With precision, he creased the receipt on the table and slipped the folded paper into the pocket of his briefcase. "I'd just like you to remember that this is your town. You're responsible for everything that happens to it. If it burns, it's your fault. If the arsonist gets away, it's your fault. The people in Three Forks aren't going to blame me or the police; they're going to blame you. Heavy is the head, my friend." Edison stood up from the booth. "I'll see you in an hour. Don't forget to change." And the investigator left.

Personally, Cal didn't see anything wrong with his jeans and shirt. But he supposed that when meeting with some of the more powerful people in the state, a dress shirt was a better choice. Charlie told him once that if it weren't for the politics, being fire chief would be fun. But in a short period, Cal was realizing that being chief was only about politics. No wonder not a soul had fought it when Mayor Hall made the appointment.

Cal took out a couple more one dollar bills to add to Edison's less than 10 percent tip before leaving too, and breaking the 35mph speed limit all the way home.

The house should have been empty, but the television was on full blast, both of his girls laid up on the couch watching the news coverage of the park and Laurel ran around half dressed in her work clothes. Her shirt was unbuttoned, flapping open to reveal a gray bra, and she held her khakis over her arm as she bounced from table to table searching for something. Alyssa lifted up her feet from the coffee table without even looking at her step-mother, who rushed by.

"Whoa, where's the fire?" he joked, turning to watch the banner scroll along the bottom of the TV with updates on the park fire, still heading North, thank god, toward the main river through the grounds, a natural barrier.

Laurel stopped, giving him a delightful sneer.

"Oh fuck off, Cal," she said, going right back to her search.

"How come Laurel can cuss and you won't let us?" Hayden asked.

"Because she's grown accustomed to the taste of soap, and you still hate it."

"Whatever." Hayden rolled her eyes.

There was something about having teenagers that Cal couldn't quite wrap his head around, ever since Hayden had gotten her period at 12 years old. He'd let Laurel handle that one with a trip to store over in Nolinsville, taking both his daughters for a talk about 'feminine products', deciding she might as well get them both over in one blow. Over the last few years, somehow one conversation turned into a million little changes from the clothes they wore to the toys they threw into the yard sales. It was stranger even to watch their bodies mold from flat rectangles into hormone induced curves. Cal used to hug and wrestle and play with his baby girls. Laurel had said he treated them too much like little boys that way. Now, as little women, he

grew more reluctant to touch them. Their bodies seemed too fragile and terrifying. He briefly rubbed Alyssa's head as he leaned over the back of the couch.

"What happened to the softball game?" Alyssa raised up the remote to point at the TV.

"The other team thought it was too dangerous," Hayden answered. "Buncha pussys."

"Hey, watch it," Cal said, tapping her cheek with the back of his hand.

"Don't bother," Laurel said from the kitchen. "She's been pissy all morning."

"Well, I have a right to be, don't I? I've been practicing my pitches and what for? Jack all! To sit around, doing nothing because of some stupid forest fire."

"If you're so sick of doing nothing, how about you and your sister get off your asses and clean the house," Laurel said, slapping her khakis down on the kitchen table. She had her hands on her hips, and her slowly growing stomach sagged over the edge of her panties which didn't match her bra. "I'm only trying to take care of half a dozen things before work. You know, work which pays for the fucking TV and your phones."

"My dad pays for our stuff."

"We, we, as in the both of us, pay for your stuff. Cal?" Laurel looked at him. He knew that look well since they'd gotten teenagers, she was calling in back up.

He took the remote from Alyssa and turned off the TV.

"C'mon, at least clean your rooms. No one wants to see those pigsties. And stop giving Laurel a hard time. She's having a rough day too."

"God, whatever!" Hayden said, stomping off with Alyssa at her heels like usual.

"Why do you do that?" Laurel asked when the doors slammed from down the hall.

"Do what?"

"Make it out like I can't just be upset with them," she said. "Why do I have to have a bad day to yell at them or for them to be nice to me? Why can't it be their fault I'm angry with them or why don't they always have to be nice? And you shouldn't have bargained with them. The whole house needs to be cleaned, not just their rooms. I'm working all day. I don't want to come home to more piles of laundry, an empty fridge, and the constant char smell you're bringing in. Would it kill them to take on some responsibility for the mess?"

"They're just kids, Laurel."

"So? I was Hayden's age when I moved in and started playing house with you. I was younger than her when I started taking care of Juniper because no one else could be fucking bothered. They can definitely figure out how to run the washer and dryer."

"How is Juniper by the way? And the whole estate thing?" Cal asked, making a desperate bid to change the subject. Nothing pissed Laurel off more than talking about the girls. And when she slumped, her bare feet slapping against the fake wood floors again as she went back to searching the kitchen, he knew he'd picked the subject that was really on her mind. Juniper was never far from Laurel's thoughts, especially in the time she'd been back home.

"She's fine, I guess. It's all fine."

Cal followed his wife to the kitchen, peeling off his t-shirt and tossing it into the laundry basket by the door to the utilities room. "Have you seen my nice pants?"

"They're in there." Laurel pointed past him. "On the rack. I ironed your blue shirt for the meeting too."

He continued to undress, tossing the rest of his clothes into the laundry as he took shook out his clean dress clothes. They were the same ones he'd worn for Charlie's funeral, but he didn't have many reasons to dress up. He took his belt from his jeans, sliding through the loops

as his wife kept searching. She shifted dirty plates on the counter, looking under and around each bowl or pan then placing them in the sink. Dishtowels went wadded up in a pile between her arm then shook before she dropped them in the basket next to Cal. She went back the kitchen table this table, moving cereal boxes and overdue bills.

"What are you looking for?" Cal asked.

"My stupid phone," Laurel said, crumbling some of the bills into the garbage. He hoped that meant she'd paid them. "Juniper went to sort some things out today. She said she'd call when she was done."

Cal knew where his sister-in-law had gone. He'd heard that too. It was part of the reason he'd called Edison to make their trip to the distillery even earlier. He'd had no desire to run into Juniper on business with Reed Hollis. The executor position had been like a thorn in the thumb lately that no one wanted to pull out, but Cal had been relieved it was June rather Laurel who had to deal with all the legalese. Last time, when it had been his mother who passed, being executor had eaten at his wife. She shaved off several pounds in the first week trying to settle debts, cremation costs, and insurance claims. In his opinion, their disorganized household had enough problems to occupy anyone. But he knew Laurel didn't quite see it that way. Juniper had always been Laurel's to protect, to take care of, not the other way around. He understood, because he had his own daughters, that it was hard for her to let go of that control and concern, especially when Charlie had taken it from her in one piece of paper.

"Did you leave it in the bathtub?" Cal said as he slid his arms into each long sleeve. Laurel stopped instantly.

"I already checked there." In her pause, she came over and tugged on the edge of his shirt, lining up the shoulders, and then began buttoning it for him. "Please don't listen to my private conversations, Cal."

"I take it you don't want to talk about it."

"No, I don't." The rings that filled her fingers tapped against each plastic button as they worked up his chest.

Shocker, obviously, that Laurel didn't want to talk about something. The whole Owens group were perfect boxes, nothing but sharp corners and hidden hinges. She got it from Charlie, not that Laurel liked getting anything from either parent, but she had her mother's stubbornness and her father's evasive emotions. When he married her, Cal thought she would continue to open up, but she was like the morning glories she had bitched about that died just like everything else in their yard. Laurel's natural state was closed up, only a few rare hours on good days did she let the petals down. She lived like she'd never been taught how to let go of hurt, or to let people help. So, for his wife, there was nothing to talk about, not when it came to money and her job, not when it came to her body and why they never talked about children anymore. These things existed only for her because nothing had turned out like they wanted, like he promised her. Now, she didn't even talk to him about her father and his estate. But maybe it was fair, considering he wasn't talking to her about Charlie either. He hadn't told her anything close to the real story of the barn, chalking it up to a minor accident, which she'd swallowed without much question.

He checked his watch as Laurel finished the top button on his collar, nearly choking him, so he undid it as soon as she let go.

"You look good," she told him.

"Thanks. And this isn't me talking about it," Cal said. "But everything'll work out."

"I know it will. We'll take care of it."

"Juniper will take care of it," he reminded her. "This is her job now, Laurel Lee." His wife didn't reply, but went back to searching the kitchen table. "Try the laundry. You know me, that's where I always leave my phone, forgotten in some pant pockets."

"Yeah, sure. You better go before you're late. Harry hates when people are late."

He didn't want to leave her. Everything in his body urged him to stay with his wife, telling him to be home and present. She had her blonde hair swept into a cheap clip and sleepless purple brushed under her eyes, but she was beautiful. He came up behind her, closing his arms around her midsection, palms against the cold skin under her open shirt. She didn't move, and he said nothing.

Then Cal released her and went for the door. He yelled a goodbye down the hallway to his daughters. Only Hayden responded, screaming through a crack in her door, "We don't care." One day, he was sure she would grow out of her rage. He just hoped he wasn't too told by then to enjoy it.

Cal was ten minutes early when he got to the town hall, a back room of the post office building that also contained Three Forks' single jail cell and public library, but everyone else had already arrived. An eerie quiet held the room. It gave Cal that childish feeling of walking into a group that had been talking about you.

A folding table took up a majority of the floor space in the windowless room, leaving folks to squeeze into seats at the perimeters. The officials from the Department of Interior and the Forestry Service dressed in nice suits and sat with the head rangers from the park, while the state police representatives were in uniform too, sitting across the table. Cal shuffled in behind the chairs to an empty seat with Harry Grimes, the Fire Marshal, and Cowboy, who Cal had

personally invited, just so he wasn't the only active fireman discussing the fire. Edison had claimed an isolated seat at their corner and sipped on a to-go coffee, watching Cal settle in.

They all waited, checking watches and sorting papers, until the official time. Even when the dollar store wall clock reached 11:30, it seemed as though no one wanted to speak first and risk their case. Everyone was vying for jurisdiction because with that came control and a certain esteem, particularly for the elected officials in the room. Cal was grateful when Cowboy, the outsider but yet more experienced in this type of meetings, gave him the usual slap on the back and told him to start the lowdown.

"Right, right." Cal coughed as the attention turned to him. "Well, as of right now, the fire, which originated on the Young property to the southwest of the park, has burned for over a week. We have 350 acres of black in the southwest side of the park, while approximately another thousand are currently burning as the fire heads north. This is, so far, one of the largest fires to ever hit Cedar Cave. We've got an approximately 10-mile circumference of fire to monitor with limited manpower. As always, this puts our men and the towns around the park at risk."

"I think we all know the status and what's at risk here," Edison commented. "What's being done to mitigate the damage?"

"Thanks to the Forestry Service." Cal nodded toward the suits. "And news organizations, for spreading the word, volunteers from California and Texas have been coming in to help our men to ease the load and keep our crews from exhaustion. We've got several rehab stations set up from the left to right flanks of the fire. We're clearing as much debris as possible to eliminate fuel and digging fire lines as thickly as possible. Cowboy's crew has been running water trying to coat areas and compensate for the drought to prevent embers from igniting further areas. Men

are working almost around the clock, except for peak sun hours. We're doing everything possible, but, to a certain degree, we have to let the fire run its course."

"So, just let our park burn?" one of the rangers asked, crossing her arms over her chest. "We're losing thousands of dollars every day. This town depends on the summer tourist income. What we need is for you to stop the fire completely."

"There's no stopping it until it's done," Cal said. "We can limit its movement, reduce the rate of spread. But there's no stopping it. You should be familiar with this."

"I'm quite familiar. The fact still stands that the last fire at the park only took fifty acres," she continued. "Of course, Charlie was the chief then. He knew how to manage wildfires." Cal ignored the sly smile Edison hid behind a sip on his coffee cup.

Cal had worked that fire too. He remembered Charlie at the command station, organizing three crews of men to contain the burn from a group of hikers who hadn't put out their campfire properly. They had it out in a two days. But Cal couldn't forget Charlie's frustrated sigh as he'd kicked off his boots back at their bunkers in the department.

"We should have let more go," the chief had said, shaking off some of the sweat from his forehead. "Sometimes I worry that when we stomp out these little ones, we're just asking for some bigger monster down the road. If there's one thing I know from working in the woods all my life, every so often, things have to burn."

Memory and reality began to echo as Cal found himself repeating Charlie's tired concern, "At some point, the park has to burn," he said. "There's 50,000 acres. In order to survive, it has to embrace the natural process of things. Nature doesn't care about your profits. And for the record," he added, taking control of his own voice outside of Charlie's in his head. "The last fire wasn't during one of the worst droughts in the town's history. But we are dealing with disaster in

the best possible way, I promise you." Cal directed his assurances to the suits in charge who nodded back at him.

"Yeah, okay, you're dealing with the fire," the post commander from the state police said. "But what about who started the thing? We're fielding reporters left and right, trying to keep them out of the park and out of your way. That Ann-Margaret Beaufort has been at the station at least twice a day asking questions. Everybody knows it was arson but so far you guys have nothing but a broken bottle. I've been talking to our fire investigator. He thinks we're overlooking evidence..."

"To be fair, Preston, your investigator only works with structure fires," Harry interrupted. "Forest fire might be a bit beyond him. My guy Edison and Cal here have been following all the right leads."

"To be fair, Harry," the commander echoed sharply. "The barn was a structure fire, not to mention the Young farm is technically private property. The original crime was to a state citizen, not a national park. We're in our rights to take charge of the arson investigation."

That was all it took for the tepid display of manners to melt away and for voices to cut over each other, escalating in volume as everyone wanted to be heard. Cal was ready to let them run their throats ragged until he heard Edison try to push through the noise, offering a lead on the arsonist. However, before Cal could shut down the bickering, the redheaded woman from Forestry Service beat him to it. She stood up and slammed both palms onto the table.

"Excuse me," she shouted and, when the lips stopped, she continued in a normal tone of voice. "I would like to point out that the traditional method for wildfires is not for any one department to take charge. Instead, we generally set up a unified command. This way we'd like to offer the state police and the fire marshal's office a chance to both work on their

investigations. I see no reason to limit potential insights to the case. We should work together and in the unified command, then we all report to a single commander for organization. Calvin Harper has already proved sufficient as Charlie Owens' successor in the field, he seems the appropriate choice to lead unified command for the rest of the time being, until the fire ends and the arsonist is caught. Does anyone object this?"

There wasn't exactly a vote, but, around the table, there were a few grumbles before heads started to slowly shake yes. The police commander's head shook even more when the door to the room cracked against his chair as someone tried to rush in. He pulled up his chair, and Andrew the rookie shoved through in his gear, a different, lighter material for wildfires. All of him was dingy with soot and dirt. He stood out among the clean uniforms and suits.

"Burr sent me down," Andrew said, holding his ribs between deep breaths. "You weren't answering the pages."

"We turned them off, boy. It's an important meeting," Cowboy told him.

"But the fire..." the rookie hesitated, as though only just currently aware that multiple people surrounded him. "Umm..."

"Just tell us what Burr wanted," Cal ordered.

"He needs you back in the park. The wind has picked up."

"That's fine. We've planned for this and it's almost midday anyway," Cal said. "Have the men pull back, let it keep going north. We'll get back to it just before the sun dies down."

"Problem," Andrew said, holding up his pointer finger. "The fire isn't going north. The wind picked up and started heading southeast. It's heading up, to the hills on the edge of town."

"Sonofabitch, boy," Cowboy growled. "That's the kind of information you lead with." The heavy man jumped up, fighting his chair to get around the table. He finally kicked it under and Cal got up with him once the aisle was clear.

He squeezed Harry's shoulder, "Can you carry on here?"

"We've got this," Edison answered instead. "It's just updates."

Cal felt a twist in his stomach. He didn't trust Edison. If he left, there was more than a strong possibility that Reed Hollis' name would end up in the 'updates'. But Cal couldn't stay either.

"I'll take on unified command," he said. "So I expect everything to come back to me. This means final say between departments." He looked straight at Edison for that. "Harry, when you're done, call my cell if any new information comes up."

"Will do," the older man said.

Cal followed behind Cowboy who was shoving Andrew like a shield past the chairs and back out the door.

"Whose truck are we taking?" Cowboy asked.

"Mine," Cal said. "Andrew, you're sitting in the truck bed. I don't want you stinking up my seats with your gear. Seriously, why did you wear that down here?"

"Burr said fast. I went fast."

Cal had never seen someone so eager in his life. If he didn't see Andrew's car by the blue mailbox, he would have thought the rookie ran the entire way from the park.

"Just get in," he said, unlatching the tailgate on his way around to the driver's side.

Soon, Cal was on the radio with Burr. The head of the fire had turned on them. The Happy Valley Chief was pulling back men and collapsing rehab stations at the right flank as the safety zone deteriorated. It was a complete bug out.

"The fire started crowning fifteen minutes ago. Hopping tree tops like a game of leapfrog. All cause of a cold front, a stupid cold front," Burr repeated, while other crews jumped on the signal as well, reporting in as they fell back. The rate of spread was climbing as the winds hit 50mph, the fastest they'd been since the thing started. Cal cursed at their wind vectors, which were obviously wrong.

"It's gonna start swallowing the cabins up that hill," Burr static voice warned. Cal continued to gun it down the main road and then under the interstate overpass and then took the radio back to his lips. Plumes of smoke were climbing up to the sky in massive signals.

"Are they empty?"

"We think so. I've got a crew hitting the driveways to check."

"Good. We'll be at command in five." Cal barreled through an empty four way stop past the park signs. There was never any traffic out that way anymore. He didn't meet a single vehicle as he drove out to the field command at the bottom of Henry Mountain Road, which separated the park and town limits.

When they pulled up, the gravel lot that was normally used by hikers but was now overrun with fire personnel. Engines and trucks were crowded into every spare space, blocking off the road up the hill. A couple tents for shade were set up and some men were half asleep, laying across the seats of the trucks as the new rehab station was being set up with command. Cal noticed a few men at one of the medic trucks getting patched up with liquid skin.

"What happened to them?" Cal asked as they exited the truck.

"The coyote crew," Andrew said, jumping over the side of the tail bed. "They were out on the fire line almost got overtaken when the wind changed course and created a blow-up. But they're all right now."

"How they'd get out?"

"Me." Andrew hesitated, shifting away from Cal. He started to speed talk. "I know you didn't want me out there. I'm not ready for the big work yet. But Burr had me running some equipment back and forth. He cleared me to use the truck even though I don't have all my hours yet but since it wasn't actually road and all the other drivers were busy he said it was okay. But then the blow-up happened and I knew where the trail was back to the rehab. So...So..." Andrew gulped and finally slowed down. "I led them out. Please don't kick me off for being out in the field."

Cal just stared at the kid for a minute, sorting a mix of reactions. Then Cowboy solved the situation for him.

"No one's going to kick you off for doing a good job," the gruff man said. "But keep in mind who your real chief is, don't be going behind his back to get a piece of the action. That's how you're liable to get somebody killed next time."

"No, sir, I mean, yes, sir." Andrew nodded.

"I don't want you anywhere near the fire without me again, alright?" Cal said, digging out his gear from the steel toolbox Andrew had rode over on.

The rookie was still nodding and Cal sent him over to their home crew while he and Cowboy suited up. Cal dressed, thinking how pissed Laurel would be when his nicest shirt was sweat strained and smelled like soot.

As he sealed up his jacket, he scanned over the scene, taking inventory of man power and equipment. Everyone looked exhausted. A couple of guys were at the Three Forks engine taking turns pumping away at the purple water flavor and downing the full Dixie cups like shots. Four days jumping between real jobs that paid the pills and here in the nights and mornings was enough to wear anyone down. A good portion of the crew were even losing paychecks to be out here in the early summer heat. Cal knew because he was one of them. He'd had three building jobs lined up before Charlie had died. Two of them had hired new guys once it was clear Cal had his hands full. There was no predicting how long the fire would go on.

Cal and Cowboy found the other high ranking officers by the medical trucks, discussing wind patterns and topography. But the discussion died as Cal walked up. He was starting to get used to that.

"Talk to me," he told them.

Burr took that as instruction to lead, giving Cal the complete rundown, locations of all the crews, progress on fire lines, status of equipment, predictions on the spread. Everyone agreed that after Henry Mountain was engulfed, the fire would slow downhill, giving them time to contain when it hit the edges of Three Forks. But Cal shook his head.

"I want to start evacuations now. Anyone within two miles southeast of the park."

"That's half the town," Gary, his new assistant chief, said. "That's your family's homes."

"There's a lot of underbrush and kindling around those homes too, even mine. This is the closest a fire has gotten to town. I don't want to wait until it's there before we start getting people out."

"I'll get a structural crew prepped for the urban interface," Cowboy offered.

"No, I want you here," Cal said. "The out-of-town guys listen to you and they're strong on the direct attack that I want to set up. Burr, I need you to head back into town, get a hold of emergency management and start making calls to the radio and talk to the news stations to get the word out on the evac. Take your Happy Valley crew to each side of town and help people leave, then delegate out to get places set up for people to stay, whether at the elementary school or over in Nolinsville."

Cal had given Burr public attention and control, exactly what would keep the chief satisfied and off Cal's back. Burr would head out, Cowboy would lead the offensive, and Cal, as incident commander, would stay in the station here and organize the men and the movements around the fire. Orders were clear for everyone. Just as they were about to break up and round up the crews, a call came over the radio for Burr.

"Happy Valley One. Happy Valley One," a man screamed. "This is Happy Valley Eight. We've got a resident up here. He uh...he refuses to leave. Shit, fucking shit." A sharp pop came over the radio as well before the static cut out and Burr was quick to reply.

"Happy Valley Eight, this is Happy Valley One. What is the situation?"

"Scene is not safe! I repeat, scene is not safe! He's shooting at us, sir."

"Happy Valley Eight, what is your location?"

"694 Henry Mountain Road."

"Happy Valley Eight, get out. Just leave him."

"Wait, just wait a second." Gary stopped. He sighed, then pulled out his own radio. "Happy Valley Eight, this is Three Forks Four. Stay where you are. Maintain safety routes and remain in the truck. Keep a look out for the fire, but do not engage with the resident. Back up is on the way."

"What are you doing?" Burr growled, getting into Gary's face. "Those are my men. You heard them, the scene isn't safe. Do you want them to get shot?"

"They're not going to get shot. It's just warnings," Gary said, shoving a shoulder into Burr's chest to push him back. "It's Drury Hollis. He's shooting at them because they're strangers."

"What's Drury Hollis doing up there?" Cal asked.

"He's got that cabin. If he's there, it's cause he wants to be alone. Everybody know that," Gary said. "Let me take a truck and see if I can't get him down."

"Are you really going to risk a bullet for some whack job in the woods?" Burr asked.

"He's a veteran, not a whack job. And even if he was, I wouldn't leave him up there to die. He just needs to be told what's going on. So, can I take the truck or not?" Gary directed back to Cal.

"Yeah, but I'm coming with you." The other chiefs started to object. Burr probably more so because he didn't like being upstaged, than, as he said, he agreed with Cowboy that someone had to stay for incident command. "Cowboy is in charge until I get back. You both know what to do. Send the head ranger with a crew for the direct attack, he knows the paths. We'll be back in no time. I want the evac started by then."

Andrew dashed up on their heels as Cal and Gary went for the engine near the head of the line.

"Where are you guys going?" he asked.

"Up the hill," Gary answered as the kid followed.

"Can I go?"

"No," Gary said.

"But Cal said I could only go out in the field if it was with him. And now, he's going out into the field."

Briefly, as he slipped on a backpack pump, Cal wondered if he had been this way as rookie, like a child staving off boredom. He knew he had. Though it sometimes seemed a lifetime ago, he remembered sitting through safety classes, borrowing gear for rescue drills, and memorizing gear and equipment, all before Charlie would let him sit in the truck again. The initial run out at the trailer park had been a tease, enough to suck him in. But returning to the field had been anxious and patient work, with Charlie seemingly adding class after class until clearing him for runs. Getting his radio, a piece of plastic that connected him to the rest of the department, made him feel free to take on the world.

For that first year, he jumped up for every call that came through, even using his lunch breaks at work to be the first on scene for car wrecks and house fires. Weekends were spent at fire school and any training he could follow Charlie to, who taught half the classes in Ballard and the neighboring counties. It didn't matter how long the drive to training or how long he would work a scene, Cal was willing to go. He slept less as a rookie than he had as a new father with a baby crying throughout the night, and he still couldn't decide which he had enjoyed more. His life finally had felt like it had movement, more than the endless highway journeys with his semi-truck, to somewhere that made it worth waking up each morning, or rather staying up each morning and directing traffic around three car pile-ups after the early a.m. downpour. "Sometimes, you new guys exhaust me," Charlie had laughed, as the rain on I-65 continued and Cal refused to take a break while the day's commuters honked and crawled by him. "Just be ready, cause one day it will wear off. It's not always an adventure. Sometimes, it's scary as hell, Cal."

"I know," Cal had replied, waving on the merging traffic in the emergency lane to pass through. And he thought he did know. He'd already found a few dead bodies, seen pools of blood and even a face sheared off, like a Halloween mask laying on the pavement. It was easy to assume that after that Cal knew this wasn't going to be a pretty job, one that could even wear a soul down. But he naively thought he'd seen the worst. It would take a couple years for Charlie's words to come back, and remind Cal that he chose this for more than the rush of adrenaline and good stories.

Cal expected it to be that way for Andrew as well. For now, the rookie was eager, he saw heroes and saving lives. There was always one run, or maybe a series of runs, that made the transition from rookie to veteran. Still, Cal couldn't predict that moment for Andrew any more than he'd been able to predict that run out on Shelby Road for himself. And until that moment, Andrew was going to itch for movement and the field. While Cal's instinct was to tell Andrew no, it would also be more trouble explaining why he couldn't go than to just let him sit in the back seat for a quick run.

"Fine," Cal said, opening up the doors to the brush truck. Gary gave him a look from the driver's seat, but Cal just shrugged. "What's an extra pair of hands?"

"Awesome." Andrew turned and yelled, "Hey, Matt, let's go."

Another young firefighter, one from California, jogged up. Cal focused on Andrew with hard eyes but the rookie ignored him, smiling at Cal and Gary as he and his friend joined them in the truck. Cal slammed the door hard, almost hitting Andrew as he climbed in. Alright, Cal wasn't that cocky as a rookie. Later, he would stick Andrew on truck washing duty for the next six months. For now, he told Gary to shut up and drive as he watched the other man hold his lips stiffly together, resisting the desire to laugh.

Gary maneuvered around, partially in the grass, to bypass the parked trucks. Once they got clear road, he sped up, driving parallel to the smoke above the tree lines. Drury's cabin was at the top of Henry Mountain Road, isolated even from the other reclusive second residencies. At they worked their way up, occasional embers fell like red snowflakes in the thickening air. The kids in the back wagered on the progress of the fire, from acreage to rate of spread.

"It won't hit town. We'll contain it before it heads downhill. Guaranteed," Andrew said.

"I don't know. Drought man, that really turns a fire into a beast," Matt said. "I know because I had just started on the department the year before I worked on the Rim Fire out in Cali. I'm surprised you guys have kept the spread down this much. You've got good firefighters here, especially for being volunteers. But containment is hard. I mean, it's not like it's your guys' jobs either." Andrew nodded along, attentive to every word the out of the paid fireman's mouth. Cal appreciated that the Matt kid was using his vacation time to come out to help, but he couldn't let the last comment slide.

"It is our job," Cal said. "We just don't take money for it."

"Right, which is admirable," Matt backtracked a little. "But it's not exactly the same, is it? As volunteers, you don't have the same level of commitment or hours. You know what I mean."

Over the years, Cal had met a lot of paid firemen. Most, especially around here, didn't look at the volunteers any different. But a few, and there were always a few somewhere, thought that making firefighting their career made them better than the men who did it for free. Charlie had always told Cal to never mind those guys, that nothing was ever going to change their opinion, so just do the work and move on. But Cal wasn't very good at keeping his mouth shut, not when the chief for five minutes over at Nolinsville had ignored Charlie and their entire

department during an overturned gasoline tanker, which had got him suspended for a month and a pat on the back, and certainly not with some young stranger in his engine.

"You're right, I know exactly what you mean," Cal began. "You paid guys go through special tests, you get scheduled for training, you work long 24 hours shifts. We wouldn't know what that's like. I mean we don't have shifts. We can come and go to whatever runs we want, depending who's not already at their real job, or too exhausted at 3am for that car wreck on the interstate that won't finish until the kids have to get to school and we go off to our businesses. Although, you know, we do train a bit like you guys. Gary and I take classes in our free time and passed required tests for our EMT certification. We did do that. And of course, there's the tests for all our other training, but we don't get paid or scheduled for that. Then again, it was my choice to miss a week of paying work to go with Charlie for the FEMA training in Florida. I did volunteer, paid for my own ticket too. Yep, seventeen years on this department and I've never got a dime for a single day. All my choice. Andrew buddy, you don't get paid for the 150 hours of training you're supposed to complete in the next year, do you? At least, I hope not, or we might have some other unhappy firemen, cause they certainly didn't get paid when they joined."

"No, sir, I'm not," the rookie whispered. He was being embarrassed in front of his new friend. But the way Cal saw it, his friend had already embarrassed himself.

"You sure are right, Matt. We are very different from the paid firemen."

"I didn't mean any disrespect."

"I'm sure you didn't," Cal agreed. "It's not like over half of the firemen in this country are volunteers. No one would ever want to disrespect that many people who risk their lives."

A buzzing silence settled in the engine's cab. Gary was the only one smiling. Cal was still too annoyed to feel good about knocking the new kid down a peg. The sky got darker as they

reached higher into the hills. Embers, while still sparse, grew larger. A few the size of golf balls glowed at the side of the one lane road.

They rounded a corner and the ground evened out to a thin driveway where another truck parked. Gary pulled up in the small spaced between it and the thick bushes. Both sides rolled their windows. "Ya'll need some help with an old man?" Gary called out over Cal.

"If you wouldn't mind," said the other driver, whose voice matched Happy Valley Eight.

"Nobody is hurt, are they?" Cal checked.

"No, just scared the shit out of us, so far," the fireman said. "When we got back into the truck, he left us alone and went inside."

"Right, well we'll take care of the situation," Gary said, unbuckling his seatbelt. "Go ahead and skedaddle if you boys want. Burr's getting anxious, he'd rather have you back down the hill." The other crew nodded, wished them good luck, and drove away without much fanfare. They were just as eager as their chief to leave Henry Mountain.

Cal asked Gary if he was sure this was a good idea.

"It'll be fine," the driver said, cradling his hardhat under his arm as he slipped down from the truck. "Drury's got twenty minutes to change his mind. If not, I promise, we'll leave him. I won't argue."

"I was more concerned about the gun."

"Oh, that. Well, if he does shoot me, I know you've got the training." The older man grinned, closing the door.

"You're not funny," Cal called out his window to Gary who held up a hand, with the fingers spread wide signaling five minutes. Then he slowly made his way toward the front porch. After just a few steps, the cabin door swung open and a rifle barrel poked straight out.

"Holy Shit," Andrew and his friend jumped up in their seats and nearly crawled over the ones in the front to get a better look. Cal grabbed the door handle, ready to pop out the second the old man fired.

Gary however raised his arms up higher, hardhat clutched in his palm.

"Drury, hey, it's me. Gary Jones. You remember me, I worked with Charlie. Charlie Owens, remember? I came up here once to help fix your generator." The other man stepped out further from the doorway and Cal could see him. Drury wore jeans and a blue plaid shirt. With gloved hands, he held the rifle butt tight to his shoulder, blocking part of his face, but his white hair and mustache stood out.

"I'm not leaving with anybody," he responded with a gravelly voice, clicking back the hammer.

"And I won't make you leave," Gary said. "I swear on Charlie's grave. I just want to talk, Drury." The gun remained steady and pointed at Gary. Cal squeezed the door handle tighter, just waiting for another move.

"Is he going to shoot?"

"He's not going to shoot."

"He's got a loaded gun. He can shoot if he wants to."

"What do we do if he shoots?"

"Shut up," Cal snapped at the backseat, using his free hand to push Andrew away from hovering over his shoulder. The rookie and his friend tumbled back like bowling pins.

He didn't have the patience for youth like he used to. Cal wanted to focus on the man in the doorway and the gun pointed at their driver. He waited for the sound of a gunshot, to see the pop of shells, but really, with a gaze on old Drury Hollis, Cal went back to Shelby Road.

Shelby Road was twisty thing out behind the park, making its way from Three Forks to the even smaller towns of Shady Lake and Beaver Grove, full of thick forests and forgotten hiking trails. It was just on the edge of the department's region, meaning the medical call that came into dispatch went to Three Forks. At mid-day, most of the firemen were still at work. So, Cal left early, racing out to run a scene on his own. According to dispatch, Cal should have found a simple work accident, some sort of fall.

He found Drury Hollis instead. Though fifteen years ago the hair had been darker and fewer wrinkles had crept their way to the surface of his skin, it was the same man planting himself resiliently in his cabin now. But back then, out in the Shelby Road woods, Drury was more dazed than determined. The man had sat in the muck and leaves with blood on his hands and a chainsaw next to him eerily devoid of red. It had taken a few more seconds before Cal realized that blood didn't belong to him. It came seeping from under the fallen tree, where Charlie lay half hidden under the branches, his face a sticky white except for deep, red scratches as the shock set in. Cal dropped his medical bag. Miles away from a main road, the three men were completely alone.

It's a scary job, Charlie had warned Cal.

"Yeah, alright then," Drury finally said, releasing the hammer and immediately dropping the rifle towards the floor. "We can talk." He left the cabin door open for Gary, who waved on Cal before following inside.

Cal hopped out of the truck and directed the other two boys. He put them both on lookout to watch for embers and make sure their safety routes stayed clear. The moment any exits became even potentially compromised, it would be time to leave. With the kids occupied, Cal eased up to the still open door and passed the threshold.

The cabin was simple and small. Just a few feet away at the left, Gary stood with Drury by the fridge, taking the beer being offered, with the rifle still poised under Drury's opposite arm. To the right wall, there were two doors Cal assumed went the bedroom and bathroom, everything else was open space. Only a stone fireplace divided the kitchen and living room. All the furniture appeared several decades old, the couch especially threadbare, some of the brown worn to a tan. The only things that hung on the walls were guns, dead animals, and photos. In numerous frames both on the walls and on nearly every other open surface, pictures of kids filled the cabin, from all different ages, from black and white images to color Polaroids and class pictures, lending to the presence of life in an otherwise blank home.

"You want a drink too?" Drury asked, after a gulp of his own PBR.

"No, no I'm good, thank you," Cal stumbled, taking in all the young faces in the room, some looked familiar but he could quite place them at the distance. "I'm Chief Harper, by the way. I don't know if you remember me…"

"I know who you are. You're Charlie's son," the old man said, working his way to one of the armchairs by the fireplace.

"Son-in-law."

"Same difference, ain't it?"

"I'm not sure."

Drury and Gary sat down, while Cal moved in closer to the side tables. He recognized the kids in the pictures. In the oldest pictures, it was a Drury with a young Charlie. Across the fireplace mantle the pictures crammed together of the two them, evolving even as color over took the pictures. The color though seemed to add the Drury's wrinkles. Cal had trouble understanding how people so close, could end up so far apart. Drury hadn't even showed up to

Charlie's funeral. Then again, Drury was a near recluse even when he wasn't hold up in some cabin. What happened out at Shelby Road had changed Cal's life and Drury had shared it with him, yet that was the only time Cal had seen the man after he and Laurel moved out of their first apartment, into their own tiny house, where they could watch the girls walk to the elementary school each day, sometimes with Juniper taking lead, coming down the road from Charlie's house. Everyone had been close enough to walk together. Now they were spread apart like the embers spit from a fire. Maybe that was what had happened to the Owens and Hollis families, the wrong kind of burn.

The images continued down the row and Cal recognized the toothless grin of his wife as a child sitting in Drury's lap and one of him with Juniper holding an Easter egg basket. All the pictures seemed to be taken in or around the cabin, with the exception of two at the far end. In a hinged frame, in Drury Hollis' cabin, Hayden and Alyssa's grade school pictures were on display.

Cal grabbed the silver frame and shoved it at the old man. "How did you get pictures of my daughters?"

"Laurel Lee," Drury said calmly, resting his rifle upright against the fireplace before getting up to grab the pictures back out of Cal's hand. While Cal was left checking the wrenching feeling in his gut, Drury careful placed the frame at its proper angle in the dust outline, using the black leather of his gloves to wipe off Cal's smudgy fingerprints. "I used to get their pictures every year in my Christmas card. They're real pretty things, just like their momma."

"Laurel's not their birth mother."

"So?" Drury said. "You saying she ain't raised them like a real momma?"

"No, that's not..."

"Good. I'd hate to have to shoot Charlie's son for being rude."

"Drury," Gary interrupted, stepping between the two of them. "I think we need to get to why Cal and I are here. We don't have a lot time."

"I suspect it's about that fire. I'm guessing it's coming out of that valley by the river."

"Then you understand why you need to leave with us?" Gary said, while Cal crossed his arms and continued to stare at the photos in Drury's cabin, wondering why this strange old man kept pictures of people who weren't even his real family. As far as Cal could tell the only blood he had on the walls was Reed Hollis, and the kid wasn't even on the mantle. Something was off about Drury. Cal thought maybe that was why Charlie had left their friendship a secret for so many years.

"I understand why you think I should leave. But that don't mean I'm going nowhere," Drury said, sinking into the weak springs of his yellow armchair, using his rifle almost like a kickstand to ease himself down.

"Drury, this cabin will catch fire and probably soon. You will die if you're still in it," Gary warned.

"Why are people so scared to die? It ain't like it's something to be avoided. You live safe enough, long enough you're still going to die. We're all going to die, just like my Charlie." Drury seemed to trail off for a moment, but Cal was barely paying attention. The discussion between the two other men became more like background noise as Cal stared at the pictures of young Charlie, those in the color and in black and white. His eyes darted back and forth between the two happy faces.

"Please, Drury. I'm asking a neighbor and a friend. Come back down the hill with us," Gary said.

"And I'm telling you, I'm not leaving." The old man rocked back in his chair, a solemn smile across his lips. "This is my home, my land, and my fire. I sure as hell ain't running, not from this fire there. If it's coming for me, I say let it come. We all gotta face the devil sometime." Drury took a hand-rolled cigarette from the pocket of his shirt. "Either of you got a light? I lost mine. Been using the gas stove instead."

Cal patted his sides like Gary but didn't find one. It didn't even occur to him to worry about that fact he didn't feel a lighter in his gear or clothing. Cal was too busy pulling frames off the mantle. For the past few nights, he'd been dreaming about Charlie with pale eyes. Cal hadn't questioned it, they were eyes like the dead, like he'd seen above him at the barn. But when Charlie was alive, his eyes were dark brown. Even in the colorless photo, where Charlie held up his big bass fish for the camera, the dark around his pupils was easy to tell. But in the color photo, where Charlie sat on the porch holding up his crayon drawing, his eyes were light blue, just like Laurel and Juniper. And eyes did not change color like that. Cal picked up the two frames, trying to reconcile the pictures, but he knew what he had in his hands wasn't a problem of color. It was the kind of problem men whispered about when they thought they were dying. "Help, help me," the younger Cal had shouted at near catatonic Drury, kicking at him, while trying to lift the tree trunk off of Charlie in order to pull him out. It had taken several direct kicks to his knees but eventually Drury seemed to blink back into existence. What had taken all of Cal's effort, looked like a shrug on Drury as the wood creaked, moving upwards and releasing Charlie, who dug his elbows into the dirt, shifting himself out before collapsing to his back again.

"Hold his C-spine," Cal continued to order Drury around, pointing and finally placing Drury's hands himself against Charlie's ears. "Don't let him move."

"You're doing great," Charlie said before cringing as Cal reached his abdomen, pressing to check for injuries.

"Bruising, maybe internal bleeding," Cal muttered. Another yell followed as his hands went to Charlie's left leg. "It's broken, compound fracture. I can feel it under your overalls. That's where all the blood is coming from. I think it hit an artery in the thigh. I need…I need…"

"Attend to any life threats," Charlie finished for him between multiple dry, swallows. "You've got to stop the bleeding. I need you to."

"Shit, Charlie."

"Is he going to die?" Drury asked. "Charlie, you better not fucking die," he said, smacking the bleeding man's shoulder. "You can't leave us."

"Look, if it goes bad. It's okay," Charlie said with a grimace. "Just go to Harlan, he knows everything. Just take care of the girls, Laurel, Juniper, and him too," Charlie added, reaching up to his head to give Drury's hand a squeeze. "Take care of my family. Just make sure to tell them all that I love them."

"Charlie, shut up," Cal cut in, yelling at his father-in-law for the first time. "Just shut up." He couldn't let his wife's father die. Even in the beginning, he'd never felt nervous with a patient. He'd been eager, ready to follow any direction thrown at him. He'd led his own scenes a couple times before, for some small accidents and heart attacks. Charlie as his patient had been different. He finally realized the delicate spark of life that was at the whim of his breath. One wrong move, he could blow it all out and Charlie could have died. Later, Cal would think of Shelby Road as the moment he became a real firefighter and medic. That was the change when it

stopped being a rush of adrenaline because his life was at risk, but because of the lives he was saving.

But in the moment, he was too preoccupied with gauze and bracing for the broken bones, to take stock of the growing shift in his entire perception of being a volunteer. He didn't pay attention to Charlie's final wishes, except to hope that he didn't have to fulfill them. As years passed, they were easy to forget too. But now, Charlie was really gone. While the past echoed in Cal's head, he thought about the "him", the family that Charlie was desperate to take care of.

"Drury, this is your last chance," Gary said, handing the old man a plastic Bic. "When we go, there's no coming back for you. Do you really want us to leave you?" The white haired man wasn't paying attention to the firefighter sitting in front of him anymore.

"You see it, don't you?" he asked Cal, grinning widely. "Few people look that hard."

"Who is this?" Cal held out the crayon photo.

"You know who it is. Same as everybody else who don't want to admit it. That's your family." Drury lit up his cigarette. He took a puff, adding, "And mine."

"Cal, what's going on?"

He rubbed at his face, from his chin to forehead, waiting for words to come out. But he couldn't speak, mostly because he wasn't sure himself what was going on. He knew he had a picture that was Charlie but not Charlie and the nagging question that had come from his wife in the middle of the night, "what do you mean someone else is in the will, Juniper?"

Reed Hollis' picture hung on the wall next to a pair of deer antlers. In the image, the young man stood by the cabin fireplace, holding up a bottle of Three Bells whiskey like a victory flag and Reed smiled, his blue eyes shining.

Before he could say anything else to Drury or Gary, the cabin shook, rattling the frames and the guns around the room, as a burst like the air breaking down around them echoed through. Instinctively, everyone ducked and Drury grabbed his gun. A roaring sound continued after the blast and the two boys from outside scrambled into the doorway.

"Cal!"

"Chief Harper!"

They both screamed from the cabin entrance. The other firemen were up, racing outside with them to where a pillar of flames climbed about 30 feet from the cabin to the opposite side of the driveway, blocking the secondary safety route. In the midst of the glowing flames, the former propane tank was a warped shadow in the aftermath of the explosion. As it edged closer, the approaching wildfire had turned into spotting fires. To the western side of the cabin, the demon-like crackles of the flames were louder and the smoke had cast a hand across the sky, blocking out most of the afternoon sun.

"We were watching, I swear, we stayed by the porch and kept eyes on both routes and the forest edge," Andrew panted. "But it just blew, out of nowhere, we didn't even see the fire or the embers hit. It just blew up. Cal, what do we do?"

"We leave. We leave right fucking now," he said. "Mr. Hollis, are you coming with us or not?"

Drury squinted and coughed as the smoke made its way into the clear yard, but he held his gun tight to his chest and shook his head.

"This is my home. I'm not leaving it."

"Drury, be fucking sensible!" Gary said.

"No, forget it. It's done. We're gone," Cal said, pushing the rookie beside him into a speed run towards the truck.

"Goddamn it." Gary stomped, lingering with Drury, but then he joined the crew, hustling back to the engine. Cal was shoving the boys into the back seat, making sure they were in before hopping into the front. Through the windshield, he watched as Gary froze midstride to the driver's door and then start to back up. "Get out, get out of truck!" Gary yelled. He slapped at the grill. "I said, get out!"

"What are you doing? Let's go," Cal yelled back, leaning out of the window.

"Chief, the bushes!" Matt interrupted, pushing Andrew at his right towards the door. Bright orange and yellow flames licked at the back window and the smell of rubber seeped in.

"Shit, just shit," Cal murmured, bailing out with his boys. He jogged up to Gary and could see the burning bushes on the other side. From there, the fire had spread, consuming the back tires and climbing into the truck. More embers, some growing to size of baseballs, found surfaces to burn. The main fire was pushing its way through the forest and the spotting had cut them off from their small window to leave. In a few quick bursts, everything had changed. The flames were coming for them, all of them. And Cal knew they had nowhere left to go.

Their group stood, watching the truck fall under. As the fire reached the wiring and the engine, the siren went off, loud at first with the lights flashing and then, like rabbits caught in a bonfire, it squealed and shrieked before tapering off and going dark.

Cal paced, going back and forth, looking at his men, the dying truck, and the cabin, where Drury still stood, watching them. He searched for something to do, something to get them out, the kind of answer that Charlie would have. But Cal wasn't Charlie.

"We could run, try to make it back to command or a rehab station," Andrew suggested, his voice shaking.

"The fire is moving too fast. It would catch us before we made it to the next house," Gary explained, leaning over onto his knees.

"Well that's what our personal shelters are for, aren't they?" the kid whined, pacing around the other firemen. Cal sidestepped to avoid him when their paths almost tangled. "What other options do we have?"

"None, we've got none. Don't you get it?" Gary yelled, standing back up. "We're stuck here!" He sighed. "Cal, I'm sorry. I'm so sorry."

Cal waved him off and finally stopped, staring back at the old man and the cabin, the only building for maybe half a mile. The rookie was right, they needed a shelter, but not the small tents in their gear. There was still too much risk with those and this devil of a fire. Cal knew the only thing they could do. They needed to save the structure.

"Everybody inside. Get in the house," Cal ordered. The other firemen hesitated first but followed directions when Cal smacked at their shoulders, bellowing, "NOW!"

His men broke into a run and Cal took up the tail end. Without complaint, Drury twisted his shoulders, letting the men rush by him, closing the door after Cal. He went to offer more beers to the men but Cal cut him off.

"No, we might need them, and other liquid in the house."

"For what?"

"To save this stupid cabin," he said.

Drury laughed, popping the top of his own beer before sitting at the kitchen table. "That's new, but I've always thought a fine beer could save the world. You know, it might do you boys some good to stop worrying. Let whatever's gonna come, come."

Cal went over behind Drury and in one swift motion jerked the patio chair out from under the old man. The beer fell out of his hand, spilling out over the wooden floor. Drury jerked up, pulling his rifle on Cal as he turned.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?"

"Saving your life," Cal said, pushing the barrel out of his face with the back of his hand. "You didn't want to leave. Now, we can't leave. But I'm not going to let my men die for some stubborn son of a bitch. If we keep the cabin from burning, we maintain a shelter, which means we survive. And you're going to help whether you like it or not."

"Oh yeah, cause you say so?"

"No, because it's the decent thing to do and it's your home we're saving." Drury sneered but lowered his gun the rest of the way.

"Fine. Take the goddamn beer. Take anything, I don't give a shit. But I'm not lifting a finger. I didn't ask any of you to come here."

"But we are here."

Drury flipped the bird at Cal and then shuffled over to his armchair, facing away from the firemen in his kitchen area. Though he wanted another pair of hands, Cal would settle for a lack of interference. With little time to prepare, Cal let Drury's outburst go and began setting his men to task. He sent to boys after tools, what they could salvage from the truck, to start on a fire break at least ten feet from the house. They would start on the western side, clearing away woodland debris, any flammable twigs or grass that would let the fire cross closer to the home.

Cal wanted Gary to find a water hose, in hopes they could give the house a soak and prevent embers from setting up a smolder.

The crew was about half way to the door when Drury muttered something about a toolshed behind the cabin.

"It's got shovels, axes and stuff," he said. "The spout and hose is right next to it too."

"Drury, thank…"

"Shut up and fight your fire," the old man grumbled, getting up and taking off for the bedroom.

"He's right, get a move on," Cal said, returning to his men. "I'll radio to command and join you." Once the door closed, he went back to the pictures on the mantle and the call. "May Day, May Day, May Day. Three Forks Three."

"Three Forks Three, this is North Ballard One. What's going on? Are you boys caught on return?"

"North Ballard…" Cal paused and then clicked back in. "Cowboy, we aren't returning." He let go and listened to the long hesitation in the static as he once again found himself focused on the blue-eyed boy who wasn't Charlie. There was a story there, one that spanned loves, lives, and deaths. But Cal knew it wasn't his story, not right now.

"Three Forks, please repeat."

"Three Forks has lost safety routes. We're still at the cabin."

"Cal, I'm sending a crew now. We'll get you out."

"No, don't send anyone else into this mess." Cal moved down the mantle to his girls, in pictures so old that Hayden and Alyssa were still at the age they could crawl into bed on stormy nights, curled between him and Laurel. Time was a rough force. It had turned his little girls into

women, Laurel from that toothless child to a childless wife. He would give anything to touch them right now, to hold them until they couldn't breathe. But all his fingers could stroke were the glass covers of their pictures.

"Then what do you want me to do?"

"Nothing. Look, we're going to try to maintain the structure. Wait it out until the black."

"That could take hours, Cal. Let me call somebody, flight support or evac from one of the cities," Cowboy rushed out, the static cutting in more and more.

"It would take too long. This is our best option."

"No, Cal, let me…" Cowboy didn't finish. White noise came through and that was all. Cal tried to get through, repeatedly calling for North Ballard One and switching channels, but he received no response. The radio signal had gone. The fire itself couldn't do that, but it could take down the tower on Henry Mountain, which meant they had only minutes before the flames would be clear on their way through the trees. Cal took the pictures of his girls again, slipping them into the pocket of his gear.

Cal made his sure his shroud was wrapped properly around his shoulders and face and put on his goggles before going back outside. Each time he left the cabin, it felt like a deeper level of hell. The smoke had increased and the column from the incoming fire made everything dark like a sunset. The propane and the truck still burned. Embers fell like red snow flurries. Andrew and Matt had a good fire break started and water dripped from the walls of the cabin as Gary sprayed with the hose. But would it be enough? Deep in the trees, Cal could see the flames that surrounded them.

"I'm not sure I'm getting the top of the roof," Gary said.

"Andrew," Cal called out. He switched places with the rookie, digging into the ground as the kid climbed up cabin, using the porch rails and then corner logs to lift himself to the top. Gary tossed the hose up, so Andrew could give the roof a good spray. He was about to come down when Cal realized it would be a better idea for him to stay. "Keep the hose and keep watch, don't let anything up there burn. And make sure that shroud stays on."

The wind shot through and the crackles roared as the fire tore its way to the edge of the forest. Flames rushed, enveloping everything in their path up to the clearing that separated the cabin from the tree line. The radiant heat intensified, pulling sweat from the Cal and his men, aching to char them if not for their protective gear. Like hands reaching, the flames grasped for anything they could burn.

"Brace yourselves," Cal yelled. "Eyes open, watch for spotting!" He had Matt keep digging, while he and Gary ran the perimeter, making sure nothing crossed as the grass caught fire and danced over to the fire break. What worried him though was the crowning, the fire up at the top of the trees, looking for the next spot to jump to. In a normal situation, it would burn the cabin and the trees along side, but Andrew jogged up and down the length of the roof, putting out stray fires. So, the fire worked around, circling the cabin through the trees.

The forest was reduced to dark lines, outlined in vibrant orange shadows that looked alive, and with each gust of wind or crackle from the burning wood, the shadows broke apart flying past the fire break. Cal and the men ran to each ember, to each potential fire, ensuring that nothing caught for more than a moment. They would have to do this for hours, until the black came, until everything burned down and the fire moved past them. This made time the enemy too.

After half an hour of chasing small ignition points, their water backpacks were getting low. Cal was soaking through his clothes under the gear. He pulled down his shroud long enough to drink from his canteen between jogging from spark to spark. The heat had warmed the water just shy of simmering, but it went down. He was going to get back to pumping water or even helping Matt, who still dug around the property, when he felt a sort of vertigo to his steps, finding he had to focus harder through his goggles. He shook it off and took another drink, his mouth was getting drier by the moment. As the smoke, grey and thick, billowed around, Cal kept running. He coughed, wishing they had gotten the air packs out of the truck, but they wouldn't have been enough to last them until the black anyway, maybe thirty minutes of air, if lucky. At least this way they had water packs, which got lighter with use. Yet Cal couldn't shake the feeling that he felt heavier the longer he was out there. He noticed his reactions slow on seeing embers and his eyes felt dry and tired. But it wasn't until he ran by Gary, who stood and ignored the embers that had fallen on the back part of the porch, that he realized something was actually wrong.

"Gary, hey, what are you doing?" he asked, shaking the other firefighter after he took care of the small burn.

"I don't know." Gary shrugged. "I just stopped to watch to the fire, it's just, it's really...I don't know. I just started watching them move." He gestured limply to the trees at the back of the cabin that were burning.

"What's wrong with you?"

"Nothing, nothing's wrong with me...me...meee," Gary repeated, playing with the sound of the word. His voice vibrated under the thick shroud. Then he stopped. "Hey, do you smell what I've been smelling?"

"It's just smoke, Gary. Are you having trouble breathing, is that what this is? Have you inhaled too much?"

"Don't you smell it? Like…spring and moss and…and I know this smell. I know I know this smell. It's like…like..." Gary tried snapping his fingers through his gloves to recall the memory, but the material just rubbed together. The fireman trailed off watching his useless fingers, then he burst out into a laugh. "Ha, I remember."

"What?"

"Weed. Ha, it smells like fucking weed." Behind the goggles, Gary's face sharply changed from amusement to panic. "Oh, god. Cal, I think I'm high." Then, just as quickly his chest started to shake again before releasing another series of laughs. "I'm messed up."

"What are you talking about, Gary?" Cal asked, shaking his partner, who laughed the more he was manhandled.

Cal let him go, pushing him down to a seat on the porch. Cal blinked, over and over, trying to see through his dry eyes and trying to make sense of his only other veteran firefighter falling apart. He shook his head, as though he could throw off the slow haze that bogged him down, and turned on his heels to the fire that was one lazy move from over taking them all. The smoke had already consumed half the air around them. Cal watched it flow like oceans waves, dark with the debris eaten as fuel. He tried to understand what Gary was on about with the smell. It smelled like smoke, the same smoke wood always smelled of, bittersweet. He started to run again, covering the ground that had taken both men. As he went to the back of the house, where Gary had been watching, Cal noticed the smoke changing color, getting lighter, as it made its way over the hill below the home. Something else was burning down there. Though it choked him, Cal took a deep breath, and like Gary, this time he could smell the difference.

Stumbling over his own boots, Cal darted back to the cabin, pulling Gary up from his seat. He yelled over the flames, tossing Matt their water packs, with what little was left, to watch the fire break. Then he guided Gary, walking like a puppet under Cal's hands, inside. When they entered the cabin, Drury was standing at the window, a spectator to the wildfire that made the room glow a deep orange. Cal left the door open wide as he dived at the old man, using the rifle to pin him against the wall, the cold metal digging at his Adam's apple.

"Get off me," Drury sputtered, trying to push the gun away, kicking at Cal's legs. Even Gary, dazed and high, told Cal to back off, limply pulling at his shoulders.

Cal could barely feel his hands, numb and tired from the work and from the strange smoke, but he focused, tightening his grip over the barrel and the shaft.

"You worthless piece of shit," Cal spit at him. "A pot farm. Your goddamn pot. That's why you wouldn't leave, isn't it?" He pushed harder. Drury squeezed his eyes, gasping for a breath. "We put ourselves at risk, our lives, to get you out of here and we get stuck because you won't leave your fucking drugs!"

"No. No," Drury croaked.

"Well, guess what. They're gone anyway, half way to ash and cinders."

"Cal, let him go!" Gary finally jerked the neck of the coat, knocking Cal off balance. The rifle dropped and everyone fell back. Drury hunched over, hacking and coughing between his knees. "Have you lost your mind?" Gary asked Cal, who leaned on the back of the nearest chair.

Cal didn't get a chance to answer. Like a bullet himself, Drury launched at Cal, tackling his midsection and throwing him to the floor. A bony, old knee jabbed into his side, just under the ribcage. Cal contorted with the blow, holding his arms up to block as the man on top searched for an opening with his fists. Despite his age, there was a power to Drury's hits. The old

man had kept his strength, but he was still smaller. Cal shifted his hips, gaining the momentum needed to flip Drury off.

He could have left it at that, but riled up and pissed off, Cal decided to throw a punch, landing on Drury's mouth. Teeth bruised his knuckles, but it was worth it when Drury sprayed out blood as he spit at the floor. Cal blocked the next swing, but the second connected with his jaw, making his ears ring. Everything else, any thoughts, reason, or Gary's calls at both men to grow the hell up and calm down, faded away into a mess of limbs trying to inflict a hit and the scramble of Cal and Drury, hammering each other back and forth into the hardwood floor.

"You stubborn old man," he said. "We might die just because of you."

"That's not what I wanted."

"Right, you just didn't want to leave your pot field in the back." Drury snorted as he landed another blow, this time to Cal's temple as the helmet fell off onto the floor.

"You don't know what you're talking. You don't fucking know me. You're just a stupid kid."

They each grunted and groaned, attempting to find the upper hand. Cal expected it to be easy to take the older man, but age barely withered the strength that helped lift that tree off Charlie more than a decade ago. Cal ended up with more than a few throbbing muscles from elderly impact. Blood smeared across his goggles, some Drury's and some his. They were both panting like old dogs when Drury rolled on top of him again, this time the small framed pictures in Cal's pocket fell out, clattering out and open on Hayden and Alyssa's posed grins.

Cal flinched, waiting for the next hit, but Drury's gloved fist paused in the air above, then it lowered, picking up Cal's daughters. The old man climbed off Cal, shuffling over to a table to help pull himself up.

"Thank god, finally some sense." Gary sighed, laying back on the couch. "Are you both done now?"

"Yeah, I'm done," Drury whispered, huffing in and out to catch his breath. Once more, he put Hayden and Alyssa on the mantle.

"Those are my daughters. I don't want them there," Cal said, heaving himself up as well.

"Too bad. They're my pictures."

Cal felt dizzy from getting up too fast. All the movement had brought some of his head back, his mind moving a little faster, clearer, but his body needed to catch up. Regardless of a bout of cleaner air and exercise, Cal knew he was still stoned, which frustrated him and made him feel angry all over again.

"I swear to God," he mumbled, reaching over to Drury, grabbing a handful of his arm. "If I don't get to see my daughters again...if I die because you're a stubborn druggie..."

"I didn't want anybody else to die. It's was just supposed to be me!" Drury turned away from the mantle to Cal at his shoulder. Cal jumped backward, surprised, even more after he saw the tear the caught in the wrinkles along Drury's cheek. "No one was supposed to know I was even here. I've waited days for that damn fire to find me and then you assholes come and ruin it." He swung his arm out of Cal's grip and jabbed a finger into his chest. "It's not about the drugs, you idiot. I don't give a shit about them. I never have. It's just a means to an end, fills the time. You know what I care about? This cabin, my home, and these people." Drury gripped the mantle. "The only thing that has ever kept me sane and they just keep dying. And I'm tired of being left here, not doing any good to nobody. This is what I did. It's my mess. I just wanted to clean it up. And you fuckers wouldn't let me."

"Whatever is going on, you don't have to kill yourself," Cal said. As much as he didn't like the man, even wanting to keep pounding him into the floor, death seemed a lazy answer to any problem.

"I don't have to. I want to," he said, taking the picture of the blue eyed Charlie off the mantle. "Reed'll be better off. I don't think he'll forgive me for lying to him." Drury held the frame to his flannel shirt, staring down on at the little boy. Even Cal wasn't so obliterated to need anything more to tell him that Reed was the kid in the picture, or why a boy with no connection to the Owens could look so much like Charlie, or could have the same blue eyes as Cal's wife and her sister.

"You lied about his father, didn't you? All of you did. Charlie…" the words caught in Cal's throat. He knew they had to be true, but it didn't make it easier, the idea that Laurel had a brother she never knew, that lives were about to be upended, that Drury knew more about the man Cal had idolized for most of his adult life. Cal coughed it out. "He's Reed's father, isn't he?"

Drury shot up straight, glancing at Cal before looking back at the picture in his hands.

"God, no."

"What?"

Cal's confusion was interrupted by Matt rushing in from the fire, carrying empty backpacks. "Chief, I'm out of water. What do you want me to do?"

For a moment, Cal had forgotten the fire, like it was a dream or part of the haze and it came barreling back in full force. He turned to Drury, one last glance. He knew so little about the other man. They were connected by nothing except the family they loved, so much so they had stood together once watching the ambulance tear back through Shelby Road as the EMTs

finished the work to save Charlie's life. But it wasn't enough for Cal to neglect the other lives he was responsible for. No one could save Drury Hollis, save himself.

"Any liquid in the house, cokes, beer, water, anything that isn't real alcohol," Cal said. "Take it, start pouring it on anything that looks hot. Keep Andrew on the roof with the hose. Gary, get up, start filling the backpacks up. You and me, kid." Cal patted Matt's shoulder, abandoning Drury to his mantle of frozen faces and twisted family lines. The two of them empty out of the fridge, finding Gatorades and sodas, carrying them out by the handfuls, back in the heat and smoke, which Cal could finally smell distinct with the sweet, dry taste of weed. His eyes began to feel too big for his head and his eyelids too weak to endure the hours it could still take before they were safe in the black. Of course, time felt more infinite with delayed senses and slow to react reason. If the kids felt the effects, they appeared less bothered by the situation. A thought that occurred to Cal to examine further after this.

With no other options, fighting time and intoxication, he and Matt popped tabs and screwed off caps, chasing after embers and preventing crossovers on the fire line. It may have been desperate means but it worked until Gary delivered full packs, filled slowly by the kitchen faucet. The spent another hour of rotating between beer cans and packs.

Cal started to believe that they could make it. The grass burned out and the roaring seemed farther behind them than coming toward them. Flames still engulfed the house and the property around it, but they were fighting and it felt like winning.

Cal stopped, out of breath, dumping the last of a Gatorade bottle on a small burn by the fire line close to their truck, the red paint laden down with black and soot, as it glowed from the flames hugging it from the outside in. As soon as the road behind it cleared down to charred trees

and ash layers, they could make their way out, walking down the hill. If the wind just kept pushing, they would be so near to the end. Cal knew it. He could feel it.

When he got the chance, he would run home if that's what it took. He would sweep up Laurel, hold onto her soft body for the rest of the night, reminding her over and over how much he loved her, loved that she was fierce, that she was broken. He loved all of her pieces, the sharp and the delicate. He would hold his daughters too, in the way that scared him because they were growing too big for his arms. He would do it all right. Everything would be more thought out, it would be better. He would work harder. He'd give them everything he promised. And when he didn't, when he failed on these promises too, because he's was certainly a little high and ready to promise moons and stars or servitude to any god that saw fit to strike him down, he'd still remember how much he loved them, how much he would always love them. That was the only promise he could actually make and he would make it again and again regardless of the weed in the air.

But promises had little to do with fate.

While Cal swore everlasting love in his head, his bloodshot eyes watched a blackened tree near the truck start to splinter at its base, creaking and crying out from the fire eating away its strength. The men started to shout, Matt, Andrew, Gary. They saw it too, the way it leaned, finding the angle with which it would fall across the fire line, because no matter what angle, it was going to cross, spreading the flames that cheered eagerly all the way to the crown. The question was where Cal would be.

One wrong fall.

It had left Charlie bleeding under a tree, Cal the sole responder on Shelby Road, and Drury the witness to a final plea. It had left them all facing fear and death. Cal knew he was

facing them both again. Two hours, he'd been moving, fighting this inevitability with his crew. Cal was exhausted, reluctantly high and he stalled, unable to make a decision, to choose a direction, as the dark trunk faltered, making its way down in a smooth line. All choices seemed to leave Cal trapped, so he made none. A pair of gloved hands made it for him, yanking on the neck of his jacket, pulling him toward the cabin side.

Cal fell onto Drury's body and they both went to the ground. The tree dropped, jarring the ground, and a cloud of sparks burst out. Arms went up as shields to block the spray. As things settled, the other firemen rushed over, even Andrew climbed down from the roof. Cal shook the burning flecks from his hair and his body. He got up quickly, reaching down to Drury, who brushed himself off first.

"I told you, no one else was supposed to die but me," the old man said in a near growl before taking the hand being offered. At the same instant, both Cal and Drury seemed to realize that it was a mistake, as they stiffened, looking from their clasped hands to each other. In the fall, Drury had lost a glove, exposing the burned, yet healing, skin that in blotches covered the back of his hand to his fingers and palms. Cal met Drury's eyes, so cold and blue they were almost ice clear, eyes that had stared over him at the Young farm and in his grave nightmares. Shaking off a chill, despite the heat, Cal let go of Drury. He left the old man sitting on the ground. And the fire, hungry and finding untouched and easy to burn ground, climbed from the tree toward them and the cabin.

Laurel in Hell

Laurel had felt it like a boulder between her hips, heavy and pressing from the inside out. The dampness rushed over her as she stepped down from her Ford Explorer. She'd been too busy, organizing unpaid bills and trying to get the girls to finish the laundry she'd started, to acknowledge the pain. Though already late for work, instead of clocking in, she now shuffled her way through the back door of the truck stop and into the bathroom. In the stall, she sat and gazed down at the underwear hanging by her ankle and the rust colored blotch straining the paisley print. At first, she saw a rhino. But the longer she stared, chin propped up in her hands, as if she were faced with one of those psycho tests with the ink butterflies, she saw rabbits. A whole mess of them in red seeping slowly out and into the fabric fibers. Bloody rabbits.

Laurel sighed, finally kicking off the underwear and the rabbits, and sifted through her giant purse to find a tampon, the same as she did most months. When she finished, she had half a mind to throw her underwear in the trash, just so she'd have one less thing to deal with. But she caught herself, thinking about the money they'd cost and the awkwardness of going commando during her shift. She tossed them into one of the sinks outside the stall, turning the hot water on full blast so that it became a soft pink as she scrubbed. Though the water cleared, a brown cast remained on the material. It always did. Blood was hard to wash out.

Laurel used to be more patient when it came to stains. They were inevitable disasters. She'd raised two wild girls and partially even one before them, who came in with dirt streaks, scabbed knees bleeding through, spilled Kool-Aid, and mustard drips like bits of artwork on their clothes. Stains used to be a sign of a well-lived life, an adventure survived. But the stains that discolored a majority of her underwear, old and brown like the damp pair she wrung out in her gold-ringed grasp, felt nothing like life. They were constant reminders that she had no life. But

she knew she wasn't dead, or at least she hoped death didn't hurt this much, as if the rabbits themselves coming back to tunnel and gnaw their way through her abdomen. She found some off-brand Tylenol in her purse too, swallowing them dry as she used her elbow to jab the silver button to the hand dryer. It roared, and she spread out the thin wet panties to capture as much of the air as possible.

The underwear was still damp when the machine powered off, so Laurel pushed the button again. It took ten cycles before the pair was dry enough for her return to the stall to put them on and not worry about wet spots seeping through. The elastic waistband was warm so she held it out briefly letting it cool before releasing it to snap into place. She blinked when it stung more than expected, then she shimmed her khakis up, its silver button struggling to stay in its worn loop. At the door, she turned, remembering to tuck her shirt in to avoid a write-up from Dougie, the owner, when he watched the shift's surveillance footage. She was twenty minutes late to clock-in by the time she left the bathroom. Not that she was desperately needed.

Laurel was the kind of person who even if she didn't like her job, which she didn't, still wanted actually to work when she was at work. But the fire had driven away most of the summer business of the Truck Stop. Normally, there would be lines to all four of the gas pumps, semi-trucks circling the store, and kids plucking every candy from the shelves that they could convince their parents to buy. She was used to harried families, the regular truckers, and locals coming in for a quick snack to make her shifts go quickly by. For the last week, everything had drug like heels in the dirt. People no longer got off the interstate once they saw smoke from the overpass. When she had pulled up to the store, there were two cars and one news van. She could already see a long afternoon and night of dusting dollar chip bags, wiping down the trashcans for

feminine products in the bathroom, and whatever other filler jobs Dougie would expect to be done.

The news people sat at one of the booths by the windows, whispering to themselves over coffee cups and making notes on napkins next to a pile of crumpled notepad papers. Laurel's co-worker Bobbi Lee was behind the counter, chatting with Mariah Burgess, whose belly looked painfully bloated under her pink maternity shirt, the sight of which caused Laurel to stop mid-step. Mariah also worked for the Truck Stop, but she was supposed to be out for the next few weeks since she was close to her due date. Laurel had been looking forward to those weeks. She'd grown increasingly irritated each time she saw Mariah. Barely out of high school, Mariah was on her second baby, though she gabbed on and on like it was her first.

"They'll induce Friday if I don't go into labor by tomorrow," Mariah said, leaning against the counter that separated her and Bobbi Lee. "I wish they'd just do it now. JJ and I are so anxious to meet her." Laurel watched out of the corner of her eye as Mariah rubbed her whale of a stomach. Everything else about the girl was so small, it seemed a wonder she didn't tip over any minute. "Not to mention, I'm tired of having to piss every five minutes," Mariah joked to her friend.

Laurel went around the barrier, throwing her purse into one of the empty cabinets under the cigarette caddies. The other girls stopped their baby talk long enough to say hello. Laurel gave a brief greeting, more like a grunt, in reply.

"Hey, are you charging those guys for each refill?" Laurel whispered, nudging her chin to the back booth.

"Yeah, the anchor lady gave me a twenty and said to just let them know when they went over," Bobbi Lee said, pulling out the bill from under the cash register.

"How are our numbers?"

"Shittay." Bobbi Lee logged into her computer screen and started the print off for Laurel as assistant manager. "Luckily we've had some big sales with the fire trucks filling up earlier. And don't worry I won't tell Dougie you were late," the younger girl added with a laugh. "It's not like I was slammed or anything."

"Thanks," Laurel said, taking the slip. She grabbed the clipboard hanging from a nail on the wall and started the mid-shift paperwork. She regretted not having more questions for Bobbi Lee as Mariah resumed their discussions about delivery rooms, maternity clothes, puffy feet, and, of course, yesterday's baby shower.

"The cake was huuuge," Mariah said, expanding her arms. "I told Momma I didn't need one that big. I'm not supposed to be eating too much sweets with the gestational diabetes. But she don't ever listen. I mean, it was cute as can be with the Stork on top and Shalaylee's name, but we've got a whole shelf of cake in the fridge now. JJ is gonna get fat as me if he eats it all."

"Aw, I wish I could have been there. But Danny wouldn't watch the boys. Said he was too tired from working the fire. Not that I blamed him. It's been rough on them out there, him and Cal especially I bet," Bobbi Lee said.

Laurel glanced up from her scribbling. She'd had her eyes tight to the numbers just so she wouldn't have to get involved in the conversation.

"Yeah, it's been rough," she echoed and nodded, then chewed on her pen cap.

"Is that why you didn't make it either?" Mariah asked, hands under her stomach like they were the only thing holding it up.

This wasn't like Tyler Richard's birthday party. Laurel couldn't pretend to have never received the invitation like she had with Sarah. Mariah had hand delivered the pink rubber ducky

cutouts to each employee at the Truck Stop. She could have gone. She hadn't even worked yesterday. Instead, she'd laid in bed until noon, read a trashy romance novel on the couch, and finished the day off with a marathon of *Crime Scene Stories* while she did chores. She really had no excuse, except that she didn't do showers. No showers, no birthdays, no christenings or baptisms, no bar or bat mitzvahs, though not that she knew any Jewish people in Three Forks. She didn't go anywhere that she would have to celebrate other people's children, and certainly not their babies. It was all she could do to maintain her barest tolerance of Mariah's and any pregnant woman's presence.

"Yeah," Laurel agreed, jumping onto the easy scape goat of her husband, rather than admit the truth to a pair of twenty-something children. She didn't need them to know each time she looked at Mariah's belly she wanted to scream, that sometimes when she saw babies sitting in their carriers or buggies she wondered how far she could run before someone would notice the child was gone, or that sometimes when she went to sleep she felt so hollow she wondered why she would even bother waking up the next morning. "He was beat. He needed me to take care of things at the house." Cal hadn't made it home until nearly midnight, long after the baby shower had ended.

Her husband hadn't even known about the shower. Laurel had crumbled the ducky invitation into a ball at the bottom of her purse within seconds of receiving it. If he'd known, Cal would have made her go. He would have called her bitter and told her she was being a bad friend until it guilted her into showing up at Mariah's mother's place. Which is why she hadn't told him. Cal didn't get it. Neither had Charlie. Nobody understood it, not even her mother, Nora, because they all had kids. It was so easy for everyone to tell her to move on, that ten years was plenty of time to move on from the fact she was as dried up as the old lake on the county line. As

if a betrayal of the body like that was so easy to move on from. And maybe it would be if the world didn't constantly seem to remind her.

Laurel stared at the pink-shirted belly on the other side of the counter. She could picture the small body curled up inside, the precious bit of life. Why not be bitter? She thought when Cal called her that. She read enough news stories of women selling their toddlers to men or killing them outright in the bathtub. She watched women like Gerry Skaggs come into work with a hoard of kids trailing behind her and pull out an EBT card, popping them out just for the government cash. Then there were girls like Mariah, not bad girls or even bad mothers, but so young and unprepared, who seemed to become mothers because it was easy, because it beat boredom or doing something else with their lives. And that left her, a good person, a hard working person, who wanted to be a mother because she knew taking care of people was the core of her soul. She wanted to give over everything she had to another person, to someone who would want it. She wanted to put that kind of good back into the world.

And her mother Nora wondered why Laurel didn't pray to God anymore.

"Well it's a shame. You both missed a good time," Mariah said. "We played a whole bunch of games. And I got some of the cutest little dresses for Shaylalee and a new crib."

"Why did you even have a shower?" Laurel asked, through the teeth clench on the blue ballpoint. Before the awkward silence could take hold, she pulled the pen from her mouth and clarified. "I just mean, don't you still have all the stuff from Landon's shower. He's only two."

"Yeah, we do. But Landon is a boy. Shaylalee is gonna be a girl. We needed girl stuff."

Tacky, Laurel resisted saying, because not only would that be ruder than she ever was, but then she would sound like her mother, who decreed things like multiple baby showers tacky because it's greed and pride, sins in the eyes of Jesus.

"Bobbi Lee, do you want to leave early?" Laurel asked, knowing she couldn't take much more of conversation, and Mariah was liable to hang around all day. "It's slow. I don't really need you and it's gonna skew our labor costs if you stay."

"Heck yeah," the short haired girl said, perking up.

"We can go to Puerto's for lunch," Mariah suggested, instantly happier as well. "They say spicy food can get things into gear." Both girls laughed, while Laurel remained stone faced pulling out the drawer to tally out. As she counted money, she could feel the rabbits shifting in her gut, wild feet stomping in her groin until the pain killers finally kicked in. It only took a couple minutes to balance the drawer and clock Bobbi Lee out. The pain eased as the girls left, but she still dug through her purse, tacking on another half dose of Tylenol. She washed it down with a fountain coke that she had to purchase because Dougie was a stingy bastard, and there were cameras everywhere.

Not long after Laurel set up the new drawer, her only customers got a call and went scrambling for their van, tailing the next big segment or just repeats of the same tired wildfire story. It baffled her how much people could report on a few burning trees.

Laurel was alone in the gas station. She turned up the volume of the radio to drown out the quiet and finished her paperwork to Big Beaver Country Station blasting from speakers across the ceiling. Then she spent half an hour straightening snacks on the shelves after a quick sweep of the barely tread tiles. When it was clear no one was coming to the Truck Stop today, she cheated the cameras. Pretending she was heading to the bathrooms to clean, she snuck outside to the back left corner outside the building where Dougie's lenses didn't reach. She sat on the yellow sidewalk. She stretched out her legs, leaning against the gritty concrete wall.

Her purple lighter, the one Cal had given her, remained in her purse inside the store. Laurel lifted up one hip, pulling out a silver Zippo from her back pocket instead. She had stomped when it struck her bare foot back at the house. She tossed the jeans it had fallen from violently into the washer, the material smacking at the sides, muttering obscenities under breath. The bit of muscles and veins between her big toe and her ankle still ached, but she cared less now. The pain had faded like a lost radio signal when she picked the lighter up from the linoleum and realized what lighter it was.

Laurel rolled the lighter between her fingers, the way she remembered seeing it done as a kid, shifting it from one knuckle to the other. She stopped, suspending it on her middle finger. The lighter stood on its corner like a sunken gravestone, inscribed like one too. The Owens name decorated the lid, and below it, the way gravestones quoted biblical verses, read *When I die I'll go to heaven cause I spent my time in hell.* Most of Laurel's childhood seemed buried under this piece of metal. And while she didn't know how or why, and she wasn't even sure either mattered, holding it after twenty years felt like digging all that past up again.

Most of the time, Laurel didn't want to bring up the past as it echoed of mistakes and guilt, the way the present echoed of disappointment. But the Zippo suddenly made her consider that maybe it wasn't the past itself as much as it was the way she remembered it that troubled her. She wondered why some memories survived over others. She could recall endless summer afternoons, dry and sticky hot like this one, where she played outside Drury's cabin and ran through the trees for the lightening bugs rising with the dusk, while Charlie and Drury sat next to each other on the porch. Laurel remembered the sound of them laughing at a distance, clinking their beer bottles together. But she couldn't think of a single time her parents laughed together liked that, or even a time where she saw them kiss for that matter. Why could she easily bring

back the screams of her parents breaking beyond closed doors and not quiet nights with them reading her bedtime stories, nights that she knew happened but never appeared like all the rest?

It was easy to forget that some things about her life had been happy. But happiness did exist, deep under the worm ridden dirt of other memories, there was a before, when Charlie and Nora loved each other, when Drury Hollis and even his sister Laura were friends who came around. There was happiness for her when Pap was still alive and he owned the lighter currently in her hand.

The happiness Laurel remembered was being small and fitting into Pap's lap as he torched his hand rolled cigarettes, drawing in the smoke between those sandpaper lips, rough and ragged like the rest of him. He smelled always of fresh cut tobacco and Old Spice, never the bitterness of the smoke itself. When he finished lighting up, he'd lean back into his chair and take his arm around her again. She liked to snuggle in closer to the scent and his starch stiff shirt. There was where he'd return the lighter to her, while he blew out away from her face.

She'd wasted entire afternoons in her grandfather's embrace. When Nora or Charlie raised objections to Pap's chain smoking around their daughter, Pap squeezed Laurel tighter.

"Aw, keep your britches on. It ain't gonna hurt her none," he said each time. "I'm doing the smoking here. Are you bothered by the smoke, babydoll?" Pap would ask Laurel, who shook her head. Then Pap always gave her peppermints from his shirt pocket. While she would clack the hard candy around her teeth and he would draw on the crinkled cigarette, they watched reruns of *Gunsmoke* or *Rawhide* until her parents were ready to go home.

As a child, Laurel felt safe next to Pap, even when Nora called the old man gruff and meaner than a hornet's nest, and said this was to blame for why the women he dated never seemed to stay longer than a square dance. Still, all she knew was hidden sweets and his hands

gently patting on her back. And Nora said awful things about the people she had loved those days. According to Nora, Charlie was a philanderer and Drury was a carnal heathen. Laurel felt confusion trying to melt together her mother's vitriol and her own idolization of the men who sat around the living room doting on her, especially Drury. Most of her mother's snide words were reserved for the quiet man, and, yet, he was the one who treated her least like decoration to sweep aside when other things arose.

If Laurel spent her childhood living in Pap's lap, Drury's was where she vacationed.

"Go on, baby doll," Pap told her, lifting her from the ribs and standing her on the carpet. "Drury's done lost his lighter again. You give him mine."

She'd join Drury on his seat in the couch where he held her differently than other people. Others, even Pap, still held her like a baby, cradled to one side or splayed across the lap. Drury always twisted her straight forward, her back to his chest, like he was her own chair, and she was big enough to hold herself.

"You wanna light me up?" he asked, the cigarette dangling from his lips just above her forehead. Drury never took the lighter from her. He let her flip open the lid and waited patiently for her weak, soft fingers to roll the striker fast enough to catch a spark. Her parents didn't like that either. Charlie, particularly.

"You're teaching her fire is something to play with," her father said once to Drury, frowning under his shaggy hair. It was strange for Laurel to think of Charlie with hair. Charlie always seemed balding and wrinkled in her memories. It was too childish in her mind for Charlie to be anything but old. But, for once, she couldn't picture her father any other way than smooth faced and young, standing up to the more worn Drury.

"No, I'm not. I'm teaching her how to control it," the man had replied in his usual curt sentences. The two of them stared hard at each other from opposite ends of the couch. Laurel pulled the lighter back towards her chest, flipping her head from her father up to the stubble chin of Drury, waiting to see who would win the argument she couldn't seem to hear. It wasn't like the way she was used to, with Nora and Charlie throwing needles at each other until one of them stomped off or Nora blew up. When Drury stared down Charlie, her father eventually softened and shook his head. The older man clapped his hands on her shoulders when the objection faded. "Keep trying, Laurel Lee. You can get it."

Some attempts took longer than others, but Drury never rushed her. He held out his chin and the cigarette at his lips for as long as it took for the spark to hold out into a flame. The rush when the end charred and went red made Laurel more proud than blowing out birthday candles in one breath. Even Charlie, letting go of his doubts, smiled at her. But he smiled longer at Drury.

Decades later, for the first time since Pap died, Laurel used the Zippo again to light her Marlboro. As she inhaled, Laurel felt a peculiar satisfaction watching the red crawl down the white paper and sensing the prickly burn into her chest. It was similar to having her first cigarette ever, the instant mix of pain and relief.

Pap's lighter was born in a post station in Vietnam. It wore scratches from being carried with pocket knives and a spot of rust on the hinge from the tropical rains. As she smoked with the lighter in her grasp, Laurel thought about these objects and how they live so much longer than people, that they constantly drag the past forward. For Pap, the lighter was a way to carry the war back with him. For Laurel, it carried Pap back to her. It carried him, and Drury, and her father. It thrust them before her in a moment that didn't ache completely. That was a moment

where everyone was happy, where everyone was alive and together, except Nora who, of course, had been at church.

Then Laurel thought about that smile on her father again, the one that moved from her to Drury. The problem with happiness, she realized, was that even when we're happy, we're never satisfied. Happiness is short lived, while discontent is infinite.

Even though smoking was a horrible, nasty habit, even though she knew it would probably kill her like it did Pap, at least it was a respite from discontent. Smoking filled her with a calm joy when she had no other reason to want to prolong her stay in this reality, when she couldn't remember what real happiness felt like.

Laurel glared at people, like her parents especially, who told her to give it up. For one, she thought their judgment was a real piece of work, considering most people had their own vices. Just because her mother's vice was Jesus, didn't mean it was any less damaging, and, just because her father's vice was his own desires, didn't mean she had found them any less difficult to forgive, even with him dead.

When she didn't have two shitty step-kids who hated her, when she had a job that wasn't mind-numbingly dull, when she made enough money actually to pay all the bills for an entire month instead of choosing which credit card balance to pay on, when waking up every morning didn't feel like the most hopeless part of her day, then Laurel Owens would quit smoking. Until then, nicotine was the only thing that had never disappointed her. Who was anyone to ask her to give that up? God himself could come down and beg her to quit, and she'd probably just blow the smoke in his face.

Laurel grinded her finished filter into a crevice in the sidewalk, then tapped out the last cigarette from her pack. She used Pap's Zippo once more. And when she exhaled, she tried to

imagine what that would feel like to have the Almighty on the other end of the grey cloud dispersing from her lips. Vindicating, perhaps. She believed in God, despite what people thought, particularly her mother. With all her weak and probably tar coated heart, she believed that God was real, that He was watching. It was impossible not to look at the world, at all these people spinning on a rock through an abyss of cold and burning clusters of light, and not believe that there was a Higher Being, who couldn't give a shit, who did it all for his own egotistical amusement. That was the difference between her and her mother, Nora believed God had a plan and infinite love. She just thought He was a sick son of a bitch. And she was not about to give him the satisfaction of asking for anything, or pretending humility.

Nora believed, and told her daughters as much, that God only wanted servitude, and in return He would provide for them. As a kid, Laurel had bought into it as a sweet tradeoff, even if she hadn't had the patience to sit through the lengthy, scream littered sermons. Her admiration had waned over the years, when her parents had started to fall apart, and when those provisions in return for humble service seemed few and inadequate. In an ironic twist, Laurel sometimes felt grateful God had blessed her with the good sense to see faith for the bum deal it was, a pile of wasted time in an uncomfortable church pew.

Her mother could never see this, despite what Laurel thought she had for good sense. Nora's solution when she got knocked up at seventeen was to ask for God's forgiveness, when money was tight to beg for his mercy, when her husband started stepping out to pray for heavenly strength, and when her daughters fell willingly into the carnal world to plead for the Lord's protection and guidance back to the fold. For all those hours on her knees, for all those tears, Laurel wondered what Nora really had to show for any of it.

Laurel remembered the first time she saw her mother pray outside of church. She was five, and it had scared her. In the congregation, prayers were loud and tear-filled. She had been used to that roar of mingled voices as everyone bowed into the floor. When she found her mother, knees on the linoleum by the potato bin, Laurel was confused because prayer seemed an action reserved for the brown carpet between the pews. And then she was terrified. She'd never heard her mother sound like that, like something helpless. Nora prayed like no one was watching, voice running without breathing, the volume escalating, repeating the same words over and over, begging to a force up above while her forehead was tucked to the legs and her dirty kitchen apron shoved at the side. Laurel froze, forgetting even why she had gone looking for her mother, and hugged at the doorway. The way her mother's voice scratched and cracked, or cut away from words entirely and seemed to release strangled sounds, like an animal, like the creatures she used to hear at night when visiting Drury's cabin, it kept her, that little girl, at a distance from her mother. A mother is someone a child always wants to run to, a pair of arms that makes the rest of the world feel harmless. Up until that moment, that's how she had seen Nora, as the Lord herself, protector from all things, a physical presence that rendered everything safe. But watching her pray, watching darkness and fear wallow their way out of her mouth, she was afraid to even touch her mother, because that wild and broken thing on the floor was not her mother, even if it was praying for its daughter. That's when she began feeling safer in the arms of men her mother hated. But she even grew out of that eventually.

Every so often, Laurel had a rush of sympathy for her mother. Nora was always praying for her and Juniper, or worse, praying at them. But there was a love in it, she knew that, not matter how misguided and self-serving. A mother is beholden to her children, and Laurel understood that was particularly hard for Nora. She imagined it couldn't be easy to love one's

children and yet have them come out so utterly far from the desired. Nora had tried so hard to raise her daughters to follow her up in the church, so it had to be hard as a devout Christian, desperate for the approval of a congregation, to watch both of her girls flaunt and distain the core of their mother's soul. She felt sorry for Nora, who never got the life or the daughters she dreamed of. In that, she could even empathize. But her empathy wasn't enough to make her kneel to God, or quit smoking for that matter.

Stabbing out the butt of her last cigarette, Laurel stood up and returned to the air conditioned boredom of The Truck Stop. Just as she slipped back in, edging her way along the wall to the bathroom before stepping into the camera view, the register dinged with a customer waiting at the gas pump. She jogged up to the counter in order to approve the sale and turn on the pump. Before she pushed the button, however, she glanced to see who was her first and possibly only customer of the day. But there was no vehicle. The pumps were as vacant as when she pulled up earlier. Still the light for pump two blinked rapidly. She hesitated and then reset the pump, assuming the equipment was malfunctioning. No sooner had the light gone off, then register dinged, and it came back on. She cleared the register once more, and again the ding resounded in the gas station. This time she grabbed the work keys and headed outside.

Half way to pump two, Laurel noticed a long human-shaped shadow. She slowed and turned to the side, using the trashcan as a barrier. With the keys poking through her knuckles, she peeked around the steel column, where she saw Jerry Weatherbee, gas pump in one hand, the other pushing every button around him.

"Turn on, dammit," the old man grumbled, smacking his palm at the unleaded button.

"Mr. Weatherbee?" Laurel interrupted. "Can I help you?"

"I'm just trying to fill up my car, but this damn thing won't work," he said. "I'm about ready to move my car and try the others, or, hell, go somewhere else."

Laurel stared at the unoccupied space behind the former fire chief, while the nozzle pointed behind Jerry, as though inserted into a gas tank, but was not suspended by any vehicle. She didn't have much experience with Alzheimer's, but she realized Jerry was in a different place than she was.

"Hey, Mr. Weatherbee, I think it's all the pumps. Why don't you come inside with me? Stick around while I call somebody for maintenance."

The old man huffed, but then let his shoulders relax and clicked the gas nozzle back into the holder.

"Yeah, alright."

Laurel walked to the store, repeatedly looking back, like he was a child trailing at her heels. She opened the doors for him and gestured to the booth for him to sit.

"Can I get you anything, coffee, water?" Jerry shook his head, groaning as he lowered himself into the hard curved bench. "Okay, well, just hang here for a bit. I'm gonna make that call."

Once behind the counter, Laurel dug out the phonebook and found the number for the Board of Education's office in Nolinsville. Because she whispered, she had to repeat three times to the lady who answered that she wanted to speak to Superintendent Weatherbee. Then it was another five-minute wait to pull him out of a meeting, which the lady only agreed to do because Laurel insisted it was an emergency.

"Sam? Sammy?" she asked when the hold music clicked off.

"Yes?"

"Hey, it's Laurel Owens...sorry, Harper." She felt strange introducing herself so formally. She remembered Sam as a pimpled teen with KISS t-shirts. He'd been a firefighter kid like her. But it'd been years, not since he'd become old enough to stop getting dragged to department meetings and dinners, since the two of them had traded more than the standard 'how are you doing?' At the funeral, Sam had been too busy pursuing his father through the parking lot for even that. Her embarrassment at that whole ordeal hit Laurel all over again. She felt embarrassed for Sam too, for that and for the fact his dad was doing it to him once more.

"Right, Laurel. I'm kind of busy at the moment. Can I call you back later?"

"Actually, no." She turned away from Jerry at the booth, the phone cord wrapping around her. "See, I have your dad with me."

There was a tense silence, and she could hear the frustration in his sigh before he spoke.

"Where are you?"

"At The Truck Stop. He just sort of wandered up I think, tried to fill up his tank."

"He was driving?" Sam's voice pitched up.

"No, no, the car...there was no car, not a real one anyway," she explained. "Look, I've got him inside. I just need to know what you want to do."

"It's going to be at least an hour before I can try to leave here," he said. "Laurel Lee, I hate to ask this, but can you watch him? Just keep him at the gas station until I can get there, or get ahold of Cousin Sherri and see if she can get him. Please, I know this is a big favor to ask. I'm really trying here, but I just can't...I can't drop things right now. I swear he's not dangerous to anybody but himself. He just gets a little lost. Just keep him in one place, you don't have to do anything else besides that, please. Please."

Laurel bit her lip, twisting her fingers in the curled cord rather than her hair. Babysitting wasn't her preferred occupation anymore, but at least he was a grown man. She shifted on her feet, thinking it over as she turned back to check on Jerry, except he wasn't in the booth anymore.

"Aw, crap."

"Laurel, what is it? What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she blurted out. "Look, it's fine. I'll watch him. We're slow here. It's fine. Fine," she said a little too forcefully as she spun around trying to untangle herself from the phone cord to leave to counter. "Just get here as soon as you can." She hung up before Sam could say anything else and as soon as she unsnagged her wrist, she ran outside around the pumps and the parking lot, searching for Jerry.

"Mr. Weatherbee!" she yelled at each corner. She shielded her eyes from the sun and looked up and down the road in front of The Truck Stop in case he'd decided to continue the journey to fill up his invisible car. "Mr. Weatherbee!" Her voice cracked. "Shit, just shit." Laurel stomped. She took her hand down when the sun fell behind a cloud. Except, it wasn't a cloud, it was a plume of smoke, dark and thick. For a second, she forgot about the senile old man she'd lost and focused on the smoke looming over the tree tops. Suddenly, the burn didn't seem far away in the park. It seemed a breeze away from eating at the ground around from her. It was enough to make anyone worry. She would have worried more if she hadn't known every person working that fire. But she knew their qualifications. She knew their training and experience. She knew they were good at their work. So, she had no reason to be concerned about the smell of charred tinting the air. No concern at all, she reassured herself.

Laurel heard a tapping sound on the glass windows of the store, and her whole body jerked. Back at his seat in the booth, Jerry was tapping and waving at her. She walked back inside, eager to leave behind the ominous sky she could do nothing about and return to where the country station continued with classic Garth Brooks.

"Where did you go?" she demanded, plopping herself into the bench across from Jerry.

"I had to piss," he said. "Was that not alright with you?"

It wasn't. But how did she explain that to Jerry? Telling him that he had lost part of his mind didn't seem like the best scenario. Mad and out of breath from dashing around the building, Laurel didn't see the need to be cruel.

"It's whatever," she said after a deep breath and sprawled out along the length of the bench, leaning one arm over the back.

"So what did maintenance say?"

"It'll be at least an hour before anyone can make out here," she half-lied. "You're not in any hurry, are you?" Jerry looked out the window to the pumps and his not-there vehicle.

"I guess not. Better to wait than run out of gas on the road."

"Smart man." Laurel nodded. She could feel the store cameras watching them, reminding her to get back to some semblance of work. But she didn't want to leave her seat across from Jerry.

The old man continued to stare long and tired out the window, where the sky grew dark from the gray clouds of smoke. When she was a child and barely two feet tall herself, the old fire chief had towered over her. Laurel remembered being in awe of this man. Every year, he dressed as Santa Claus for the department's Christmas dinner, and every year she had cried as Charlie tried to put her on his lap. His size and that deep booming voice had terrified her more than the

fact she knew he wasn't the real Santa underneath the red velvet. She didn't understand how a person could grow so mammoth. But now, as Laurel looked at him, the shoulders that carried air packs for decades were shaved down, and the muscles in his arms had withered away until they were just slightly larger than her own. His whole face drooped, the skin loose and gravity tugging it from the bottom of his chin. Watching time steal people made Laurel feel helpless, especially how, though it happened in small increments, the realization always came like this, sharp and sudden. She wished she could catch age as it happened, so age wouldn't seem like a spy under the skin.

"What brings you out today, anyway?" Laurel asked, brushing away the somber quiet between them.

"I couldn't breathe," Jerry said, picking at his purple blushed fingernails. "I was home and I just couldn't breathe for all the smoke. But I couldn't find the fire. So, I left."

"You still live up by the park, don't you?"

"224 Henry Mountain Road, Three Forks, Kentucky, 42321." Laurel raised an eyebrow, and after a pause Jerry continued. "My son Sammy makes me repeat it every morning. It makes him feel better if I can at least tell people where I live. Don't know if you've heard, but my memory ain't much count anymore."

"Yeah, I might know something about that," Laurel admitted, wishing she had another cigarette, or even better that she could still smoke inside. She dug out her lighter again to keep her fingers busy, flicking the lid open and closed.

"I still remember plenty though," he said. "Like I know you're Charlie's eldest. Not that anyone could tell it from the offset. Never been two girls look so little of their parents coloring.

But, you both have your Daddy in you. Just a bit around the eyes. You've got that crinkle." He pointed, circling in front of his own iris.

"We look like our grandmother, that's what I always heard growing up," Laurel told him. Because it was something she only heard, since the woman had died when Charlie was just a kid himself, it was always strange that she looked like someone she had never seen, aside from perhaps the daily glance in the mirror. "Except the eyes, Juniper and me got Pap's eyes," she added with loud click from the lighter in her hand.

"My son got his mother's eyes. I always liked that." Jerry sighed, just like his son had before. "She's gone, I remember that today, but I still get to see a bit of her when I see him. See, you're never really gone once you have children. We take from our parents. We carry 'em in our pockets, or if we're lucky, we carry 'em in our faces."

"I'm not sure I want to carry the dead like that. Who wants to recycle bits of ghosts to the flesh?"

"Loss is almost too hard a pain to survive. But those pieces left behind, they keep ya going. They give you a little something left living."

"Well, I don't have any pieces," Laurel whispered out loud, because Jerry was just a crazy old man in a booth with her. He wasn't going to call her bitter. He wouldn't care that she couldn't have children. He probably wouldn't remember any of this conversation tomorrow, so no point to censor herself.

"But you get to be someone else's piece. When Charlie dies, at least..." Jerry trailed off. Then he paused completely, rubbing at his temple with one set of knuckles. "Charlie *is* dead. Ain't he?" He looked direct at Laurel, but he didn't stop talking for her to answer. "I feel like I

know that. I know it. I'm just not sure it's true, cause I saw him. I know I saw him standing there, watching us."

"Charlie's dead. I swear." Laurel reached out, taking Jerry's free hand. "I promise. He's gone."

"Are you okay?" Laurel's gesture turned on her, and the old man brought his other hand down over hers, clenching both sides of her palm. As he met her gaze, it felt like the first real condolence she'd had since Charlie had died. For once, no one was offering her prayers or sympathies, no one was assuring her that he was in a better place, and no one was asking if she was holding up, because to everyone else the only two options she had were tough it out or break apart. Laurel could tell that Jerry was asking a very different question, and so she gave him a very different answer.

"No, I'm not," she admitted.

A life had ended, and the entire sum was a box and a patch of sod. It bothered Laurel more than anything else to watch her father sunk down into the ground, to watch him be covered up, sealed away like a secret, to know that after a lifetime all anyone could ever, if lucky, claim was a plot in a graveyard. The only bit of land that ever really matters, that ever truly belongs to us, and no one ever lives on it.

Charlie had picked out his spot in Bell Cemetery decades ago, when Pap met Grandmother Undine in the ground. The church had finally started selling plots again, and Charlie had snatched one up next to his parents, just the one, as though he already knew Nora would never spend eternity next to him. Each year for Memorial Day, when they went to visit Pap and Undine, and Laurel was the only one who would bother to bring flowers, Charlie would point at the blank grass by their granite tombstone.

"That's where I'm going to go," he said each time. "Right next to Pap."

And that's where Laurel's father was now.

Charlie had found a different way of making arrangements for the afterlife that didn't involve Nora's brimstone or pearly gates. He'd chosen the practical route. But that was just how Charlie had been, all practicality. He'd even bought her own land tracts for a wedding present.

"It may sound weird," Charlie had said, helping her unload all the bridal shower presents into their tiny apartment across the tracks. "But I don't want to get you something without any real use. You and Cal are gonna be married, you've got kids. The future is a thing to be thought about. I've had a good season logging this year. So, I figure I'll start a life insurance policy for you and when you and Cal pick a place, I'll buy your burial plots."

"Thanks, Daddy, for making the happiest day of my life so morbid," Laurel said, shoving the crockpot box under the sink.

"It's not morbid," he said, following her back out to his truck bed. "This is a fact of life Laurel Lee. We all die and I want to make sure you and any kids of yours are squared away when it happens."

"You sure you wouldn't rather get me a new car instead," she countered, but only received Charlie's sideways frown.

"Do you love Cal?" Charlie asked her. The directness of the question caught Laurel off-guard, the hamper full of new towels nearly slipping out of her grip.

"I do," she answered without any other hesitation. She was only nineteen, just a few months shy of twenty, but the only thing that didn't make her feel unsure was Cal. She loved that he gave everything about her life a purpose. Her mother thought she was too young to know what love meant, or for the responsibility of marriage. If she was, it was her parents' fault. But

she was older at heart because of them. She knew what love shouldn't look like because of them, she knew what irresponsibility acted like because of them. They had shown her all the wrong ways, but Cal made her feel like the two of them could do it right. So she had no problems telling her father how she felt, even if she wasn't sure why he was asking this late in the game.

"Then trust me," Charlie said, hoisting a set of dishes and silverware on his hip. He grunted as the ceramics tinged against the boxes. "The most romantic thing I could give you is knowing that you'll be next to each other forever." Laurel almost missed the flick of her father's head to the other side of the apartment complex. Almost, but she didn't.

Sometimes, Laurel wondered if it was only her. If she was the only child, who felt conflicted about her parents. Sometimes it seemed to her that the rest of the world either loved their parents unconditionally or loathed them with their entire being, because in so much of what Laurel saw, in books, in movies, in the way people presented themselves into the world, parents were good or bad, adored or hated. There was no in-between. Yet, she was uncertain about hers. In moments, like the late night unloading of her father's truck, she loved Charlie for always being there for her. She loved his realism and the hidden sentiment of his wedding present. She loved that Charlie was a thoughtful person. But in the same moment, when he looked out to another apartment door, she could barely stand to look at him because there was something deep within her father that she would never understand and that had proved him capable of so many flaws.

"Who was it?" she remembered yelling, tossing everything in arms' length at Charlie, who had sat on his work bench unmovable as wrenches and screwdrivers hurtled by, harmlessly missing their target. "Who was she that you fucked all of us over? Who was she?"

"It doesn't matter," Charlie had told her. The way he remained so calm pissed Laurel off even more. He was so calm about everything, announcing the divorce, Nora exposing his cheating, his daughter storming out of the house and then into his work the next day, still drunk of the whiskey she took from Cal's place the night before. Watching Charlie take the abuse fueled even more from her, who screamed and scrapped her nails against the concrete grabbing for random screws and bolts around the log truck.

"Momma knows. Why can't I know, huh?"

"Your mom..." Charlie paused to knock away a washer that nearly reached his face. "Your mom knows what one angry woman told her and nonsense gossip from people too bored to keep their mouth shut."

"So is it gossip or is it true?" Laurel stopped, panting and holding her hips. There was a long silence.

"Laurel Lee." He didn't even have to finish. She knew by the way he said her name. "I'm so sorry."

"Who is she?" Laurel screamed once more, kicking at a pile of wooden boards.

"I told you it doesn't matter."

"But it does," she breathed hard into her chest. "It does matter."

When Charlie wouldn't tell her, Laurel went looking for someone who would. She went to Drury, to the same door her father's gaze had flickered over. She had gotten the truth, even when Drury hadn't intended to give it her. It hadn't been in words, but it had been honest nonetheless.

"You have to know," she told him, hunched over the arm of the couch in his apartment. Customers came and went, taking their drugs and leaving their money, while Laurel tried to get

Drury to look at her from his stagnant seat in the armchair next to her. "You're his best friend. You spent more time together than anybody. He's told you, or you've met her. You've probably been his cover, so you have to know. Tell me what you know. What's her name? Where is she from? Why her? Why was she worth it? He's told you. If he's told anybody, it's you."

"Stop it, Laurel Lee," he finally snapped. In seventeen years, it was the first time he ever raised his voice to her. "Just let it go."

"I can't. It's my family."

"Well, it's mine too."

In those bloodshot eyes, framed with deep crow lines, she saw the hurt twisted in his chest, something deep and dark. For a second, she felt the world spin, because everything slowed enough that she could feel how fast it was going. So Laurel did stop asking, because she realized the answer.

"I'm not okay," Laurel repeated to Jerry Weatherbee, who squeezed even tighter on her hand. Deep concern came from underneath his wooly eyebrows, but there was something also vacant about Jerry's gaze. It reminded her of a child, earnest yet confused. Unlike a real child, he had the patience to listen. He held her hand, waiting, and she considered how much to tell him.

Laurel knew that Catholics believed in the power of confession, that admittance was the only path to redemption. Then again, her mother had always said Catholics were going to hell. Though her problem wasn't if she was going to hell, but whether if she was already there. She already suffered for her sins, and the sins of the father. She had the option to confess, not to God, but to another human, who could never hold any of it against her. Fate or kismet, or whatever existed, had plopped a barely lucid man in front of her. The opportunity to say anything she wanted without consequence just sat there.

It was a frightening temptation, mainly because Laurel had grown up in silence. The rule that seemed to govern her life was that some things didn't need words. To give them words was to give them power, to give them life. For a long time, that silence had been a relief, something to escape into for her. But now, silence overwhelmed her. It lay between her and everyone in her life.

Laurel avoided speaking to her mother, who still called at least once every day since Charlie died. After lunch a few days ago, she had reached her quota for enduring Nora in a short span of time. Too cowardly to send her mother outright to voicemail, she let the phone ring continuously each time. At times, she'd even watch the screen lighting up and wondered at what point the guilt would get to her enough to answer. Juniper, though, appeared to have no qualms sending someone to voicemail. Her sister had begun avoiding her with one ring and done, holing up in Charlie's house with the will, the security box, and the abandoned overflow of antiques and knickknacks. Six years apart and their longest conversation together since the funeral had been a ten-minute call in the middle of the night that had left her so frazzled she forgot where she laid her phone afterwards.

Whenever Cal asked about Juniper and the will, about Charlie, or the sudden convergence of her spread apart family, Laurel evaded the questions. She had taken to stonewalling her own husband, a horrible crutch she'd used for years in their relationship. Sometimes she worried he'd get sick of it one day and leave her for someone who would speak. As always, their girls ignored her as much as possible. She never expected anything but the minimum of syllables from Hayden and Alyssa. They couldn't even be bothered to respond through their doors when she asked if they'd finish the laundry she started.

Then there was Charlie. Well, he was dead, which was a whole other type of quiet. Except, even dead, sometimes Laurel could still hear him, and she remembered the silence he'd kept for her. The prevailing thing she had learned from her father was that silence in itself was a force, one more powerful than the secrets it kept or the distance it bred. She couldn't stand the sound of it any longer, the buzzing in her ear that separated her from her family and even in that moment from Jerry. What she wanted to hear was the truth, just once out loud, for all the words than she wrangled in her head time and again to fall from her lips.

"My daddy was a cheater," Laurel said, knocking away that silent buzz like florescent lights. Already, she could feel a crash in her chest as fear and liberation barreled into each other at her heart. "Except, you probably already know that, enough people whispered about it. But they don't know the truth. They don't know what they think they do. Because it was years, he did it for years and years. He did it even though he loved my momma. He just didn't love her like he was supposed to. But then, I also heard momma say one sin was never greater than another. And she," Laurel paused, slipping her hand out of Jerry's grip. She cupped her face for a moment, slowly dragging her palms down against her cheeks. "Well, Momma was a piece of work herself. Still is," she added. "But it's not really about them. I love my momma despite her. And...and I forgave my daddy despite him. I did. I forgave him." Laurel stretched her jaw out tightly, blinking and looking up at the ceiling. This part caught her unprepared. She didn't want to cry, not yet, not before she'd said it. "I never told him that though. I never said those words, like that. And now he's dead and he won't ever hear them."

"I'm sure he knows. Wherever he is now, he knows."

"Yeah, but I don't know" Laurel trailed off as she gulped down a knot of air in her throat. "I don't know if he forgave me and that's the part nobody knew but me and him. It's selfishness,

but I'm worried about my own sin, Mr. Weatherbee. I've lied to my momma for more years than I can think back on. I've let her believe something so wrong. I took from my daddy," she finally said. She sniffed hard, sucking up the snot that was trying to trickle its way down like the few sparse tears from her eyes. "He wanted to be honest and to be happy. I took that from him. I made him lie. I wanted what was easier, not what was right. And he's buried alone because of me. He'll always be alone down there."

It was so effortless to confess now. She was ready to let decades of deceit and dark family secrets to spill out. Perched behind her teeth were all of the things that had eaten her insides since she'd walked in and seen Charlie's body, stiff and colorless in his casket. Before she continued, Jerry reached across the table, patting her cheek as he wiped away a tear.

"Don't cry, sweetie," he said. "Everything will be fine. Your dad will get back from the run. It's just a small fire."

"Wha... Wait, what?" Her chest trembled as she tried to grasp what Jerry was talking about.

"I'll tell you this," Jerry said. "I never trusted anyone more when the flames were crawling up the walls. You want a man like Charlie who doesn't flinch from the smoke or heat. He's got more gumption than anybody. He'll be back safe and sound before you know it. So, no reason to worry, no reason to cry."

"No," Laurel began, shaking her head. "No, Charlie is..." Then she looked at Jerry and needed to rush her hands to her mouth in an attempt to catch the burst of laughter. She failed, and Jerry's eyes popped open as she hunched over the table into her laughs. She dug her fist against her teeth to try and pull back the tide as she realized his senility had reclaimed Jerry and with it, her means for absolution. She held her breath so her ribs couldn't shake with laughter. She could

still confess, but it wouldn't be the same. The whitewash had come too soon. She felt thwarted and perhaps, she imagined, it was God reminding her that there was no such thing as redemption, which just made her want to laugh harder. "You're right," she told Jerry, still trying to pull herself into a calm that didn't scare the poor man. She wiped her eyes herself this time, though the tears came from straining against her laughter rather than any heartbreak. "Charlie will be fine. He'll be here any moment." She even managed a controlled smile as she bottled back up her soul, withered with dishonesty and sick amusement at the whole thing.

With both hands slapped on the table, Laurel pushed up, sliding out of the booth. She would leave Jerry to slides through time, and she would get back to work, what little there was to do. She grabbed a broom from behind the counter and started sweeping the way she wished she could sweep away the guilt that had bubbled up and found nowhere to release. She had done a lot of wrong in life. Confession couldn't fix those decisions. The guilt was hers to bear like the boulder in her gut. She felt ridiculous for trying to even change that.

Laurel was ready for the store and her chest to settle back down and to leave Jerry to his contentment staring at the smoke through the window. But just as she finished sweeping the straw wrappers from under the fountain drink machine, the radio station cut out with a shrill sonar sound. The wooden handle clacked on the floor as she rushed to cover her ears. Jerry flinched in his seat, but he didn't avoid the sound. His eyes widened, and she saw him mouth an "oh, no" she couldn't hear over the beep.

"Attention, this is not a drill. Please stand by for an important announcement," a digitized voice interrupted, killing the painful sound. A human voice broke in and followed, "Attention Three Forks and surrounding Ballard County Areas. This is an important announcement from the fire department. An evacuation order has been issued for all residents north of highway 31

running through Three Forks. Take only essential items. Make sure to take prescriptions and medical supplies with you. If you have time, turn off electricity, water, and natural gas and disconnect appliances. Please follow established routes. An evacuation center has been implemented at Nolinsville Elementary, 243 Piketon Road. All residents in the evacuation area are recommend to go the elementary school. Again, an evacuation order has been issued for all residents north of highway 31 running through Three Forks." After a pause, the announcer began to repeat the script, calling for attention again. Laurel ran to the work phone and dialed her husband's cell.

It rang and rang until it went to voicemail. She dialed again.

"We need to go." Jerry got up from the booth. "We're north of the highway."

"I'm calling my husband. He's the...he's the current fire chief. He'll know what to do." Laurel also hoped he'd know what was going on. In her memory, there were three wildfires that had broken out in the park. None had been cause for an evacuation. She needed to hear Cal's voice, not the announcer over the radio. She needed to know what was happening because Jerry was right. They were north of the highway, but so was her house and Charlie's.

She got voicemail. She hung up and dialed again.

"Look, Nora. Charlie is a good chief," Jerry said, coming around the counter. "But if they're evacuating, he's too busy. We need to follow the instructions from the radio."

"I'm not Nora. I'm Laurel. Cal is chief. Cal is my husband," Laurel told him, snatching her elbow away from his reach. Jerry stepped back, looking her over.

Voicemail. She redialed.

"We're not safe," Jerry finally said, still somewhat dazed, looking around the store.

"I don't care. I'm not going anywhere until..."

"Hello?" a man's voice cut Laurel off. She could hear the hustle of voices echoing in the background and sirens trailing off.

"Cal, hunny..."

"This isn't Cal," the voice interrupted once more. Laurel sunk down on her heels, leaning against the counter.

"Then who is this? This is my husband's phone. I want to speak to my husband. Get me Calvin Harper."

"He's not here. I just heard this phone ringing in one of the trucks."

"I don't care where you found it. Get me my husband or get me someone who can," she said. Except Laurel did care, because if he didn't have his phone, it meant Cal was in the field. She didn't realize she'd started holding her breath until a new voice came over from the static reception and the air rushed back into her lungs.

"Laurel, it's Cowboy."

"Thank god. Where's Cal? Why is there an evacuation order?"

"Look, the wind picked up." Cowboy answered. "With this drought...The wildfire is going to hit the town, Laurel Lee. No question. You and the girls need to go the evacuation center."

"Right, ok. We will." She nodded, twisting the ends of her blonde hair. "Let me talk to Cal though. Can you bring him in?"

No quick reply followed this time. Laurel could picture Cowboy on the other end, another man she'd watched in the fire department for years, another friend of her father. She could see him, kicking a boot around the gravel, his thick mustache twitching as he avoided telling her the truth.

"Where is he?" she repeated softly.

"The fire moved faster than we could have expected...."

"Just tell me," she said, falling over with her forehead onto the cash register. She ignored Jerry's continued pressing to leave, and she listened without reacting as Cowboy explained that her husband was caught in the fire. She couldn't have reacted if she wanted to, as much as she understood what Cowboy told her about the cabin, the blocked escape routes, and the lost radio tower, even as he spoke none of it felt real. The same way it hadn't felt real when Drury Hollis had called her in the middle of the night.

Everyone thought Laurel had found her father. But that was a lie like so many others she had told. No one knew that Drury had been the one to call her just before bed. It had been the first time they'd spoken in years. Their only contact since her father's accident in the woods was the Christmas cards she sent every year, out of guilt if she was honest. But she had recognized his voice instantly. No one sounded quite like Drury, no one could imply so much with so few words.

"It's Charlie," he had said. And she had felt a limbo, like that cat in the box from her philosophy class last semester. Laurel had barely passed that class, most of it seemed meaningless or contradictory. She hadn't understood how disparate things could be true, how something could be alive and dead. She didn't understand the box until her father was put into it, until Charlie was both alive and dead too, until everything staying the same and everything being tossed like debris. It didn't go away until she saw him, until she went up the hill in her pajamas to face his still, quiet body. He looked like he often did, asleep in his living room chair, only the pallor of his face and the purple of blood settling on the bottom of his forearms and calves told Laurel that her father's heart had stopped beating.

"I didn't know who else to call," Drury said from his perch on the staircase just across from Charlie's chair. "I didn't think you'd appreciate if I was the one who called the hospital. Since I'm not supposed to be here, of course."

She didn't cry, not then, because she was just barely opening the box.

"Thank you," she said without turning to look at him. Laurel remained fixed on her father. "You can go now. I'll make the call." She listened for Drury's footsteps to fade away and the front door to shut. Only once she was alone with Charlie did she touch his skin and feel him die. She opened the box, just to put him in another one.

It was well and good for philosophy to explain away the indefinite outcomes, but it never explained that sick, splitting feeling of being the person waiting outside the box.

She couldn't do that again. She couldn't do that with Cal.

"There's nothing you can do for Cal right now," Cowboy told her. "The best thing you can do is take the girls to the elementary school. That's what he would want. As soon as there's news, you know I'll call you. Look, I've gotta go. Some kid is asking about his uncle. Burr is working the evacuation. Find him at the school. He'll take care of you guys."

Cowboy hung up. Laurel lifted her head, returning the phone to its cradle. She was destroyed, and she was preserved. She was both until Cowboy would call her back. She was both until the fire subsided.

"Let's go," Jerry said. This time, Laurel agreed. She grabbed her purse from under the counter and locked the cash drawer and the front doors. She took Jerry through the back, turning off the lights and wondering if Dougie would accept the evacuation as an excuse to close to the store or if he'd fire her later for job abandonment. It was only a brief thought as neither option brought much concern. Then she wondered if she had any right to take Jerry Weatherbee with

her, but there was also nowhere else for him to go. So she helped him into the front seat of her Ford Explorer and took him home with her. As she drove down the main road through town, she saw neighbors scurrying to and from their cars, loading up suitcases. A few vehicles peeled out recklessly in front of her, burning tires on their way out of Three Forks. She was relieved to only live a few minutes away from work and navigated herself and Jerry as quickly as possible off the highway and into her driveway a couple blocks down.

"Hayden, Alyssa," Laurel yelled as she entered the house. She dropped her car keys on the table near the door. No one replied, of course. She gestured Jerry to the couch, handing him the remote. The television had been left on, the breaking news line scrolling through the early afternoon soap operas, repeating the same evacuation order. "Girls!"

She stomped down the hallway and banged on their door. Alyssa finally opened up, taking out the earbuds connected to her iPod. Even Hayden turned away from the computer long enough to rudely greet their step-mother.

"What do you want? I thought you went to work."

"I need you both to start packing," Laurel said, picking up their backpacks from behind the door and tossing them onto the closest bed. "One bag each, a few clothes, toiletries. Make sure to bring the chargers for your phones. Alyssa, get your extra inhalers from the medicine cabinet in the kitchen, just in case."

"What kind of crack are you on?" Hayden asked, kicking her feet up on the trunk at the end of her bed. "We're not packing anything. It's not our weekend to go to our grandmother's."

"You're not going to Wanda's. We're evacuating." Laurel kept it blunt. She worried that if she let become more than words, more than directions to follow, she wouldn't be able to move. "The wildfire is reaching town. We can't stay here. Take what you need."

"Is our house going to burn down?" Alyssa asked. She sat on the edge of the bed, wrapping her arms around the wooden post.

"I don't know. Maybe," Laurel said, shoving a pillow into the bottom of the backpack. "Which is why we have to leave."

"Where's Dad?" Hayden stood up. She and Laurel faced off in a strangled paused. She didn't know how to tell them. She couldn't tell them. It was her box to keep. And she'd never persuade her stepdaughters to follow her if they knew their father might be gone.

Cal might be dead. He might be alive.

"Just pack your stuff." Laurel turned. "We're out of here in ten minutes whether you're ready or not."

She closed the door behind her, sealing the girls in with the problem of Hayden's question. Then she checked on Jerry, who raised the volume on the TV when she tried to talk to him, intently watching local news commercial update. Alone, she went to her and Cal's bedroom. She quickly pulled a little used duffel bag from under the bed, dropping it onto the mess of unmade covers. Zipper undone, flap open, slack on the sides, it waited to be filled. Laurel jerked towards the chest of drawers, then stopped. All of her momentum abruptly went flat to the floor, deflated like the empty bag. She looked around the bedroom. She had given herself ten minutes to stuff the necessary parts of her life into one duffel, and she didn't know what to pack.

A stack of folded clothes sat on the floor. The closet rails overflowed with hangers and garments. A locked jewelry box held her cheap costume jewelry and the expensive stuff like gold necklaces Cal got her for the big anniversaries and the ring she found in Charlie's security box, the one that had belonged to her grandmother, a dead woman she'd never met. Her makeup and

creams lined the mirror along the bathroom sink. Her romance novels piled at her side of the bed. The quilt Nora made for her lay folded over the rack at the foot of the bed, where stuffed animals she'd had since childhood rested underneath like little guardians. Her marriage certificate hung in its frame above the display cabinet that held her collectable glassware, the vintage kind that Nora and the old grandmothers and aunts had given her like a dowry. Bowls, pitchers, sugar and cream holders, plates, butter dishes, cups, they layered in all multiple colors, from clear glass, to foggy jade, and a strange purple that shined like oil on the blacktop after a rain.

Laurel began to imagine all of it burning and the smell of polyester on fire. She saw the gold covered in char, her makeup and books into a thick cover of ash, flames eating away hours and hours of her mother's stitching and turning the plastic eyes of her animals completely black. She pictured the edges of her marriage certificate curling up until it dissolved into embers and the shine of the glassware in the bright light because it would not relent to melt in such pitiful heat. She could see all of it destroyed and, still, the urgency she had felt before did not return. She saw nothing that she wanted to save. Her life lay around her, accumulated in items and mementos, and she would rather let it burn that carry its weight out of that room.

More out of obligation than desire, Laurel opened her jewelry box, sliding on Grandmother Undine's tiny ring with the several already on her right middle finger. She also changed out of her work shirt, almost hoping the fire would come to claim it from its discarded spot. But the only things she packed were true necessities: her pads, tampons, and some underwear. A significant amount of space remained.

She considered packing some of Cal's things. If Cal was alive, he would need clothes. He would want Laurel to salvage something. Digging into his shirt drawer, however, filled her with the dread of the possibility that he wasn't. If he wasn't alive, she wouldn't want these things, like

lies that he was still around. She took her hands off his clothes. The other part of her feared he was alive, and it might jinx him to take anything, to pretend that he was coming back. It was childish superstitious fear, but she had it nonetheless. She backed up and left his clothes tucked away.

The duffel was light when pulled up on Laurel's shoulder, bunching up the sleeve of her dollar store t-shirt. When she closed the door behind her, the girls came down the hallway, backpacks on and the usual sullen expressions.

"And now to Ann Margaret with a breaking news report," announced the WKBO news anchor. Jerry pointed up the remote, the volume increasing again.

"Mr. Weatherbee, can you turn that off. We're going to go," Laurel said, then nodded to the girls. "Do you have everything? Do you get your inhalers?" Alyssa shook her head and headed toward the kitchen where they were stored. Hayden just slouched one hip.

"This is fucking ridiculous, you know that," she said. "How am I supposed to get everything important to me in one bag in ten minutes? I swear, if this place does burn with my stuff in it, I'll never forgive you."

"Thank you, Stewart." The same woman who had been sitting at The Truck Stop earlier now grinned on television, then replaced it with somber lips. She continued as background noise to Laurel, who muffled a groan. "We're here at incident command with the volunteer firefighters working to staunch the National Park wildfire, which is now making its way to Three Forks, the bordering town. An evacuation order has been executed for around 200 residents."

"Sure, Hayden," Laurel agreed. "If our home burns down, please hold it against me. It's all my goddamn fault. Now shut up and go get in the car." She pointed, stiff like a scarecrow to the door. She gave Alyssa's butt a smack as the girl returned, trying to spur both of them into

more than their brooding saunter. "Mr. Weatherbee, you too. We're heading out. Turn off the TV."

"But as the locals flee the growing flames, one citizen remains. Reliable sources have informed us that approximately an hour ago, the fire encircled one resident's home, trapping him and four firemen up on Henry Mountain Road, which runs parallel to the park boundary."

Laurel stopped mid-step, just inches away from the front door.

"Turn it off," she repeated, attempting to push the girls the rest of the way out, but they had stopped as well, planting their feet as they turned to the television.

"Not now, I'm catching up on the stories."

"Turn it off, Mr. Weatherbee!"

"The downed radio tower, which has interrupted service for many cell phones users, has also cut off communication to the group on Henry Mountain. At this time, no one is certain of the status of the stranded firemen or the resident. A rescue crew has been mounted and they are fighting the blaze in hopes of reopening one of the safety routes in order to recover any survivors."

"Laurel, where's Dad?" Hayden asked, this time without any of the prickling venom from earlier. "Where is he?" Hayden reached around her sister and grabbed Laurel's arm. It was a desperate clutch, fingertips pushing to the bone, but Laurel didn't flinch. She met her step-daughter's gaze.

She missed the little girl, the one she'd met for the first time at two years old riding in Cal's semi-truck. Laurel missed the countless times Hayden, as a small fragile body, had fallen asleep in the arms that she now grasped. She had been a child easily enveloped and loved by her step-mother. That wasn't the girl who dug her fingernails into the skin of her arm, but there was

a touch of her returned as she looked to her for an answer. The moment flickered but its appearance could not be denied. She had only ever wanted to protect her, her and Alyssa, and even Juniper. Her girls. She wanted to protect her daughters. But she couldn't protect them from truth.

"He's on Henry Mountain, baby," she said, her voice kinder than it had been in years.

"224 Henry Mountain Road, Three Forks, Kentucky, 42321," Jerry added from his seat on the couch, finally turning off the television and getting up just at Hayden pushed her way from the door and past Laurel. The girl threw down her backpack down the floor. Laurel kept to her position at the edge with Jerry as Hayden paced and clawed at her hair.

"You weren't going to tell us, were you? You weren't," Hayden answered for Laurel, who shook her head anyway. Laurel tried to reach for Alyssa as the younger sister began to cry quietly to herself, but she used her shoulder to toss off Laurel's hands and shuffled closer to the corner of the living room.

"Girls, please," Laurel said, approaching Hayden instead. "We've got to go. We can talk in the car. Burr is at the evacuation center. He can tell us what's happening." She reached for her step-daughter's arm.

"I'm not going anywhere with you, you fucking liar," Hayden said, slapping the hand away. She gave her backpack a kick towards Laurel, who stumbled over it as Hayden used the moment to dash back down the hallway. Even after the stumble, Laurel stayed close behind. Hayden didn't have time to reach to the bedroom, so it was the bathroom door that slammed in Laurel's face.

"Dammit, Hayden. You open this goddamn door. We have to go!" Laurel screamed and beat, but the cheap white door only shook against its lock. The only thing she heard back was Charlie in her head, like she'd been hearing him all week.

"Those girls were meant for you," Charlie had told Laurel not too long ago after she complained about their smart mouths when he came in to pay for some gas for the log truck. "Angst and all. Now, you get to see what your mother and I went through with you."

"I was nothing like them."

"No, you weren't," Charlie agreed, before adding, "You were much worse."

He'd left her dumbstruck and pissed off there at The Truck Stop. Laurel had wanted to tell her father where he could stick his observation on her just deserts. But she didn't want to justify his remark. It's not that she'd revised her memories. She remembered exactly what she was like, angry at everything. She skipped school, drove too fast, tried every drug that was handed to her, drank until her stomach drowned, got naked with the wrong boys, and stayed out until Charlie himself was hunting her down around the country at 3am. No matter how much her parents yelled, especially if she'd taken Juniper with her, Laurel never felt guilty. A few intoxicated teenagers were better company for her and her sister than the toxic air that they all lived in together.

That was the difference. Laurel felt she had something to be angry about, and more as time went on. That's why she hadn't felt any empathy for Hayden and Alyssa. She saw them as spoiled brats, coddled and given too much until it stretched their greed to a size that couldn't be filled. Her biggest regret was that she didn't whip them often as kids when her gut had said so. She'd been too scared of her uncertain title, her fairy tale stereotype of wicked stepmother to provide discipline in their life until it was too late. She'd loved them too much to risk them not

loving her. And it had happened anyway. They'd become rotten little girls for no other reason than because they could. She had tried to explain that to Charlie, but he'd shook his head at her.

"Everybody is angry about something. The world doesn't guarantee any of us happiness. Just cause you don't know what it is for them girls, doesn't mean their hurt is any less than what you had at that age."

"Whatever," she'd said, handing over his change and a receipt.

"Ever notice people say that when they know they've lost the argument."

"Whatever, Daddy."

While he had laughed, Laurel rolled her eyes at her father. She regretted that.

She continued to beat on the closed door, trying to convince Hayden to let her in, and the memory of Charlie cycled over and over in her head. She thought about the sound of his voice. She thought about the crinkles in his forehead and the shine on his balding head under the florescent lights of the gas station. She thought about the smell of sawdust on his clothes and the way he walked out the glass door on his perpetually stiff knee. She had to remind herself that Charlie had died. What she saw in her head was a ghost, a lingering fragment, but it felt real. She could hear him talking about Hayden and Alyssa like he was next to her again.

"Those girls were meant for you."

She closed her eyes and rested her forehead against the door, still pounding her fist. Charlie spoke from his chest with a raspiness that had grown after years of firefighting and smoke inhalation. She remembered how he leaned on the counter, handing over a faded fifty, his leather wallet peeling and stretched out with cards and receipts and the little plastic inserts that held pictures of his family, most of which had scruffy white edges and were accompanied by sawdust as well.

"Those girls were meant for you."

He talked like he knew everything. He talked like he knew better than Laurel, like age and a lifetime of mistakes gave him some sort of insight. He talked like he was her father and like he was a friend. He always talked that way. She could hear it. She could hear it like he was whispering it in her ear.

"Those girls were meant for you."

But no one was with her. No matter how much she played him in her memory, Charlie was gone. The feeling in her gut, the heavy and clenching pain, cloned itself in her chest. Her brain, her memories, had lied to her. They made her father live when she knew that up the road his house sat empty except for Juniper and on the other side of town a hole was filled. Grief felt like the same surprise repeated with the same sting or like trying to clutch her own heart—she could feel her heart beating, but she could never see it, she could never touch it. And grief made her angry, angry like her father used to make her, because he was a cheater and a liar, and death couldn't take that away. But she desperately wanted to pull him from her head and wrap her arms around him anyway. She wanted him to be solid again. She wanted to not be alone in all this, the only one trying to break down doors.

"Hayden, open up right now. Open this up, or I will!"

"Fuck off and die, bitch!" The girl returned with a shrill shout, and Alyssa's crying in the living room got louder. Frustrated, Laurel tugged at her hair and stepped back after giving the door a kick at the bottom.

"Fine, just fine!" She stomped off, past the pair in the living room and out the back door. Outside, she could hear fire trucks wailing down the main highway and the emergency siren at the fire house began. The sound faded in and out as it circled, blasting to each end of town.

Already cars honked at each other at a distance. She stepped through the brown, dead grass and empty flower beds to the garage door near the side fence. Closing the door muffled the chaos growing in Three Forks, and it faded to a dull whisper beyond the concrete floors and brick walls. Laurel knew that no matter how the sound was filtered out, the fire was still coming. Aside from her honeymoon weekend in St. Louis, she'd never spent more than a night away from Three Forks. Now, she was trying to leave it behind like Lot's exodus from Sodom. Though there would be no exit unless she could get her stubborn daughter out of the bathroom. Then they'd all burn. She debated the merits of leaving her step-daughters to their own self-destructive rebellion, letting them see how they'd fare on their own against a wildfire.

While she tried to take care of them, all those two girls ever seemed to do was try to make things harder for her. When they got a little older, antagonizing her seemed to be their favorite hobby. If she fell asleep on the couch from reading, they pinched her feet until she woke up. If she cooked a meal, they refused to eat it. If she left her purse out in the kitchen, they stole ones and fives from her wallet. When Hayden was thirteen, they went a whole month speaking to her in only 'yes' or 'no'. But one of the worst moments was last year. They humiliated her by telling their homerooms teachers that the reason they didn't have their lunches was because their step-mother thought they were fat, which meant multiple sessions with the high school guidance counselor and stop by from a social service worker. The truth was she had over slept after picking up a week straight of third shift at the Truck Stop to pay for Christmas presents. She'd been so pissed she spent the extra money on a better radio system for her Ford instead of getting the new phones the girls wanted. In return for that, the girls "accidently" broke the vase Cal's mother had left her. She'd never been so close to slapping someone in her life when Hayden switched from fake tears to grinning behind Cal's back. Her life with Hayden and Alyssa

required constant retaliation. But, unfortunately, even she didn't hate them enough to actually leave them behind.

Laurel went to the tool cabinet and table on the far wall. She searched for a wrench or screwdriver to take off the doorknob or the hinges, but she didn't know the size she needed. She certainly wasn't about to go back in and check. She crouched, pulling out boxes from under the table when she found another option. It was bigger than a screwdriver, but it would have the same effect. As she grabbed the handle, she considered that maybe she was losing her mind, maybe there was already smoke in the air making her loopy. Of course, with daughters like hers, maybe her only solution was to go a little crazy. With a firm grip on both ends of the ax handle, Laurel carried it back inside.

"Oh my god," Alyssa whispered after a hiccup between sobs.

"Where you going with that thing, little lady?" Jerry asked.

Laurel didn't respond to either of them. She went back to the bathroom and gave Hayden one more opportunity to unlock the door. But her eldest repeated the same sentiment as before. The hallway was too narrow to come directly from the front, so she stepped to the side, angling diagonally to the doorknob. She'd never swung an ax before. She could barely even remember seeing Cal use it for any construction work, which was probably why it was stashed away and carrying the remains of a few cobwebs around the blade. Assuming it was probably something like swinging at bat, something she hadn't done since little leagues when Charlie was her coach, she tried the stance he taught her. She squared up her hips in line with her target and choked up her grip on the ax handle, then raised it up above her head.

"I mean it, Hayden. I'm coming in."

"Oh yeah, how?"

Laurel swung down, allowing to weight of the metal head to create momentum. The ax connected to the door and then bounced off like a rubber ball taking Laurel backwards with it. She caught herself before the ax knocked against the other wall.

"What the hell was that?" Hayden called out, a hint of genuine panic in her voice.

Laurel still silent, raised up again. She swung three more times, each strike bouncing back as Hayden cussed her out, until, finally, the ax hit. The door cracked and split under the force. A couple of splinters spit out Laurel turned her head away briefly. Screams came from both directions of Laurel. The ax head stopped mid-door, a ways from its mark. She pulled it out roughly and raised up again, swinging down once more while the screaming kept going. More splinters forced her to close her eyes until the door was flimsily attached to the lock. She dropped the ax to her side, and, with one last kick, finished the separation, finding Hayden sitting on the other side of the toilet, arms wrapped over her head.

"Get up," Laurel told her, breathless from the heavy lifting.

"You're a complete mental case," Hayden yelled into her knees.

"And you're a complete shit, now let's go."

"No!" the girl looked up and screeched. The whites of her eyes had pinked. The eyelashes damply clumped together and tear streaks, shining like wax glaze, went down her cheeks. She froze as though embarrassed at exposing a weakness. She rubbed away the tears, leaving rough red marks from her fingers before turning her head away from Laurel and into the shower curtain beside her. "Just go away!"

She felt just sorry enough for the girl to let the ax handle slip from her grip, dropping with a thud to the floor.

"Oh, Hayden," she whispered, stepping over the broken wood into the bathroom. She went in and, with her back against the wall, slunk down into the floor until her bent knees met Hayden's. "I'm not going to leave you. So, c'mon."

When Laurel patted at Hayden's thigh, the reply was a series of rough kicks. Face still buried into the curtain, Hayden thrust the soles of her boots forward, slamming into Laurel's shins and knees, even hitting the side of her hips.

"Hey, hey!" Laurel cried and after a couple of hard lands on the bone, she kicked back directly to Hayden's side, and the girl curled up with a high yelp. Laurel grabbed the flailing ankles and wrapped them under her arm so they couldn't move. "Stop it, alright? Just stop being such a child and look at me. I said, look at me!"

"Why should I listen to you? You're not my mother!"

Over the years, the girls had said a lot of cruel things to Laurel. They called her a loser, or a bitch. If they felt particularly pissed off, they'd whisper "barren" under their breaths. Only once before had either of them dared to tell her she wasn't their mother however. Alyssa had said it in the grocery store when she was nine and Laurel refused to buy her the orange pushup popsicles. Her fear of disciplining the girls dissipated for one wild moment. The one and only time she ever laid a hand on either girl was in the Food Lion parking lot, Alyssa screaming bloody murder over her lap in the backseat and a terrified Hayden peaking from the passenger side. The whipping incident earned her about a week of good behavior, then they were hellions are usual. But neither had had the nerve to try that statement again.

And Laurel wasn't going to accept it this time, any more than she had then, no matter what crisis surrounded them. With her free hand, she reached over and snatched Hayden's chin,

pinching it tightly from under her jaw so the cheeks puffed up, then jerked, forcing the girl's face forward.

"Yes, I fucking am," she told Hayden. "You are my daughter. Mine." She pulled the chin even farther toward her own face. "And so like it or not, I'm the only mother you got. I'm the one who loves you, even when you're a complete shit. I love you enough to stay. You got that? Hell, if that's what you really want, we'll all stay. You, me, Alyssa, even old Jerry Weatherbee. We'll stay right here at home as the fire crawls its way toward us. We'll stay and burn with the whole freaking house, down to char and bones, if that's what you want. Is that what you want?" Though still red eyed and crying, Hayden shook her head. "Then tell me. Stop yelling at me and just tell me what you want."

"I want my dad," the girl sputtered out.

Finally, something Laurel understood. Hayden could yell and kick and call her every name in the book, but it was still fear pushing its way to the surface. She knew what it was like to be scared, especially about this.

The longest five minutes of her life would always be driving up the hill to her father's house. It was longer than hearing her parents announce their divorce, longer than waiting outside the doors for the wedding march to start, longer than when Dr. Tish explained why she'd never have children. Those moments had crawled, some with eager anticipation, some with her heart dragging in the floor. But time never felt so slow and so terrifying than those quiet minutes, where she couldn't even stand the sound of the radio, as the gears changed to pull her against gravity and to her father. She knew and she didn't know what would be there. Because of this, there was no one else in Three Forks who could understand how Hayden felt except her—Charlie was right once again.

"Okay." Laurel took a deep breath and let go of Hayden's chin. "Okay, then. If you want your dad, let's go find him."

"What?"

"Don't question it. You're getting what you want."

As she stood, Laurel held her hand down. Hayden eyed the palm with a fair hesitation. But then she rubbed the last tears away from her cheeks and lashes and gripped Laurel's hand with her own. Not even for a flicker of a second did Laurel see this as the sign of some breakthrough to Hayden. Years of animosity didn't melt off with a flimsy sort of handshake. She hadn't forgiven Hayden any more than she imagined Hayden was forgiving her. She wasn't certain there would ever be that shift or some grand reconciliation. This wasn't even a heart-to-heart when she got down to it. For now, they were just two people who wanted the same thing, and that would be enough to get them out of the path of the fire.

With Hayden alongside, Laurel rustled everyone out of their corners and to the car. Bags flew into the way back, and she considered whether to lock the front door. She settled on not and jumped into the Ford one more time after Alyssa finished helping Jerry in the backseat with his seatbelt. The emergency siren from the fire department still blared in and out. Once out of the driveway, the sound got louder as she drove them towards the center of town and the chorus honking car horns and the display of red and white lights.

After a turn, they reached the main road through town, which overflowed with vehicles inching on each other's bumpers. Traffic heading left, out of Three Forks and toward Nolinsville, stretched all the way from the road block, which followed procedure by keeping people from coming back either for their stuff or to check on loved ones, down to the one caution light in town and probably farther, but the horizon cut off the rest. A few desperate drivers flew down

the opposite lane and past the nose of Laurel's Ford to bypass the traffic and tried to merge back at the road block. No one was letting them in, but even that line was growing as Laurel and her family sat idle at the intersecting roads.

"Holy Fuck," Hayden whispered, leaning over the dashboard to get a better look each way.

"Language," Laurel mumbled on instinct as she bit along the bottom of her lip.

"Now you tell me to watch my language?"

Laurel dropped her jaw, readying a retort, and then closed it back. Truth was she didn't care what words Hayden used. The objection always belonged to Cal. She backed him out of obligation. She was tired of following the rules.

"Right," she finally said, shrugging. "Fuck it. And fuck this."

"What do you mean? Where are we going? You realize we're never getting in the line, right?" Hayden asked a slew of questions.

Laurel flicked her head around to look past Alyssa and Jerry to the cars coming up behind them. She checked her side mirrors and the vehicles in front. Seeing a clear stretch, she hit the gas and pulled out in the opposite direction of the outgoing traffic. She barreled down the near empty lane, the cars at a near standstill blurred under her window. Then a station wagon, attempting to cut the line like the others, came over horizon at the caution light and headed straight for them. The other car honked at her, trying to claim the right of way. Hayden and Alyssa started to shout. Jerry remained staring out his window. Laurel honked too, but the driver stayed on line, not slowing down. Realizing the station wagon wasn't backing off, she slammed her breaks and swung the wheel to the right before an impact. They veered across the nearest driveway and the front yards along the road. She returned to the gas, and the Ford bounced and

bucked its passengers as they traveled over uneven ditches and lawns. She hit three plastic mailboxes and a bicycle before swinging back on the pavement. Though settled on flat road again, she was panting, looking at the tail end of the station wagon in her rearview mirror, whose driver was reaching out the window, flipping her off.

"I think that was Georgia Murray," she said, swallowing against the dry roof of her mouth. "Pretty sure she lost her license last year when the cataracts got bad." She forced a smile at her girls and even Jerry, who all stared back, clinging to their Jesus handles above the windows.

"Women drivers," Jerry muttered, shaking his head. "They'll kill us before the fire will." After a strained pause, the rest of the vehicle erupted in manic laughter, breaking the tension, just long enough for Laurel to turn right on the old park road, past The Truck Stop, where the sky ahead of them changed completely and the last flecks of humor disappeared.

Smoke annihilated any light from the sun, and an orange glow, brighter than a city skyline, hovered above the tree tops beyond the interstate overpass. Her foot eased off the pedal, slowing down as nerves and rethinking overtook her. There was no more traffic in their way for good reason. Everyone sane in Three Forks was heading well in the other direction. Reassuring herself that no one in her car was sane in the first place, Laurel squeezed tighter to the steering wheel and let the Ford coast the rest of the way to the road block under the overpass.

"Sorry folks, ya'll need to turn around," a man in uniformed said as Laurel rolled down her window. "There's no passing the fire on this road. You need to get back to the main highway there behind ya. That's the only safe route outta town."

Laurel didn't recognize the man, and she figured it would be difficult to forget a mustache curled that stiffly on the ends. She looked past him to the other man still sitting the

emergency management truck parked crossways in the road and saw another stranger. Neither of them would let her by just to see find her husband. They weren't her fire people. But then again, if she didn't know them, they didn't know her.

"We're not evacuating," she said, straightening her spine and lifting her chin. "I'm Laurel Lee Owens. I'm on the Three Forks department. I'm bringing former Chief Weatherbee to incident command. He's consulting on the wildfire."

"Consulting?" The moustache curls shook as the man's upper lip flinched.

"Yes, consulting," Jerry replied before Laurel could continue her story. His voice even carried that gruffness she remembered as a child. "Roll this dag-blamed window down," he demanded, and she complied. She had barely inched down the window when Jerry leaned out, pointing a finger at the moustache man. "Son, you tell me if you remember the wildfire of '65."

"Well, no, I weren't born yet..."

"Like most of the boys working this fire, I suspect," Jerry sneered, still pointing directly under the guy's nose. "You know, I doubt any of you'uns have even seen a real fire," he said. Laurel turned away before the man outside her door could see her tight lips holding in another round of laughter. She faced the girls, who were equally wide-eyed and stifling grins. She coughed to cover raising her fist to her face and mimed a lock twisting at the corner of her lips while Jerry's tirade went on. She wasn't sure if he was clever enough to catch on or if he genuinely believed what they were doing, but she wasn't about to stop him either. "Twenty-five years I was chief of the department here. I've seen more wildfires than you got hairs on your face. And that was before we had all your fancy equipment doing the work for us. I've fought fires without an air pack, nothing but my elephant trunk stuck up under my armpit. Let me tell you, that ain't fresh air when you're sweating like a Boston butt. But I did it. I may not got the

body to fight any more, but I got the mind. Now, you best be letting us through before I get all the chiefs on the radio tearing you a new one, ya hear me?"

"Yes, yes, sir," the moustache nodded. "Let me just check for oncoming." He stepped back to the front of the truck and after looking around, moved further out of the way and waved Laurel on through.

Once they were around the truck, Laurel sealed the windows up again. Jerry sank back calmly into his seat and the girls stared in awe.

"Mr. Weatherbee," Laurel said, glancing at him through the mirror. "That's was impressive."

"Thank you," he said, then added, "I'm not really consulting though, am I?"

"No," Laurel admitted. "I'm sorry, I just thought that would get us through."

"Good, that's good. I ain't in any state to be giving people advice. But a ruse?" He smiled. "I like to think I'm still good for a ruse."

"Hey, what was the fire of '65?" Alyssa asked, loosening up her seatbelt to scoot closer.

"Boring as hell is what it was. Not even a full acre burned after some idiot hikers left their campfire" Jerry shrugged. "But it sounded good, right?" Alyssa nodded. "You know I do remember this good one, about the same year too. You guys know the apartments across the tracks. Some fella thought his place was haunted, so one Halloween, he decides to hold a séance. Candles were everywhere..."

Laurel zoned out the rest of his story. While Jerry kept the girls engaged, she focused on driving closer to the park and deeper into a thin haze of smoke. Soot traveled in the air. As they came up on Henry Mountain Road, a green flashing light broke through the gloom and told her

they had found the right place. She parked on the side where Henry Mountain and the Park Road met, behind the bottleneck of fire trucks and other vehicles.

"We're here," she said. "Now everybody stays together. You understand? You all go where I go, no exceptions." Hayden and Alyssa nodded halfheartedly. They reached for the door handles, which locked before they could pull up. Laurel watched them press unlock and try again. Only for the button to slide down for a second time. She left her finger hovering above the padlock symbol of the button this time, so they understood when they looked back at her. "You go where I go," she repeated. "We're here for your dad, nothing else."

"We got it," Hayden agreed, matching Laurel's gaze. When they pulled the handles, there was finally no resistance.

Laurel helped Jerry out of the Ford and met the girls on the other side. She wrapped an arm around each of them, forcing them under her wings, hands clutched against their arms. They walked in a line towards the organized bedlam of rushing bodies. She felt distinctly their position as interlopers as eyes flicked to the corners, examining her with two teenagers and a mad old man. But she pushed them on towards the green light, across the gravel road and the trail parking.

At the tent beyond the trucks, she saw the back of Cowboy's bald head, sweating bullets, which glistened like Christmas lights each time the green flashed on him. He was with several other men in a mix of street clothes and uniforms and a red headed woman in a suit. On the other side of him, Ann-Margaret from WKBO kept trying to shove a microphone into the conversation, which he swatted away repeatedly.

"Can you just tell me exactly what's being done to retrieve the trapped firefighters?"

"I said you could interview me later, woman," Cowboy grumbled.

"That was an hour ago," she replied, bumping shoulders with a man in glasses. "I'm trying to put this story together so it can get picked up for evening news by the national circuit." Cowboy covered up the microphone with a dirty glove.

"I don't give a rat's ass about your circus," he said, then letting go.

"Circuit. The affiliates." Ann-Margaret blew off the grime and ash from the mic and pushed it right back up. "Give me something, anything."

"That's it," Cowboy said before nodding towards some of the uniformed men. "Preston, you and your men wanna do me a favor? Get her and her crew out of here. I don't want anybody on this road if they aren't trying to actually fight the damn fire."

Laurel cleared her throat.

"I hope we can be the exception," she interrupted. Cowboy turned on his heels, his annoyance giving way to a somber expression she remembered from his visit to the funeral home, when the loss between them had been her father.

"What are you doing here, Laurel Lee?" he asked. "With the kids? And why do you got Jerry Weatherbee?" he whispered.

"It's a long story," she answered.

"We want to know what's happened to our dad," Hayden added, sticking that stubborn chin out.

"Who's your dad, sweetie?" Ann-Margaret asked, the microphone tilting not so subtly in their direction.

"Preston?" Cowboy repeated, and the men in the police uniforms corralled the reporter and her camera crew outside the edge of the tent, pushing them roughly. Ann-Margaret objected

the entire way, swinging her arms around to keep the officers from wrinkling her jacket with their grips.

When the recording devices were out of range, Laurel spoke again.

"What's happened to my husband?" She spoke calmly, restrained in a way that she didn't come close to feeling.

"Let's talk alone." Laurel shook her head.

"They go where I go."

"Alright, all of us, but not here," he said, gesturing towards the trucks. "Head over by engine 22, while we finish here. We'll be just a minute. Right, folks?" The rest of the group under the tent nodded, except for the man in the glasses who stared fixedly at Laurel over his flat nose. She frowned back at him, then followed Cowboy instructions.

"Fine… Fine," Laurel said. It wasn't, but she had no desire about to get kicked out like Ann-Margaret, and she trusted Cowboy enough to attempt patience. "Mr. Weatherbee, c'mon." She waved at the man as he lingered a few steps behind. He tucked his hands into pants pockets and shuffled forward as well. Still grasping the girls, Laurel led the group away from the main tent to weave between crews and hoses. Even on this side of town the siren blared, but it was quieter than the crackling half a mile off. Hundreds of acres consumed in flames had a powerful voice. "Stick together," she reminded them as they thinned out to a long line to slip between trucks parked bumper to bumper.

Engine 22 was parked near the head of the line, away from a majority of the movement and commotion. Laurel saw the gold number in a gap between a couple other tankers. When they reached the truck, a young man sitting on the silver edge by the bays jumped up like something bit him. He wasn't in a uniform or decked in turnout gear. He wore a plaid shirt, jeans and a

panicked expression seeing Laurel emerge from around Tanker 10. She could tell he didn't belong there any more than they did. But then Reed Hollis was showing up in all sorts of places he didn't belong,

"I'm taking care of it," Juniper had promised Laurel over the phone. "It will get sorted like it should be." Which is exactly what worried her about her father's will. Barely awake and anxious, she'd wandered around the house imaging all the reasons Charlie had done this thing to them, why he couldn't die with his secrets intact. Somewhere in that, she'd lost her phone after calling Harlan, asking him to inform their mother, because that seemed like a good idea when half asleep and faced with the possibility that everything was about to come out anyway. Because, surely, if Reed Hollis was in the will, it meant that he knew the truth. It terrified Laurel to think that someone else had the power to upend her family, especially a virtual stranger.

That Drury's sister had a son had been a vague sort of memory for Laurel. Drury was the Hollis that had been like family to her. It was always Drury filling the gap in photos between Pap and Charlie. She didn't even recognize the boy as Drury's nephew when he showed up at the funeral. And she didn't know what kind of history Reed had with her sister, but she didn't like it. The only thing a Hollis brought was trouble.

It scared her even now. Though fidgeting with the same uneasy posture he'd had near her father's casket, Reed seemed like every bit of her collapsing life bundled into one human being, her fears personified.

"What are you doing here?" she asked.

"Chief Dennison told me to hang out here. That investigator, Edison something, wouldn't leave me alone when he showed. He's a weird dude."

"I mean, why are you here period?"

"I'm waiting for news on my uncle. He was at his cabin when..."

"Jesus Christ, he's the resident." Laurel nearly laughed at the realization. Her husband might be dead, all to rescue Drury Hollis. God really was a sick bastard. She clapped a hand to her forehead, shaking it with reluctant belief. She moved as well, giving space for the girls and Jerry to get around the tanker.

"Charlie!" The old man walked ahead and took his winkled hands to Reed's face, who was so startled that he didn't react aside from a bug eyed stare. "They told me you were dead. I knew they were full of shit. Oh, Charlieboy." Jerry leaned in to hug Reed, patting his back loudly.

"Laurel, what's going on?" Hayden asked as she and Alyssa skirted several feet towards the engine and out of the way.

"I don't know."

It wasn't that strange for Jerry to mistake people. He'd called her Nora earlier. He'd taken even empty space outside the funeral to be her father. Yet even so, she looked good and hard at Reed Hollis, searching for what Jerry saw. At first, she didn't. She didn't see her father in Reed at all. He was clean faced with a full head of hair, whereas Charlie had been balding, grey speckled and thickly stubbled. She compared Reed to how her father finished, but then it occurred to her that Jerry wasn't limited the same way. Time was fluid and looped for him, the Charlieboy he envisioned could be ageless, frozen in state of the day they met.

She remembered a young Charlie, her father smooth skinned and dark hair. Like reaching for an anchor, her fingers went to the lighter in her pocket, tracing the cold metal. She remembered Charlie smiling from the other end of the couch, smiling at her and Drury. It was a rare happy memory. And between the past and the present, Laurel saw what Jerry Weatherbee

did. She saw the round, large Owens blue eyes. She saw Charlie's thin, long nose with the wide flares. She saw Charlie's dimpled chin and soft cheeks. She saw the father she remembered as a little girl. And she didn't understand how.

"Stop, stop," Reed finally said, pushing Jerry's arms down and away. "I'm not Charlie. I'm not. I'm sorry."

"No. No, you're Charlie," Jerry protested.

"You do look like him," Laurel said. "You look kinda like my dad."

Reed glanced over at her and, after a visible and slow gulp of air, continued, "Look, can we talk privately?" Reed ventured closer, once out of Jerry's hold. He spoke softly. "I think… I think I need to say something and it might be easier with you than Juniper."

"You can say it here. I'm not leaving them."

"Okay, if that's what you want," he said. He glanced over at the girls and Jerry, who appeared deservedly confused. Reed returned to Laurel. "Juniper came to see me about your father's will. And I don't want anything. I want to say that first. I want you to know that I don't care about any of that stuff, money, property. It all belongs to you and Juniper."

"I appreciate that," she said, knowing that the deep breath he took next wasn't a signal that he was finished.

"But she wanted to know why I was in it in the first place, and I'm sure you do too. Well, I lied to her when she came to see me. I told her I didn't know. Except, I do." Every muscle in Laurel clenched, bracing for the words she'd never been able to bring herself say. "Charlie had an affair with my mother… I'm their son. His son."

Rather than the horrible, plummeting feeling she anticipated, Laurel laughed, loudly with her whole chest, and it echoed through the trucks and trees around them. But she cut if off just as instantly when Reed's expression didn't alter.

"Oh, god, you're serious. You really believe that." He nodded. "Why?"

"Your mother told me. I'm sorry I never told you. I shouldn't have kept something like that from anyone. But Juniper and I..." Reed paused, grimacing like a pain shot throughout his entire body. "I didn't know then. You have to understand that we had no idea." Laurel stopped him.

"You can't be Charlie's son."

"I don't expect you to like it. But I am. Your mother told me. Even my uncle didn't deny it. Just look at me."

Laurel did look. On the outside, it made sense. The surface of everything made it easy to believe. She understood how he could believe it, how Nora could believe it enough to tell him. But it wasn't true. That he didn't know the truth let her fear shed off of him. He didn't scare her anymore. She pitied him as she pitied herself for being fatherless. Like Jerry, Laurel reached for Reed's face, grazing her thumb along the features she could never touch again on Charlie.

"You do look an awful lot like him. That I can't explain. So, you might be an Owens yet, but not because of Charlie," she said. "My mother was wrong. She doesn't know the truth."

"Then what is?"

One of the hardest things about burying someone Laurel loved was how their memories had died too. Charlie went without warning. When she had sat with him, holding his hand until the EMTs could arrive and declare his death, she had thought about all the things she lost besides him. Answers she'd never get, like her grandmother Undine's maiden name, why the Hollis and

Owens families had moved out of the hills to Three Forks, or what it had felt like hold to his daughter for the first time. Small things that she didn't know she even wanted until they were gone. But the biggest one she regretted, like so many other choices involving Charlie, is that she never asked him how he fell in love, because she'd been too concerned making sure he hid it.

A wild fire raged a short distance away. Flames breathed their way along, acre after acre, running for the nearby town. Residents abandoned their memories in their homes and belongings. By the time the fire was done, it would be impossible to know what would be left or if it would all turn to char and ruin like the old tavern by the railroad tracks.

And the most important thing Laurel could imagine was using this moment to let go of the past and do right by her father. Because if she was never a good mother, she could at least be a good daughter.

"You can't be Charlie's son because his affair wasn't with a woman," Laurel began. She didn't care anymore that more than senile Jerry would hear her. "It was never another woman."

"Who?" Reed asked.

"Drury." The name fell like dropping a weight from her tongue. Reed went ashen like the sky above them. "It was always him and Drury."

"No, that's ridiculous," he said, shaking his head. "You don't even know my uncle. No, my uncle isn't...I would know if he was...I would know. He would tell me. Wouldn't he?" Reed stopped. Every part of his body slacked, then he gradually stepped backwards until he hit the fire truck. He slid down, sitting on the bumper, and a huge sigh went through him. "Him and Charlie?" He looked up at Laurel again. She nodded. "Drury and Charlie," he repeated several times to apparently help it sink in. "Wait, Drury and Charlie!" And Reed started laughing.

"Okay, yeah, we've all got that part," Laurel said.

"I just mean, if it's them then it's not...I'm not your brother, I'm not Juniper's brother." He slapped his hands to his head, pressing at his temples and laughing like jester. "I'm a fool, an utter fool." Reed got quiet again, though the grin was immovable from his face. He looked a million years younger in seconds.

"Are you okay?"

"Does Juniper know?"

"No. Nobody was supposed to know. My mother would have never let my sister or I see him again."

"Where is she? Where's your sister?" Reed asked in a rush, pulling out his keys and his cellphone from his jeans. "I need to see her. I want to...I don't know, beg forgiveness maybe."

"She's..." Laurel couldn't complete the sentence. The plummeting feeling she had dreaded reared its head. She had found a brief relief from unburdening herself, only to find another fear wash back over her. She couldn't account for Juniper, who didn't take her sister's calls, who didn't have a car even if she did know to evacuate. "I don't know."

Laurel had another box. They were stacking up against her like fodder for the fire.

Then, louder than the sirens, louder than the fire, louder than Laurel's heartbeat pounding behind her ears, a chorus of shouts from every firefighter erupted throughout incident command. Breaking between the indiscriminate noise, Laurel heard a distinct voice.

"Laurel Lee!" Cowboy yelled through the trucks. "Laurel Lee!" She couldn't see him yet and she couldn't tell what direction the shouts would take her.

"Laurel!" Hayden and Alyssa called out, sets of matching panicked tears trickling down from their eyes. The two sisters held each other's hands, and Laurel ignored everything, Reed's

worry, Cowboy's booming voice, and the shouts that could herald any outcome. She went to her daughters, wrapping them up into herself with their wet cheeks dripping against her shoulders.

"It'll be okay. He's fine. They've found him and he's fine." Which was possibly a lie. But it was one she was happy to tell, just this once.

Because Cal could be alive. He could be dead.

Juniper could be lost. She could be safe.

They could all be ruined. They could still withstand.

But, on either side of the opened box, Laurel would hold her daughters. She wouldn't leave them. They were hers, like the warm, damp blood she could feel between her legs.

Juniper in the End: Synopsis

The final major chapter begins with Juniper at the ruins of Bell Tavern once more. Her encounter with Reed has left her stoned and ill at ease at how to deal with the mess of secrets and lies that her father's death has placed before her. When the air in Three Forks begins to change with the evacuation, her focus shifts and she tries to go to Drury for help, but finds his apartment empty except for a mother, Nora. This meeting results in a final confrontation between the two where June confronts Nora with the entire truth about Charlie's relationship with Drury and her own with Reed. When Nora continues to preach and criticize, June realizes that her love for her mother is not enough to sustain a relationship to her. She abandons her mother, seeking a ride from one of Drury's neighbors to her father's house.

After crossing Three Forks, June finds the wildfire eating away at the land around her father's house. She enters the house, forced to again face the grief from the loss of her father as his belongings and lingering essence are threatened. Reed arrives to take her to safety. Even as they begin to make amends and reconcile, June cannot entirely let go of her father, and she runs back inside to retrieve what she can as the fire starts to consume the home. A sudden flashover traps her in her old bedroom. Left with little air or time, June clings to the photograph of her father, using her last breaths to accept her likely death. In a last minute save, June doesn't die. Instead a firefighter finds her and gets her onto the roof for a rescue and an ambulance ride.

Three months later, the awkward and untidy endings for those who have survived come together for the final placing of Charlie's tombstone and identity.

Introduction

Within the history of American Southern Literature, a multitude of genres have emerged from the plantation narratives to the Southern Gothic and Grotesque or even more recently Grit Lit. Each developed with their own signatures and patterns, and, at the time, sought to reveal a unique region of the South. But the pervasive effects on the audience both outside and within the region from genre have caused a collective problem to emerge. The Southern novel has become a genre of itself, one that attempts to depict and dramatize relationships and emotions among character and their location to preserve the borders of a perceivably distinct place.

However, as the old settings and the places within in them that characterized the region fade or change, the attempts to write a recognizably Southern novel often resort to predictable and traditional images, those of South long gone by or of only small, stubborn subsections. So a few questions occur. Is there a difference between a novel set in the South and a Southern novel? Can contemporary regional writers retrieve setting from stereotype? Can those who aim to write a recognizably Southern novel hope to do so without reverting to the well accepted metaphors, symbols, tropes, and stereotypical settings and trappings?

As part of a cultural engagement series at Western Kentucky University, author Neil Gaiman recently addressed these questions as he discussed similar issues in regards to other confusing genres, more specifically the difference between novels set in the Old West and 'cowboy' novels and those between novels set in the intelligence community and 'spy' novels. In each of the latter, Gaiman suggested that plot was there only to keep the stereotypical and expected events or characters from "all happening at once," by which he appeared to mean the plot becomes filler, a decorative hanging. Moreover, he implied that the author of such fiction makes no effort to engage with setting or place other than to fulfill readers' expectations. For

Gaiman, therefore, cowboy novels and the spy novels represent genres for which the main purpose is reiterative, by which I mean the purpose is to give the reader what they are accustomed to rather than challenge their assumptions. Within the discussion, he was purposeful in clarifying that this does not lessen the readability. A reader may choose whatever he or she would like to read. Instead the implication is much greater for the writer. It is a reminder to authors who aim for literary fiction with a place that is tinged by genre and trope that setting itself does not require stereotype; nor does it require meeting the expectation of the readers. Instead, the writer for a novel set in the Old West or in the intelligence community who wants reach a literary level must reconsider and even re-conceptualized place and offer the reader something unexpected that authentically represent those settings. With his distinction, Gaiman indicates that place is malleable in representation. It cannot achieve authenticity if portrayed in simple and familiar forms.

The distinctions that Gaiman makes may seem obvious. For instance, no one reads a Tom Clancy novel and believes that Jack Ryan is a realistic figure in the modern American military and espionage world centered at Langley, Virginia. Similarly, a reader would be unlikely to mistake Larry McMurtry's *Lonesome Dove* series as a testament to the actual hardships and dangers of Western Expansion from Texas to Montana. But when it comes to setting and stereotype, this distinction of reality and fiction is not so easily won with Southern Literature. When presented with a Southern novel, one that reimagines and idealizes a backwoods or plantation era even in a modern setting, readers generally accept such settings as a truth of the region. Because the setting seems real and present, unlike for example the faded Old West or shadowy CIA headquarters, the stereotypes of the South played out on its stage are given credible authority as life in the region.

As Christ Tusa, a writer and professor at Louisiana State University, puts it in his essay "Contemporary Southern Writers: Slave to the Old South", if the current slew of novels from regional writers is to serve as an example of the area, readers would be unlikely to imagine that the South has advanced past its Reconstruction era ideals of racism and rural domination. Readers might easily expect confederate flags on every door and, to expand on one of Tusa's examples, old women rocking on the front porch, snapping beans and speaking in an indecipherable and grammatically poor dialect. More than simply identifying this problem, however, or criticizing readers for their acceptance of the conventions of a worn-out genre, Tusa lays the blame for the resilience of such images and stereotypes in contemporary Southern literature squarely on the writers themselves:

> Writers seem much more content to drudge knee-deep through the south's bloody history than explore its present. And, when they aren't exploring the south's past, they seem much more compelled to rewrite great southern literary traditions ... Instead of modernized contemporary versions of the south, too often I [find] regurgitated versions of *The Color Purple* set in a contemporary context. In fact, it's nearly impossible to find any contemporary southern literature these days that doesn't contain the usual slew of traditional southern stereotypes that we, as southerners, have all grown to hate. (para. 2-3)

In other words, Tusa argues that writers of most fictional renderings of the South find it difficult to address the South without relying on stereotype, even despite their best intentions. Their representations lack contemporary and evolving images. When attempting to write what they consider a Southern novel, that is, too many current authors effectively displace their narratives in time, going back to previous and outdated versions of the South. As one writer told

Tusa, essentially those versions are more "fascinating" when compared to a contemporary South (para. 6). And so these writers impose familiar Southern stories, characters, plot, and setting, all the constructs of the myth, either by literally placing their novels in a previous time period or by heavily evoking the past through narrow, trope-filled forms of Southern life in a contemporary setting, rather than finding those elements in ways that would exemplify the modern South. All in all, these practices result in the perpetuation of myth and the suggestion that such stereotypes represent the South in an authentic way. By resorting to them, these writers fail to represent the South as it more accurately exists in the start of the twenty-first century. As Tusa notes, the irony within this failure is that Southerners continue to replicate an image of backwardness and intolerance that most contemporary writers despise. Yet, because they do so in their attempt to be literary, they cannot escape writing a genre fiction, and therein lies the conflict.

The link to place that is authentic and free from genre conventions is, by contrast, integral for any regional literature to survive. Thus, when the early qualities of a specific region and its literature have mutated from a general thematic presence into a large but limited genre, the apparent burden on the Southern writer becomes even more cumbersome, should she wish to avoid the traps of convention. For the idea of the Southern novelist seems to exist only if there is a clear, separate region. Yet the increasingly modern South does not 'look' that much different to other areas of the United States and, with increased connect via technology, even the people are less homogenous, both to each other and the past. Diversity is growing in the current South. For these reasons, the burden under which any aspiring writer of literary fiction from the South operates is far heavier than that of the cowboy or spy novelist, to continue Gaiman's metaphor, who may wish diverge from trope. For, when the cowboys died out, the cattle could still roam on the page, or when the Cold War fizzled, the spies could keep fighting between bindings. But

regional writers from the South continue to avoid representing the South authentically because of the risk of that comes when region dilutes into the rest of America or even the world. With region undistinguished or without its own particular qualities, the regional writer risks becoming less able to write literary fiction of place. She may even cease to have a genre, should she be content to settle for one.

Jason Stanford, a former fiction editor of *storySouth*, addresses this problem in his essay "Where's the South in Today's Southern Literature." In that essay he relates an interaction with a professor who admits to refusing to teach novels published after *To Kill a Mockingbird* because he deemed them unworthy of the label of 'Southern'. According the professor, the South has changed so much that anything written about it now would not fit the acceptable and distinct definition of the term (para. 11-13). Under the guidelines of this professor, regional writers would have to conform to standards set half a century ago, and it is this outmoded thinking or ideology that has contributed to Southern novels becoming a genre rather than a literary and regional endeavor. For, with such thinking, to preserve the title and by extension the region and the self as Southern, contemporary writers must continue to preserve a static, mythical, and inauthentic South.

It is, however, time to relinquish the myth and with it the Southern genre that has ensued and persisted. It is time for writers in the South to return to setting and re-conceptualize it, make it authentic. The myth of the South, its stereotype and tropes, may have been a powerful shadow because writers and audiences believe it is the path of distinction for the region. In truth, however, there has never been one South. The region has changed and shifted as frequently as it has sought to preserve itself. If they are to acknowledge this fact in their writing, regional novelists must accept the Southern myths as constructions rather than elevations, as the only

means through which they can represent the distinctive qualities of the region. They must, instead, begin engaging with the fluidity of region, and, in doing so, retake the region as a setting rather than a tradition. To a degree, Tusa makes a similar point makes when he suggests stories about NASCAR or white boys with grills, recognizable but not quite mythic Southern images: "wrestle the mint julep from [your grandmother's] wrinkled death-grip and hand her a Strawberry Mango Mint Smoothie instead" (para. 7).

With this suggestion, Tusa seeks stories of a New South, but his proposal would only recycle the same problem. The solution to resurrecting an authentic Southern regional literature is, by contrast, not to rut out new markers of the present to turn into tropes, but to reimagine entirely the expectations that follow a choice of setting. That is the conceptualization of Southern Literature should be one wherein setting – place – remains integral to the narrative. The aesthetic of Southern novels should be one that does not set up old tropes or the potential for new ones, but rather an aesthetic where place serves to act upon and influence the narrative, the plot, and the characters, as though place was a character itself.

By conceiving and constructing the settings of novels so that they can actively impact upon their characters and plots, in other words, giving those places an agency, Southern writers can once again represent the region. But now they can do so by relying on the history and identity of place at it authentically relates to the contemporary world rather than on convention. In essence, they can ensure that the South remains distinctly relevant in effect if not distinctly different in appearance. This distinction – this achievement – is valuable for a number of reasons. On one hand, the South is evolving, but the evolution is toward uniformity through urbanization and globalization, at possibly unprecedented rates, rather than distinctiveness. On another, region has never been stagnant nor one dimensional. It will continue to look different

than it did in the past but perhaps less different from other regions than it did then. Southern Literature as a restrictive genre makes no room for these changes.

Novels set in the South that give place the ability to act can thus reclaim the regional literature, and they can enact this reclamation through the creation and representation of two specific means. The first is through the representation of the *attitude of obsession*, which I define as the distinctive way that characters located in the South form their attachments to place and through which these attachments inform and construct the identities of both those characters and place itself. The second is through the representation of the *attitude of dysfunction*, which I define as the ways that the distinctly Southern obsessive attachments – in the past and in the present - influence character decisions and their narrative developments. By depicting these two attitudes, writers of the South - and the South more generally – can stop having to resort to stereotype. They can break out of the stranglehold of the Southern genre and start to represent the South with a more meaningful and authentic aesthetic. By exploring works from Southern writers, past and present, in the sections that follow, I will identify examples of the conceptualization of these two attitudes, and in my own novel, I will analyze the ways in which it can succeed.

A Changing South: New Southern Studies

The South has never been stagnant, nor is it one dimensional, even today. There are some, like the creators of *The Bitter Southerner*, who seek to embrace this characteristic of the South. *The Bitter Southerner*, an online publication, states that its origin story began with frustration with the tired stereotypes of the South, how the accent lends itself to assumptions of "backward" and the generally held belief that the mind of the South hasn't moved past Faulkner. Its articles, essays, photo essays, and videos all seek to present overlooked types of Southerners and the "other" Souths. Examples include Patterson Hood's essay about diverse music of the South like My Morning Jacket and the Alabama Shakes as well as his own rock opera creation, or S.E. Curtis' exploration of modern Civil War re-enactors, which predominantly features Louis. L. Carter Jr., a black man and re-enactor, whose goal, like *The Bitter Southerner*, is to show other sides of the story in Southern history and present. The "bitter" becomes a fuel to rectify the predominant images of the South to more authentic and diverse versions. Non-fiction like that of *The Bitter Southerner* provides evidence that critics and essayists have found ways to forge ahead with an adapting and evolving region.

In 2000, Lee Smith, a prolific Southern fiction writer, delivered a keynote address for "A Millennial Gathering of the Writers of the New South" at Vanderbilt University. Published in 2002 and titled "Driving Miss Daisy Crazy; or Losing the Mind of the South," the speech and article use humor to analyze the inaccuracies of Southern stereotypes, highlighting modern developments of urban areas and industrialization, women working outside the home, and massive immigration numbers of Latinos and other minorities. Smith states that "Akai Hana is a Southern restaurant, just like Miss Pittypat's or Hardee's" (121). Despite its comedy, Smith exemplifies a truth of the Southern region that is less prevalent in its fiction as it has been in its

criticism, which is that the South is a changing form. By allowing an Asian restaurant the same Southern presence as any other local cuisine, she reinforces the dissolution of cultural barriers and questions the distinct and mythic image of the Southern region. The objection to such myths and a consistent question of the future of the South could be, in fact, considered one of the backbones of Southern regional criticism, particularly as Smith is far from the first or the last to make challenges to the image of the region. Indeed as David. A Davis writes in "Regional Criticism in the Era of Globalization," "Southerners continue to be, and have long been, self-conscious of their regional identity" (845). Though Davis is accurate in the general self-awareness of Southern identity, this analysis has had varied effect between writers and critics. As discussed in the introduction, writers resort to trope to preserve identity. Many critics, in contrast, have used the fluctuating identity of the South as a pedestal for debate, often as a source of concern, much like it still is for the regional writer.

Some years before Smith, *The Future of Southern Letters*, a collection of essays edited by Jefferson Humphries and John Lowe, addressed the anxiety of a "New" South with growing urbanization against the dying tropes of quintessential southern writing: dialect, segregation, witnesses of the civil war, female gender performances, etc. The things that used to work as signs and signifiers for the region had become lost or altered structures, bringing the longevity of the separate region into uncertainty. The South was slowly being blended into the rest of America with one airport and shopping mall at a time. Essentially the signs and modern structures of urban life were infiltrating the rural and isolated quality of Southern aesthetics and giving the region greater connection to the global world outside of it. All of this development placed a threat to the production of its old culture and trepidation of whether the South would remain. Essentially, the collection emphasized all the problems that would lead Southern writers

into genre in an effort to combat them. Like the other authors in the anthology, Jack Butler addressed the likelihood of changes facing Southern writers, yet he was one of the few who also reaffirmed the continued existence of the region (33), much like reassuring a child that there are no monsters under the bed. Still, what the region might look like or how it might operate was still speculation, but Butler was certain of its survival for the sheer fact that those with the region questioned its survival. What seemed to be missing from the discussion, however, was that such changes and concerns are actually a constant within the region itself, more so than its mythic tropes of racism or plantation life. Butler, nor any of the other essayists, drew out the conclusion that the South will exist and thus the region did not need to be preserved in stereotype because of the predominant history of modernization and even diversity throughout the South.

This repetition of fear of an evolving South is even more evident when going back several decades before Humphries and Lowe's collection. Concerns over region and literature, especially those effects from modernity and technology, occurred with the 1970s publication of *Southern Literary Study: Problems and Possibilities*, wherein the essays and panel transcripts were a result of a previous conference that included some of the most preeminent names in the field at the time such as the editors Louis D. Rubin, Jr. and C. Hugh Holman. In addressing modern advancements, some contributors even reached the assumption of the ultimate destruction of literature as whole through technology like I.B.M. Machines (163). It is a sentiment echoed even today in contemporary accusations towards EBooks or 4G and smartphones. The fear of technology, even then, was that mounting influences from the speed of cultural transmissions and pressures from the outside world would eliminate the sustainability of the South and its literature. These worries could be developed even further back into the region's critical history, but this elucidation will remain brief as it is only to serve the point that, though

terms like globalization, urbanization, or even transnationalism have come to the forefront of critical thoughts on region and literature, the concepts behind them have long been a concern for Southern Literature. The impacts of such ideas of homogenized world culture or faltering borders have been felt and reverberating in this region almost since its inception. Yet, it continues to survive despite a prevalent fear of its demise. One source for this survival is, according to Tara McPherson, a contributor to *American Literature*, that "the South is as much a site of change as it stasis, and indeed, it always has been shifting in terrain" (696). Though it took nearly another decade after *The Future of Southern Letters*, McPherson acknowledges the lack of a singular South, or at least one that would be authentic, in her statement. The South has been "shifting in terrain" for as long as its borders and state inclusions have been subject to argument and as technology and immigration (both voluntary and involuntary) have brought a multitude of cultures to its shores. And, for McPherson, therein lies the promise of "New Southern Studies," the subject of the journal issue and the critical response in the South to the post-millennial push of globalization, to open the cannon of Southern Literature. New Southern Studies would challenge the expected images of the South.

In 2001, Houston A. Baker and Dana Nelson wrote the preface for a special issue of *American Literature* entitled "Violence, the Body, and the South." Their introduction to the volume instigated a movement in regional discussion when they called for a "new Southern studies," a study which would include "revisionary complexity…to construct and survey a new scholarly map of 'The South.'" (243). Among the essays they chose for their special issue to represent this movement included Jeannine Lombard's analysis of violence in Fredrick Douglass's *Narrative*, Jennifer Rae Gresson's work that brought Harriet Jacob's life in New York City to greater notice in regards to her novel *Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl*, and, as

the final essay, Ana Patricia Rodríguez's examination of Central American and Latino/a refugees and the literature in which they write about their lives in the South. Each is evidence of this call for new studies, which ran in tandem to the transitioning perspectives across literature and likely why it took deep roots in the realm of Southern criticism.

Their ideas for a revisionary expansion of the region have bred nearly a decade and half thus far of new articles and received numerous responses from critics and writers. Five years later, Kathryn McKee and Annette Trefzer used the same journal to directly respond to this idea in "Global Contexts, Local Literatures: The New Southern Studies." Their preface supports both the continuation of these new theories and the scholars who are "situated at a moment of significant transition between paradigms" (677) but also questions where this shift will lead, identifying the major questions facing the region's literature in regards to its reanalysis and confronting one of the acknowledged issues of this new form. For them, the movement was still embryonic, growing and developing, but was filled with possibility because of the way it expanded conversations about the region. According to McKee and Trefzer, "one of the many challenges of a new Southern studies is figuring out how to do it – how to make it a set of reading practices that reshape curricula" (688), which is to say, that, as a form, the new studies were and still are in a process of interdisciplinary discovery and an understanding of the aesthetics of place that would be required. For the first time, there was not a question of what the South would be like if it changed. Instead the critics tried to discover the ways in which to discuss and elevate those changes that occurred both in the present and the past.

Michael Kreyling, notable for his book *Inventing Southern Literature* in which he deconstructs the mythical image of the South forged by the Agrarian and Fugitive movements in

the 1920s and 1930s[1] and thus already critical of the authenticity of accepted images of the South, responded favorably to this new criticism in his essay "Towards a "New Southern Studies."" To Kreyling the "new southern studies are the globalization of the issues of region and nation" (9). Also described as a "fruitful spin off," the core of his idea is that the canon relinquishes a binary approach of black-white, Southern or not, and instead looks at all of the varied expression of Southern identity. He calls for the South to let go of its "traditional claim" in relation to distinctive region and history and to find common language for the discourse of identity amid globalization (16). He implies that this new criticism could help alleviate the concern over distinction, as the South should seek inclusion into the global world. Essentially, the South would be better served if its critics and authors would find ways to relate to other regions and places. For example, Kreyling also praises more psychoanalytical and critical theory approaches, examinations of the tandem between culture and literature and, in regards to globalization, the extensions of the South's boundaries with comparisons to literature and writers such as in Central America and Spain (14).

Kreyling's view for the survival of the region is in relation to the post-modern world outside through this "common language," which can be broken down into subjects and techniques. What clear examples and definitions of this "common language" would look and sound like, however, were less expertly explained or identified. Kreyling seems to leave such explanations for other critics to discover. And in fact McKee and Trefzer pose similar thoughts

[1] In Kreyling's book, the two movements served largely to construct an image of the South as rural and to rally against urban development. The essence of his argument is that the authors within these movements were only building a mythic South which has to readily been held onto from subsequent generations of critics and writers. Through not further developed within this discussion as to keep the history brief, the Agrarians and Fugitives are major groups in the background of the Southern Literature who represent part of the theme of the region, which is a tendency to find superficial staples or signs of region under the threat of regional dissolution. However, this is not to demean the talent and prolific influence of many of the members had in establishing journals, elevating university departments, and retaining the respect of Southern Literature.

when they ask "what are the global gestures in literary texts that we were formerly interpreting as regional or national issues?" (678). With several years to watch as globalization gained greater notice and to build on the idea of New Southern Studies, these critics argued that the next evolution of the region was to embrace the movement of the transnational, to seek a relationship with the world rather than a continued isolation. While there is value in the discussion of how Southern Literature could be reexamined for connecting themes beyond itself, ones that "unmap, remap, and demap the U.S. South, [it] becomes primarily a task for the critic" (McKee and Trefzer 688).

For the writers of the South, the greatest benefit of New Southern Studies, besides allowing a stronger dialogue outside the region to reduce the burden of maintaining distinction, is that it opened up the canon away from the traditional white male authors. It created greater emphasis on female and black authors, such as, in Kreyling's words, the "now-canonical" Harriet Jacobs (6). It gave them a new voice and recognition by pulling them from obscurity in the past in essays like Veronica Watson's "Lillian B. Horace and the Literature of White Estrangement: Rediscovering an African American Intellect of the Jim Crow Era," which explores the work of the minimally acknowledged Horace (hence the value as a "rediscovery") and notes the increased publication around the subject in the recent years. This New Southern Studies also considered works from beyond the traditional borders, looking at literature from Mexico, the Caribbean, South America, or even southern Italy, all of which are noted in various articles and anthologies that seek to explore the new global South. The reason for remapping is, as Sharon Monteith claims in her essay "Southern Like US?", that "In a new "worldly" Southern Studies, "the" South is no longer a unitary phenomenon but a participant in a metageography of

interrelated multiple Souths" (67). Essentially, the image of the South can be different than the expectation. The new criticism, again, emphasizes that there is not one mythic South to sustain.

The broadening of this canon is both interesting and needed in terms of letting go of the genre Southern novel. A revision of borders and tradition allows marginalized writers of the past a chance for posthumous impact and showcases a current world where the performance of life within these spaces is not limited to binary options. The acceptance of variation becomes a vital new precedent for regional literary writers. However, while New Southern Studies solves problems for the critics in Southern studies to delve retroactively into a plethora of previously disregarded writers or to pull from a variety of "Souths" around the world, it responds only to that which has already been created. Other than helping to make alternative forms and depictions of the South more acceptable, it gives little useful guidance to Southern and regional writers with any "new" concepts of how to adapt their narratives. As a result, the door is open for writers to create fiction of a contemporary and authentic South, but there has been little analyses of steps to show how the path may look. Understanding the best way to disentangle from the stereotypes of a genre South and to construct new authentic narratives in Southern Literature requires examining the patterns that have led to a mythic South despite the goals of several of its predominant writers.

Southern Myths

The South has always been in contention with outside influences to wear away borders. But after the Civil War this conflict became much more distinct within the field of literature. As Louis D. Rubin, Jr. et al. relate in *A History of Southern Literature*, a crux compendium in understanding the development of the region and its writings, the fighting crippled the economy of literature in the South. As a result, literary magazines in the old South did not survive (163) and, while publishers existed after the war, "no Southern publishing house had the professional expertise to edit, advertise, and market serious literature effectively. Thus, a writer who wished to be read published in the North" (179). Relying on Northern publishers and readers put major constraints on Southern writers, in terms of how they could present their home or express ideas on their motivations and defeat in the war. What appealed to those with money, unlike the poor early Reconstruction Southerners who could not afford to buy much literature, was an inauthentic South, a romanticized version where the Elysian style days of the antebellum had never faded away to the harsh reality of war and racist sentiments. In order to survive, Southern writers often indulged in myth and artifice. Some, of course, were comfortable with such plantation ideologies. Joel Chandler Harris, famous for his Uncle Remus stories published in the late 1800s that sought to "preserve" the African American oral storytelling tradition, states in his introduction that

> If the reader [who is] not familiar with plantation life will imagine that the myth-stories of Uncle Remus are told night after night to a little boy by an old negro who appears to be venerable enough to have lived during the period which he describes--who has nothing but pleasant memories of the discipline of slavery... if the reader can imagine all this, he will find little difficulty in appreciating and sympathizing with the air of affectionate

> superiority which Uncle Remus assumes as he proceeds to unfold the mysteries of plantation lore. (12)

As evidenced by his disclaimer, Harris was not creating literary regional writing or attempting to give value to the culture of an oppressed people. He was "preserving" the mythic South, which, after defeat, could have been more quickly expunged if not for nostalgic ruminations and proactive and unapologetically racist portrayals. In his case, Harris added black cultural misappropriation by stealing their stories and reforming them for his own means and profit. But Harris is not a lone example, and the tide of nostalgia grew to the point that, around the turn of the century, new critics like Walter Hines Page and William P. Trent challenged the lack of criticism of the South. Page in his autobiographical novel specifically spoke out against characters and standards of the Old South that "haunted" the literature and writers to act more directly against these "ghosts." He became a partner and co-founder of publishing company Doubleday, Page and Company (still in operation today as an imprint of Knopf Publishing), which published innovative Southerners like Ellen Glasgow and Booker T. Washington (Rubin et al., 253-254). Nonetheless, one sympathetic publisher was not enough to ebb the flow of Southern myths.

With Southern writers pigeonholed in their writing, this lack of literary and cultural movement led to H.L. Mencken's essay "The Sahara of the Bozart," where Mencken lambasted the entire American Southern region as a wasteland, devoid of any relevant art or culture. Joel Chandler Harris is among those Mencken skewers. However, Mencken's criticism is the oft-cited catalyst, or at least an unfortunately time review (as he acknowledges himself in an annotation in his chrestomathy), to the Southern Renascence, which served as an example of the South's capacity to self-reflect and revise its image. Defense of this regional identity spurred an

explosion of internationally successful literati in the area, Faulkner among them. Much of this boom in prominence came from the sharp and swift shedding of the mythic South. In fact, Faulkner and other authors like Flannery O'Connor became part of the Southern Grotesque, flouting the idyllic antebellum image and instead allowing the hypocrisy and the hubris of the region to come to light.[2] They wrote of more contemporary creatures, characters and places more readily found in the backyard. This honesty of writing allowed for empathy and connection beyond the Southern border. It proved that relevance to the rest of the world could be found in region, if it was represented in an authentic way. Nonetheless, artifice is not an essay habit to break.

In many ways, however, the Gothic and Grotesque simply became the new myth. Allen Tate, a major player in the Southern Fugitive and Agrarian movements, wrote on Faulkner's *Sanctuary* as a way to discuss the presence and development of myth. He categorically declared that the South had never had enough of a cavalcade of writers to develop a literature and that during and after the Reconstruction a few stereotypes developed of the Southern gentleman, the poor white, and the black man "spoiled" without slavery. But he does not attach the term *myth* until discussions of Faulkner and the current (meaning 1930s-60s) "imaginative focus of the Southern novel" (para. 4; para. 11). While one critic called the aesthetic a legend, Tate is clear in his label of myth and claims that it is not something that Faulkner invented, but only used, along with other novelists to "understand and to dramatize much of the Southern historical reality," which is subject to variance by author (para. 14). Tate's essay suggests that the greater and more

[2] In an essay for the *Southern Literary Journal* titled "A Peculiarly Southern Form of Ugliness," Sarah Gleeson-White looks at how O'Connor, as well as Eudora Welty and Carson McCullers, subvert the images of white Southern femininity, like the Southern belle, through "female grotesques" in their stories and thus "engage in politics of dissent." Citing O'Connor's famous story "A Good Man is Hard to Find," Gleeson-White even notes the brutal twist that the family's journey to an old plantation house, on a "road to a misleadingly idealized past," is what leads to their murder, a further example even beyond gender of O'Connor's rebellion of the Antebellum.

relevant myth is one of the "defeated South" (para. 11). His connotation of myth at the time, in those years after the recent passing of Faulkner, was positive in that it allowed the old South to be critiqued and destroyed. Unfortunately, any myth, no matter how negative, has the potential to be romanticized and retained until it is no longer relevant. So the Grotesque, which was once a dissection of the South and the evil of slavery, became its own myth, beyond the eras of Faulkner and Tate. The once idealized plantation culture reverted to hate and poverty filled rural ruins.

However, when the myth of the Gothic has proved unsuitable, the antebellum has still been preserved and repackaged in debutante lit, novels that examine the new white collar groups of debutante balls and big city family lawyers with penchants for sweet tea and good grits and almost benign and humorous racism or bigotry, as evidence by several examined novels that follow (i.e. *Saving Grace*, *Bound South*, and *The Help*). In an interview with *CNN*, David A. Davis, a Southern writer, critic, and professor at Mercer University, states that, since stereotypes are so ingrained or "longstanding" the "African-American caricature has become less acceptable and white Southern caricature has taken its place" (qtd. in Leopold para. 9). Still, it may be generous of Davis to suggest any Southern characters are becoming less stereotyped, particularly if the dialect of characters in Katheryn Stockett's best-selling novel *The Help* is any indication. [3]

[3] It may be noticed, here and further on, that the subjects of my criticism are primarily white Southern writers, but my thesis is not limited to a specific race, nor, however, do I plan to identify authors based on race or gender. This is in order to present a more generalized opportunity with equal benefits to regional writers of any background, particularly as the South and other regions become more diverse. For the sake of clarity and to preserve the objective quality of my thesis, I will acknowledge that I have not negatively criticized any African American or other ethnic writers in the South in this section, mainly because the Southern Myth does not benefit them. In a close reading and analysis of Monique Truong's *Bitter Mouth*, Denise Cruz examines how an Asian Southerner engages with issues of race as well as those of sexuality and thus avoids sentimentalizing the South, yet still Cruz suggests Truong's work is regional, even more so perhaps of how it emphasizes a contemporary and transnational version of the South. Cruz's analysis helps serve as an example that other ethnic and minority groups are less likely to resort to trope or romanticism in dealing with region. To that end, when it comes to different ethnicities, sexualities, etc., each group may also have their own methods to add for explaining the relevance of place, and would each require their own thesis. My application of function for place and the attitudes of obsession and dysfunction are intended for general and malleable use, which is why I steer away from direct discussion of ethnic variety, though I have aimed to included theorists and authors from a variety of locations and backgrounds.

And, if any of these stereotypes are too difficult to find or fictionalize in a modern setting, modern Southern writers can shift their setting to a time where the South was clearly more distinct with its growing pains of civil rights or its isolated and technologically free rural communities with bad grammar. The South has become an anchor to a variety of these myths, from the Antebellum to the Agrarian, from the time-displaced to the Grotesque. Southern writers are confronted with the impact of globalization and urbanization, and these are the forms that seem to sift to the top. In order to feel as though they are presenting a singular region, writers remove their work from the present or the 'real'. As author Ron Rash explains in an interview with *The Morning News*, "In a sense, as a southern writer you are almost always fighting certain stereotypes. There are certain expectations of a southern novel" (qtd. in Birnbaum para. 11). While Rash continues, making light of these expectations, he perhaps underscores the issue. Novels that satisfy the expectations of readers for the conventional and ready-made tropes of the South, set in the South but only recognizably so because of a few stereotypical references and allusions to the common myths may be considered Southern novels. But are they really writing about the South?

This is not to say that there is never any value to novels that resort to myth. For instance, Lee Smith executes her novels with a vivid prose and highly developed characters. But even so the main character of her popular 1995 novel *Saving Grace* is born in 1942, placing much of the storyline about Grace's evolution from the daughter of a snake-handling preacher to a May-December bride and adulterer many decades before and creating disparity on the character's modern relevance. Her three following novels, up to *Guests on Earth* featuring the famous southern debutante Zelda Fitzgerald, are also fixated primarily in the past. Though Lee Smith has

rightfully earned numerous accolades based on the talent of her writing, her novels rarely embrace a modern or contemporary South.

Susan Rebecca White's 2009 novel *Bound South*, which centers on three Atlanta women, is set in a more contemporary time (1998-2008). While well-reviewed by Lee Smith herself, who in the blurbs states that it lacks stereotype of characters, White's book deals mostly with well-to-do characters. The first chapter's treatment of the discovery of a maid's transgender status for humor is unsettling because of its disregard to the actual discrimination that minority group faces, certainly in the South. In a Q&A at the end of the novel, White admits that before this book she did not consider herself a Southern writer. She states that the South "shaped" her and that this story was about characters who are "products of their environment" (354). Although she touches on controversial issues like sexual orientation, race, and class to create a vivid intersection of characters, White does not show how environment acts to help construct these people. In her novel, place has little direct agency aside from making them hot in the summer.

Kathryn Stockett's bestselling novel *The Help* suffers from both a superficial setting like White and the abundant time traveling of Smith and other authors. Setting her novel in the 60s, Stockett, inspired by her own black maid as a child in Mississippi, seems to have sets out to write about the intense race relations between middle and upper-class white women and their black female servants. Despite the well-versed history of civil rights issues in that era, and the real danger faced when trying to confront white supremacy at the time, Stockett's novel depicts, as *The New York Times* states, a "harsh yet still comfortable, reader-friendly world" (Maslin para. 14). *The Help* also faced large amounts of criticism for its portrayal of black characters, who are only given agency through the desire of a white woman, Skeeter, and express themselves through stereotyped language that contrasts with the pristine dialect of the white characters. Yet, Stockett

is compared at times to previous female writers like Flannery O' Connor and listed on GoodReads as Popular Southern Fiction. But her superficial portrayals cannot constitute regional literature. Her novel is Southern in genre only. It is not Southern in the literary sense, as it rests on easy-to-construct settings, like raising an unchanging backdrop for a stage production, and contributes to the problem of an antiquated regional literature. The novels of Smith, White, and Stockett are not about the South, at least not about a real and living South. They are scavengers of myth, wonderfully written at times, exciting to read and easy of appeal, but scavengers nonetheless.

The Function for Land

Southern writers who wish to achieve a more appropriate regionalism must therefore look to a new aesthetic. If they are to represent region beyond the uniting theme of a genre and instead as an exploration of what place means to culture, they must construct it less as conventional setting and sense of place. Like White claimed, but failed to really produce, they must, in other words, provide a sense of causation between place and character. Regions have history and culture that inform and shape the people who live there, and this relationship is the key to making region a vital and authentic component to the literature. To achieve such authenticity, writers need to provide 'place'—the land or area in which their novels are set—with a sense of agency, to make it become a figure with its own identity. They need, that is, to develop a *function* for place.

In geography, regions are distinctive based on climates and topography. Literature, however, is not afforded those same easy lines and definitions, which makes sustaining it beyond stereotype all the more tangled. In the case of the South, it is too simple to say that the region exists as tobacco farms, humid summers filled with mosquitoes and Spanish moss in the trees. These details contribute to sense of place, but they do not acquire a function or so do not add definition to region, except to perpetuate the myth and genre of the South novel. They do not do anything to affect the direction or outcomes of characters or events. The most debilitating assumption for regional literature, not just the South, is that setting must in all ways and times resemble something that readers can immediately recognize as original or distinct to that place or region. However, evoking the South as a distinct region does not require typical settings and/or conventional tropes. The setting does not have to be singular, unique to the region, so long as it has agency in the characters' actions.

A number of Southern writers exemplify the creation of such a function for place. In juxtaposition to the novels of Stockett and White, Ron Rash's *Saints at the River* and Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage the Bones*, for examples, are both set in the South, but the naming and building of traditionally acknowledged shibboleths of the South are minimal. In fact, each town that serves as setting is fairly indistinguishable from other towns in other regions that may have local rivers or are located on a coast, respectively. But, so often, readers define regional work by the setting or a writer's representation of a sense of place. In this way, these novels show that even the boundaries of region are often displaced or flexible, considerably so in the South. Barbara Ladd says as much in her essay "Dismantling the Monolith: Southern Places—Past, Present, Future" when she tackles the problem of place within region as representative locations of the past are transformed into new functions, such as plantation homes turned into museums. She picks apart the idea that region can be represented by clichéd signs and signifiers like plantation homes because these do not remain stagnant through time or stable across a varied region.

Essentially, the problem that Ladd identifies is based on the idea that the South is the signified rather than the sign itself and the tropes of place are used to signify region. But region is based on deeper themes and cultural performances than just setting, which therefore makes region a sign. Yet, if we reverse this assumption, and see that the South and any region is a sign rather than the signified, writers can break free of the idea of constructing region through inaccurate and stereotypical signs. Or, to return to Ladd's dismantling, the South should be taken outside the bounds of the geographical. She states that rather than using sense of place or relying on details of setting,

> place needs to be constructed not as a stable site of tradition and history within a progressive nation, but as something more provisional, more fleeting, more subversive,

> and likewise more creative—a focus for economic, political, discursive, and more broadly cultural transactions, a site of memory and meaning for both the past and the future. (42)

Ladd does not provide a clear answer for the re-contextualization of region beyond this proposal for something "more creative," but she does establish guides as to what such context needs to fill, and the interpretation here seems to be that region needs to be more closely related to the *attitudes* of life that occurs within it rather than what signs of place serve to represent it physically. What Ladd acknowledges here for region is that place is never constant. Place alters, changes, advances, degrades, and as its look begins to change so do its connections to history and whatever traditions and cultures were founded there. Thus, writing authentically about place means understanding how these legacies change or endure, and not remaining fixated only with the appearance of place. Essentially, the goal of a contemporary Southern writer should be, she implies, to withdraw from an obsession with sense of place, or more specifically how a region looks based on sensory details or images (because these things are so transmutable and in the case of the South, varied or even inconsistent between states and sub-regions) and engage more with what place means – the way it creates meaning, that is. The latter requires giving place, i.e. land and objects (which are the two core components to forms of place), an active function within a narrative. Meaning then comes from the ways in which place or setting actively influence people, or in Ladd's reference to memory, the ways in which people perceive or experience a meaning for place based on their own memories, which then in turn creates identity and attachment. The idea that Ladd implies is that the land must come to represent a locally authentic experience without resorting to what are cliché tropes or visuals, and thus create a relatable world for audiences no matter their borders. Again, the solution to such a re-

contextualization is that the land or place must function within the narrative. Godfrey Cheshire, a film critic and director, acknowledges that in both Southern film and literature, "place isn't geographic...it connotes "home" and identity, it is suffused with history or feeling" (1). Therein is one plausible answer: writers can separate stereotype from region by examining the ways in which they can provide place with meaning through identity, agency. The issue, however, becomes how to execute such meaning and still retain regional individuality.

In some key Southern texts—and in my own novel—one approach seems based on responses to the function of place that involves the attitudes of 'obsession' and 'dysfunction.' These terms are part of an everyday lexicon, and, in regards to the South and its literature, are used in casual ways to refer to a hold to traditional values and Civil War fixations or rural family drama, respectively. Yet, the actual potential definitions or implications of such words as part of an aesthetic related to regional fiction have been rarely explored or clearly explained in connotation. And, for this reason, they are often perceived too literally and as negative. However, if attitudes of obsession and dysfunction are not limited to traits of people or banal descriptors, they can instead become a means through which place actively interacts with people, with characters, having had an inherently neutral position until acted out. A contextualization of the two terms can also strip them down from being part of a uniquely Southern performance and make them a part of interpretation of regional connections and relationships between place and inhabitants.

Considered in this way, obsession signifies the way in which writers can imbue the land and/or objects with agency or identity, just as they do character, through memory or personification. In other words, obsession refers to the aesthetic or technique through which writers can allow their characters to give land an identity and agency, either by virtue of its own

history, or, more frequently, by virtue of linking it to a character's family history. Obsession is thus driven by the need of characters to carve out their own spaces from the mass, often through hereditary links. Graveyards can illustrate the point further. Graveyards are universal forms, and these places are supported and respected by their communities. But their personal value comes from the specific plots, which, through family connections, become markers for grief and memory. In Bonaventure Cemetery, a famous private graveyard in Savannah, Georgia, for example, many family plots are specifically marked with letters to determine if the cemetery owners continue care into perpetuity. While some families opt out due to income, considering Bonaventure was a private cemetery for more wealthy families, often their opting out occurred because the families wished to care for the land on their own. The idea is that, with a body or identity for it to represent, the land means more; it gains an identity of its own. Or for a broader, less familial, example, take historically marked buildings. Their relevance depends on the people who either lived there or constructed it. While this memoriam can have universally acknowledged value, its emotional appeal may only apply to select groups of local communities or certain types of tourists for whom the land assumes an obsession connection. 'Obsession' as part of a 'function of place' thus emerges when lands or object as forms of place cease to have an objective or conventional quality, but instead assume an agency by becoming subject to or transformed by the identity of that person or people who relate to it emotionally. Obsession, in this way, is not based around the fact of history of place, but the feeling that such histories breed in people. Through this emotional relationship, place acquires the agency to enact and influence characters.

The enactments and influences of place on characters related to and spurred by obsession represent 'dysfunction.' Depicting the particular ways in which characters manifest their

obsession with the land, dysfunction, in these terms, provides the means by which characters generally reinforce those obsessive attachments and/or propagate the identity with which the land has been imbued. Put another way, dysfunction is a demonstration of the ways in which obsession influences and alters the acts and motives of characters. Dysfunction, therefore, cannot occur without obsession as it represents the outcome of such influence. The agency that place acquires through this occurrence means that obsession can remain the same throughout a narrative, but each character may respond to it with a different form of dysfunction, for example by refusing to leave in the midst of a disaster or, in trying to destroy an obsessive attachment, act to reinforce it. The overall dysfunction in a narrative, therefore, is conceived as the vector of characters set by their acceptance or aggression towards obsession. Their courses, actions, or fates for the vector of characters are thus predicated on obsession, and these responses become unique to a region or place because they are only suitable in that particular scenario and because of their particular attachment. Dysfunction does not, therefore, denote violence or poor decision making. It signifies the decisions made that showcase individual characters and their perceptions of region, for better or, yes, for worse.

In an interview with the *National Book Foundation*, author Jesmyn Ward helps to clarify further when she states that "place informs character: it influences how characters see the world, how they experience and react to each other, how they speak about their experiences, how they understand the stories of their lives."[4] The function of place or region similarly emerges through

[4] Whether as aptly aware of this himself or not, Ron Rash's *Saints at the River* is infinitely more successful due to the fact that his regional writing adheres to this idea as well. In a discussion with Rash at the 2013 Southern Festival of Books in Nashville, TN, he stated that he changed the narrator of his novel, which is set in the Carolina mountains, from the objective city reporter to the photographer who used to live there. He found the narrative stronger and more effective, and this effect is quantifiable by Ward's statements and my thesis. By switching to the photographer Maggie, Rash allows place to have meaning and inform character as she has a history with the town and the river in contention during the story. The reporter as an objective outsider would not have had any of those memories, and so the novel would have been less of a regional work and more of a political or environmental

an aesthetic in which writers can contextualize it as an identity, the dual attitudes of obsession and dysfunction providing the reason and manner by which it informs character. Such an aesthetic of place allows writers to use the land or place as a means to signify identity or, more specifically, to represent characters in a region in such a way as to distinguish a region while still engaging with universal attitudes and emotions. By representing emotional relationships with place, writers can then differentiate between fiction that is simply located in a region and fiction that can be classified as a regional narrative. It can allow Southern writers, in particular, an alternative to the reliance on standardized images, tropes, and myths, as they develop a function of place through which to explore potentially defining obsessive and dysfunctional connections.

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treatise over the preservation of the wild river vs. the return a dead girl's body.

Family Ties

One of the keys to understanding the attitudes of obsession and dysfunction involves the recognition that family is a core factor in each. Writing about multiple theories and formations of human attachment to place in *Space and Place*, Yi-Fu Tuan says that "attachment to the homeland appears to be a worldwide phenomenon," continuing that "the city or land is viewed as mother" (154). The exploration of Southern literature for connections that place has to identity similarly reveals those of family as prevalent and substantial. Families, like people, are a universal construct, yet the structure and culture imbedded within them vary from place to place, making them local and global. Though as Ladd's ideas for flexibility and subversion suggest family is not always reduced to biological terms. These families can extend based on friendship, adoption, or even the personification of place or land as part of the family itself. None of these adaptions or these links between family and place are limited to just South. What makes a text Southern is the way in which it expresses this attachment through the dynamics of obsession and dysfunction.

The expression of Southern attachments and family occurs in Jesmyn Ward's 2011 novel *Salvage the Bones*, where place is frequently held in correlation with two things, the maternal and the disastrous, sometimes both.[5] Written, as Ward says in *The Paris Review*, in response to criticisms for those who stayed in the Gulf after Hurricane Katrina ravaged the coast, the narrative revolves around a poor family in the fictional Bois Sauvage on the coast of Mississippi

[5] This discussion of Ward and her novel focuses her work as a Southern novelist. However, it also worth noting that as an African-American author writing about an African-American family, Ward is also engaging with issues of poverty and place for an ethnic perspective. In this way, her novel also fits into a larger culture of literature beyond regional. For ethnic and minority writers, there are many aesthetic and techniques that can be utilized, which are not tied to place or region, even if those are also important aspects of the narrative. Such groups can build aesthetics that traverse regional boundaries even when working within them, for example the Harlem Renaissance, which is often tied to the Southern Renascence, is a significant time period for African-American writers nationally though grounded in an urban region.

in the days leading up to and just following the storm. Told from the point of view of fifteen-year-old and secretly pregnant Esch, *Salvage the Bones* relates the odyssey of a family who never considers leaving, only preparing for the coming onslaught. In an essay for the *Mississippi Quarterly*, Robert Jackson notes that the South has "disaster complex," and, if so, the form could also become a trope if exploited for the sake of disaster. But, in Ward's novel, Esch and her family embrace this occurrence of disaster, and the weather itself becomes less of a focus than the people who suffer it. "Katrina, the mother that swept into the Gulf and slaughtered," Esch says, adding "the mother we will remember until the next mother" (255). Also described as "murderous" and "merciless," this disaster is inevitable for those who live here. And, by personifying the hurricane as a mother, Esch's words not only recall the observation of Tuan but they also indicate to the reader that this family does not abandon their home because this mother breeds them. In disaster, they find their true and resilient character.

In *The Paris Review* interview, Ward discusses her choice of title. She explains that *salvage* sounds close to *savage*, which is a point of pride. "It says that come hell or high water, Katrina or oil spill…you are strong, you are fierce, and you possess hope…you survive" (qtd. in Hoover). Decades ago, when asked about her own novel and Southern epic *Gone with the Wind*, Margaret Mitchell responded similarly to themes of survival, saying that her novel was a tale of why some people survived and others did not. If the outcome of Scarlett O'Hara is an indication, survival stemmed from her resilience in sustaining Tara, her family home, which was raised from nothing by her father and quietly managed by her mother. Scarlett's dedication and family ties to

place drove her to survive, even when Tara was as much a location for pain and defeat as for salvation.[6]

The unification of maternal and misery in *Salvage the Bones* is also at the heart of Esch's obsessive attitude toward her home. It is not a sudden revelation with Katrina. From the beginning, Ward mixes the grotesque with the hopeful as China, the pit bull who belongs to Esch's brother Skeetah, gives birth to her first litter in the introductory chapter. "She snarls, her mother a black line," Esch describes the animal. "Her eyes are red; the mucus runs pink...then she seems to be turning herself inside out. At her opening, I see a purplish red bulb. China is blooming" (4). Motherhood is immediately cemented as pain and beauty and even death as these puppies arrives. While it establishes the tone of the upcoming disasters within similar connotations of terror and reverence, Ward's choice of metaphor for China at the end also acts to transfer an action traditionally associated with land and ground (i.e. blooming) to the mother, further linking the two. Not only birth, but conception is associated with the earth in this novel as the seed of Esch's pregnancy occurred on the ground where she and Manny, a friend of her older brothers, had sex. These events signal the beginning of the novel's creation of the attitude of obsession, attaching an identity to place that is maternal and showing the agency with which land can alter the states of characters, here turning China and Esch into mothers. From the beginning,

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[6] The addition of *Gone with the Wind* within this essay may seem counter-intuitive as Mitchell's influence on other writers has become part of a signature of the Southern Myth that propagates more Civil War, nostalgic antebellum style stories. Yet, while those who follow Mitchell seek imitation and myth, the fact is that she is much more subversive and was rarely relating an entirely positive image of Southern gentry and plantation owners. Most of her revered characters like Ashley, Melanie, Rhett, either directly criticize the futility and arrogance of the confederacy or mournfully admit that the war never should have happened. Beyond criticism of the Confederacy, Mitchell also takes on gender stereotypes. Her admiration of certain characteristics is evident in Melanie (the more demure Southern Belle, though still fierce and strong), but in regards to Scarlett, Mitchell presents a main character who is in constant contention with the regime of traditional values, and seeks to in some ways deconstruct the limited power positions of females in such a rigid antebellum world that others sought to reinforce despite the war. Thus, Mitchell looked to reexamine the South, and it's only her imitators that desire the romanticized version.

the land thus functions as a maternal presence, although that presence is neither always positive nor simple.

This connection extends beyond the constraints of time. While China and Esch's motherhoods are present and tumultuous, land also allows Esch to keep her mother as an ever present figure in the history of the Pit, the nickname for the land which her family resides on. While her mother died years ago after the birth of Esch's youngest brother, the memory of her, both sorrowful and soothing, endures as Esch consistently attaches thoughts on and lessons from her mother to place. For example, as the only female among boys, Esch has duties that include searching out the eggs that the mother hens cleverly hide around the Pit. This search reminds Esch of her mother, the way she looked and moved with her talent for discovering the hidden food. Esch at times imagines the woman in front of her, using her recollections to give her life. At moments through the novel, in the simple day-to-day, as China gives birth, as the hurricane comes, Esch remembers her mother. By triggering memories through associations with place, the novel continues to give agency to the land. In this way, it creates a function of place, and this creation helps to guide Esch as she confronts and attempts to comprehend her impending motherhood and the mother Katrina.

The maternal thus dominates the obsession of the narrative in the novel, while, by contrast, the paternal emerges primarily within the dysfunction of the male characters. Knowing that they are not going to leave the Pit despite the storm, the male characters act for survival. A large part of their action is then motivated by preparation, and this motivation translates to a disregard of laws and rules and a tendency towards violence. Her brothers, for example, engage in a fight with Manny who they regard as a threat to the family and disrespectful to Esch.

For China the pit bull, as a mother, the paternal counterpart is her owner and Esch's brother Skeetah. When Parvo, a disease that literally comes from the dirt and acts to give the land further agency, infects China's puppies, Skeetah enlists his family in a dangerous endeavor to steal medicine from a neighboring home in the middle of the night. His other, less illegal means of providing for the puppies occurs when he and Esch venture into the abandoned home of their grandparents on higher ground above the Pit. As an object, this home creates a more generalized obsessive attachment of family than strictly maternal, though the grandparents are those on Esch's mother's side. Instead this place becomes an anchor for familial history, allowing those who died to remain in the present as well as to help the current family subsist. The home is consistently "salvaged" from, as the needs of the family are "more important than keeping the house a shrine" (58).

This habit serves to construct a dysfunctional form where, in contrast to other normative acts of reverence, the family chooses survival. The act of reclaiming objects from a place imbued with the history and origin of their family is dysfunctional in that, despite tearing apart, it reinforces the links between family and place. Skeetah has Esch help him strip the home of the dead for parts to line the ground as a barrier against the Parvo. In doing so, they encounter their father, who is similarly there to take usable boards that can be nailed to the windows of their home before Katrina hits. Both paternal figures at this point demonstrate obsessive attachment, which has allowed the house to remain in the first place, as a way to continue their dysfunction, which requires sacrifice for the past for survival. It is a surprising and modern action, whereby the traditional upholding gives way to a different kind of obsession that keeps them in Bois Sauvage. However, while it may appear as though they disregard the dead, in fact, both fathers are, in a sense, weaving the past into new forms in the Pit in order to make the home safer and

more sustainable. In some ways, this interaction adds a more profound commentary on the temporality of place. It shows how, despite change of aesthetic, the function of place as a means to survive comes through this attitude of dysfunction. They resort to places of obsession in order to sustain themselves and the animals of their concern, hence dysfunction.

Esch's father is a distant figure in the narrative, often drunk or absent, yet his drive for preparation makes clear that, despite all else, he remains a caretaker. In fact, much of his absence seems to reflect this desire to be ready for the storm as he runs errands to stock, if poorly, for the hurricane. In one interaction with his children, he says, "I'm trying to save us...Ya'll need to learn to appreciate me. You hear me?" (106). He subsequently begins yelling. As a parent, he has no intimacy or even real authority as a paternal figure in the lives of his children. But his dysfunction emerges as his response to an unrelenting need to stay in the Pit, seen through his almost neglect of his children (less concerned with their upbringing and more so to their continued survival in general). His decision to stay also emerges as a defining dysfunction as it means that he is willing to 'salvage the bones,' which, as Ward has explained, is the scarcity that families are left with in the midst of a tragedy.

Through these familial conflicts and attachments of identities, the Pit becomes more than a setting in Ward's novel. It acquires agency, the process of acquisition making the land function as more than placeholder. Before Ward discussed the ability of place to "inform character," the interviewer from the National Book Foundation commented, "Mississippi is one of the few places on earth where a story like this could happen." The place may serve to distinguish the regional and to preserve its distinction from the pressures of globalization, but elements of land's function can also signify beyond the South. Indeed, land must, for if regional literature is to have value in the global, if *Salvage the Bones* was worth giving the National Book Award, then the

story must transcend location. Any coastal city with issues of poverty could face a tempest. But, in showing an awareness of the need to give agency to land to represent how it impacts her literary family through the extension of familial attachments, the novel gives place a tangible quality in character. Throughout the novel, Esch notes the presence of dirt on everything, describing it on Manny's shoes and herself at times, particularly because of its red and orange clay colors. Rather than serve purely as sense of place, the pervasiveness of dirt reminds readers of the inescapable connection between the land and the characters' own bodies, the inherent way in which these bodies physically imbue the land with agency. Bois Sauvage becomes less a location and more the source of each character's identity, a frame for the actions they take. In this way, Ward shows that Mississippi is the specific region in which the story should be set, not that Mississippi is the only place that it could be set.

Should I Stay or Should I Go

Another narrative that deals with the disastrous agency of land on the coast is 2012 Oscar nominated film *Beasts of the Southern Wild* by Benh Zeitlin. Though books are often adapted into films, film represents culture along similar lines of literature—and in this way offers additional commentary and fictional perceptions on region. The transition of *Gone with the Wind* into film, for example, helped pave the way for the South to be a major influence, as well as movies like Robert Altman's classic *Nashville* to *Forest Gump* and recent movies like *Winter's Bone* and *Mud*. In fact, Critic Godfrey Cheshire in his review for *Indiewire* states blatantly that "*Mud* is the best Southern film that [he's] seen in ages," because it "engages and reflects aspects of Southern culture that Southerners recognize as true and meaningful to their own experience and sense of the region" (1). His response is tantamount to the same expectations of Southern literature. As part of the development of modernity, film is thus as much a fictional art for regional literature as novels. And an analysis of *Beasts of the Southern Wild* offers an opportunity to examine a narrative of the South in which the setting is less traditional, in that the film never settles the Bathtub (the name of the fictional area the characters live in) into a specific geographic location other than South. Moreover, the time period is a more futuristic/semi-apocalyptic setting due to climate change, a detail that serves as a strong antithesis to common rewinding of other works.

Beasts tells the story of the young Hushpuppy and her father who seek to survive and remain in their own home despite the external conflicts of nature from melting glaciers, the demise of which is sinking the Bathtub farther underwater and releasing the ancient, frozen Aurochs, mythological beasts and eaters of children; and the internal conflicts of her father's unnamed and soon-to-be fatal illness. Though a degree of fantastical elements occurs in terms of

nature and beasts, the core of the story is the terse but loving undercurrent of the relationship between Hushpuppy and her father, as well as the value they place on living in the Bathtub, even as the ability to live there becomes increasingly difficult.

The organization of the film rests primarily on the concept of dysfunction while the strongest expression of obsession acts virtually as a refrain around the beginning and end of the movie. Hushpuppy repeats the following lines in the voiceover, bookending the narrative: "when I die, the scientists of the future, they're gonna find it all. They're gonna know, once there was a Hushpuppy and she lived with her daddy in the Bathtub." One of the few repeated lines, especially as several sentences, and thus a hint to the potential themes of the film, this view establishes Hushpuppy's perception of the value of place as a way to signify her and her father. Their legacy is directly tied to place, the relationship of obsession serving as a record for lives and thus their identities.

Lucy Alibar, co-screenwriter with Zeitlin and author of *Juicy and Delicious*, the play that is the basis for the film, said in an interview with *The Black Book*, "In the Bayou and in the [S]outh, the first priority is family" (qtd. in Weston). Family is therefore a driving theme in the play as it is when translated to the movie as Hushpuppy's declaration shows. The little girl seeks to transcend the temporality of place. Even at around five years old, she understands that place is easily ravaged, altered, and subject to discovery in the future. By linking herself and her father to the Bathtub, she hopes the two of them as a family will exist in perpetuity. This brief repeated narration cements the motivation for the rest of story and gives the audience a reason for the characters' obsessive attachment and need to remain here even as the climate and outsiders from the mainland attempt to evict them. When confronted with these obstacles, Hushpuppy's father Wink declares, "I ain't running from no goddamn storm." Later, when Hushpuppy is clearly

scared of the roar of the winds and the downpour of rain and lightning, he yells, "We're Dusetts. We're not scared of no damn storm. I'ma show you," just before he runs outside with his shotgun to fire at the storm. In a sense, he encourages Hushpuppy's attachment to place by relating their need to stay as a point of family pride and preservation. Again, what therefore motivates them to stay is an attitude of obsession, how both look for reinforcement of their identities, primarily as a family, within a certain location. This agency of place is demonstrated by the way in which their obsession drives dysfunctional acts such that leaving is not an option.

Dysfunction proves the main thread within the plot. Much like Esch's father in *Salvage the Bones*, Wink's ultimate goal is the survival of his daughter in the Bathtub, despite its dangerous qualities and his approaching death. He states, "My only purpose in life is to teach her how to make it." He also relies on his status as family to enforce his lessons, telling Hushpuppy, "I'm your daddy and you're gonna do what I tell you to do because it's my job to keep you from dying, okay?" Though his desire shows a paternal care, he is, like Esch's father, often drunk, angry, and at times violent, as evident from his shotgun blasts to a storm. He pushes Hushpuppy by yelling and making her break crab legs with her own weak child grip rather than with tools. He creates boundaries between them as even their land is divided into two standing trailers, one for each. When Hushpuppy's burns down, he still draws a line between what is his and hers in their new shared space. He continually strives for her to be self-sustaining.

The crux of their interaction, which represents the duality where they are at once hateful and loving, comes when they escape in a major breakout from a sort of refugee holding area in the "dry place" beyond the levee. Wink tries to force Hushpuppy on without him. Her perception is that he is trying to get rid of her. However, the confrontation leads him to admit his disease and the fact that all parents die. Hushpuppy contradicts him, claiming that her father will not die.

On a surface level, her denial is derived from a childish naïveté; or her denial can be interpreted as the reinforcement of her obsessive attitude towards place, the idea that their story will be known by those in the future because of an excavation of the Bathtub. Thus Wink will not die completely. Continuing the fight, the two yell and handle each other roughly until Wink starts to cough up blood. This moment becomes one of weakness, and they both realize the inevitable loss and heartbreak for both of them. The scene ends when Wink requests to be taken home. Though being treated in the holding area, Wink prefers to die in the Bathtub, his choice another act of dysfunction that will culminate in Hushpuppy's final step into her own self.

Amid the interpersonal struggles and dysfunctional survival techniques of Wink and Hushpuppy, the aurochs have broken free of their glaciers and have been traversing the land to the Bathtub. Though the story presents the aurochs to be violent beasts, Hushpuppy confronts them in the final act as they arrive in order to get back to her father with a gift of fried gator bits and to prove to Wink that, though his own dysfunction has led to his death, he has completed his job of teaching her to survive. She stares one down, only inches from the snout until they each bow down. "You're my friend, kind of," she says. The relationship between them remains unclear, but the parallels in number to her and her friends and Hushpuppy's statement suggest the commonality of people as beasts, desperate to survive and dependent on an origin from the ground.

Ultimately, *Beasts of the Southern Wild* examines the duty of a parent to prepare his child for a world without him, one full of challenges and danger. Parents face the same exercise in any culture, which makes the film a poignant narrative across boundaries. Such universality is likely part of what helped it gain enough recognition for an Oscar nomination. But *Beasts* is also very much a Southern narrative. As Alibar noted it deals with themes of family that are pertinent to

the region, and, even more notably, it allows the land to function in their story, giving it a necessary presence. The added motivation of obsession and the link of family identity to this home gives the land agency, which allows it to influence the main characters, making place relevant to the story rather than a randomly chosen location. Even though the Bathtub is significantly impoverished and slightly dystopic due to the climate and thus not like some of the most popular traditional impressions of South (or for that matter it doesn't have a distinct Southern visualization and at times looks more like a third world country than the South), as a location it remains Southern in that it functions by virtue of the distinctive regional attitudes through obsession and dysfunction. Much of this execution stems from the perception of Wink and Hushpuppy that survival is best when associated with staying, that the life worth living or worth dying for is the one at home. Both characters display a stubbornness that might even be earmarked as a regional imperative, a characteristic derived from the function of place and the subsequent manifestation of obsession and dysfunction. As Hushpuppy says near the opening of the film, "They think we're gonna drown down here. But we ain't going anywhere...Me and my daddy, we stay right here. We who's the earth is for." When the film ends with her remaining in the Bathtub and her father's body burned and sent into its waters, it pushes the audience to accept this attachment to place, even though it may seem less reasonable because of its value as a marker for the Dusett family identity.

Of course, not every character must stay in order for the work to remain regional and to convey authentic Southern themes through an aesthetic based on function of place. While in *Beasts* the attitude dysfunction dictates they stay in spite of the weather, in Karen Russell's Pulitzer Prize finalist *Swamplandia!*, the Bigtree family is forced by the end of the novel to abandon their island home and assimilate into the mainland Loomis County in early 1990s

Florida. While the setting is not in the same year of its 2011 publication, the novel does not harken back in order to create a more familiar and stereotypical South. Part of the significance of her 90s setting, in fact, is that it lies on the cusp of that shift, where, with technology and computers and with more corporate businesses, the South has begun to appear less distinct. In debates on borders of the South, Florida is not only sometimes seen as an outlier that does not always fit in, but also a swamp that represents a small and unique subsection of the South. The novel thus presents little in the way of a traditional and trope filled setting. It thus takes most readers into a wholly unfamiliar world, but it makes that world understandable by giving agency to place through the representation of obsession and dysfunction, the creation of which enhances the novel's theme of survival and makes it seem distinctly Southern.

The narrative of the novel centers on the how and why the Bigtrees must leave Swamplandia!, beginning with the death of the mother Hilola from ovarian cancer. As she is the star alligator wrestler of Swamplandia!, the tourist attraction and the Bigtree source of income, her death marks "the beginning of the end," which is the title of the first chapter. However, the first person narrator is Ava Bigtree, Hilola and the Chief's thirteen-year-old daughter, who may be less than reliable. While it is clear that losing their mother and main attraction is devastating for their family and business, Ava gives less agency to the general development of society outside their island, as in the 90s it moves to more technology and modern entertainment, due to her stronger obsession to the family's ties to place. She perceives The World of Darkness, a large amusement park that opens in Loomis County, as a major threat. Yet her drive to become her mother's replacement is to Ava a reasonable solution to the lack of tourists, as if that drive would be enough to defeat their competition. Ava is desperate to keep her family together and to save the island. For her, obsession emerges when she is unable to split the two apart. Her brother Kiwi

asks her why she wants to stay and her inner reply is "Why save your own life?" She adds later, "That's what "home" and "family" meant, I thought: our faces, our walls" (69-70). However, saving the island is not just about saving themselves. As Ava serves as the eyes of the readers in the swamp, she continually relates the history of the people who lived there, from the Seminoles and Calusa to the Dredgemen in the Army Corp. She observes that their island is "crowded" with these ghosts (238). The acknowledgment and legitimization of these ghosts becomes important in sustaining a degree of magic realism as her sister Osceola becomes enveloped in a fascination with the otherworld and finds a boyfriend in a dead Dredgeman. It also helps the reader comprehend that, for Ava, if the swamp can house the dead, then her mother can be there too. She says,

> I was consumed by a helpless, often furious love for a ghost. Every rock on the island, every swaying tree branch or dirty dish in our house was like a word in a sentence that I could read about my mother. All objects and events on our island, every single thing that you could see with your eyes, were like clues that I could use to reinvent her. (71)

This personification ties object and land as elements of place to family, both living and dead. Ava uses this obsessive attitude as a way to save her family and reconstruct her dead mother, even if the hold it has on her is understandable if not reliable, and in turn the reader can begin to see how this perception of family identity connects the Bigtrees to Swamplandia!. This connection becomes essential in interpreting the actions of each member of the family. The reader must rely on Ava's imbuing of family and ghostly presences as the identity of the island in the swamp to comprehend how the family could continue and want to continue their sideshow-like tourist attraction. Her obsession shows the reader the agency that the land has in the family's decisions and thus its role in creating a function for place.

The Bigtrees, like the South, have an extensive mythology. Swamplandia! even has a museum, a portion of the island is dedicated to showing outsiders that the Bigtrees belong here. Yet this museum is changed and manipulated to suit the needs of the Chief. Even their name is a myth. Grandpa Sawtooth changed it once he purchased the land in the Everglades and needed to dodge out on money he owed an employer in Ohio. The idea was to make it sound more Native American and thus more connected to the region. This history espoused by Ava's father, who feeds the mythology to his own children, encourages the success of the island. According to him, as Ava says, "We Bigtrees were an "indigenous species" of swamp dweller...but it turned out that every human in the Ten Thousand Islands was a recent arrival" (239). Ava hears her father's stories but is able to dissect myth from truth. Even as child, she sees fallibility in mythology. She can admit to its flaws, but even so the reader must assume Ava finds a type of pride in the story that attaches the Bigtrees to this place. Otherwise she would find it much easier to abandon the island. In depicting this perception, the novel remains definitively regional, an example of the conflict of globalization as it challenges myths and genre by representing how a family can find their authentic selves through a continued obsessive and dysfunctional attachment to a region.

In *the New Yorker*, Russell discusses how part of the influence in writing Swamplandia! was her experience growing up in Florida as she watched the swamps shrink from their original size, damaged and poisoned by human pollution and action (Hurn). She wanted to write about environmental issues, which is evident in the novel when Ava mentions the Army Corp of Engineers who planted melaleuca trees to drain the swamp and make it more hospitable to farming and living in the 40s. Russell is conscious of the history of the swamp and how it has been, at times, ravaged and altered. Yet, *Swamplandia!* is not simply about environmental impact, but about globalization as a whole, and the dilution of the swamp is only one aspect. The

novel explores breadth of the globalization movement mostly through the narrative of Ava's older brother Kiwi, who is the first to leave the island and takes a job at The World of Darkness in the hopes of sending money back to his family.

Kiwi is the alternate narrator to Ava but remains in third person limited. Through him, readers see a world that knows nothing of and cares nothing for Swamplandia! or, for that matter, Kiwi either. He struggles to conform as his co-workers make fun of him, to earn money as he accumulates petty charges from the park, to get an education as he is driven to attend a Northern college. Unlike his sisters, Kiwi struggles against the confines of the island, but still his exit is predicated on the desire to be a "Redeemer" and to save their home and business, even as he continuously seems to fail at it through his inability to save money (124). His motivation thus comes from obsession and the tandem dysfunction as expressed with his preservation of family through place. Just as it can result in an act of staying despite the odds, dysfunction can also manifest itself in the need to flee, as in Kiwi's case. The obsessive attachments are so strong that they make Kiwi chafe, which becomes an important story line because it is only once he has left does he truly appreciates them, as seen in his joy when he encounters the rare stranger who remembers his mother the alligator wrestler or his disgust when visiting his flight instructor's home:

> Now that Kiwi had at last made it to a suburb it was easy to want the swamp. What was this fresh hell? The World of Darkness seemed like a cozy and benign place compared to the sprawl of these stucco boxes, these single-family houses. Kiwi saw no coconuts or creeks. (287)

Faced with the ultimate fear of globalization, homogenized living (essentially the same fear that drives Southern writers to stereotype), even Kiwi, who was ready to leave the island, is uncertain

of this progress and where he and his family could ever fit in Loomis County. He feels ill at ease without the traditional markers of his home. Globalization is the downfall of these markers and thus the perceived downfall of his family. Before his exit, Kiwi debates with his sister Ava about staying in Swamplandia!. Further in this conversation, he says, "It's not like the island would just vanish without you." Kiwi sees that place remains whether or not people reside there, but it is not until he leaves the island that he seems to realize that it is instead people who rely on place to help define them (i.e. obsession) or to give them a safe area to be who they are and for a culture to thrive (i.e. dysfunction). His concern is that Loomis County is not a place where his sisters, nor anyone else who was different, could survive. Essentially, he is the pessimist of globalization. For him, it is entirely destructive. However, Swamplandia! is no longer a financially feasible option. It cannot sustain the Bigtrees without paying visitors, and the only response is to utilize Loomis County as a source of income. Kiwi even encounters his father working at the local Indian casino to earn money. Both of them thus share the same attitude of dysfunction, abandoning home to save it. They face a world that would disregard them and change their lifestyle in a bid to reinforce the obsession that links them with Swamplandia!

In the end, Kiwi and the Chief's attempts are futile. The island suffers from too much debt to recover. And, through their strange solo journeys into the swamp, Ava and her sister Osceola end up rescued and returned to their family on the mainland. Ava is optimistic about this change, even though she was the most obsessed with the island. On being reunited with her family, she says "[I]t didn't matter that we were nowhere our island. All of us, the four of us—the five of us if you counted Mom inside us—we were home" (391).

The conclusion of the novel initially seems to construct place as irrelevant and so suggest that the local should and can defer to the global. However, this is a story about the

deconstruction of myth in globalization. In truth, Ava's declaration is more closely aligned with Barbara Ladd's ideas of the adaptability of place. Ava and her family remain on the mainland. They go to regular school and live a life that is considered acceptable. But, on the last page, she says, "I think the Chief was right about one thing: the show really must go on. Our Seths [the term used to refer to their alligators on the island] are still thrashing inside us in an endless loop," and she leaves the reader with the image of the show clock of Swamplandia! blank and waiting for time (397). Ava confirms that the Bigtrees have not let go of the island. Though her father was the master of mythology, she finds a truth in his words, just as at the heart of every myth there is a seed of honesty. With region and with the South, that seed is the recognition that place has meaning. Or more specifically, writers can provide place with meaning by creating conditions in their fiction through which place acquires agency, and thus the ability to function and influence character. Even at the end, Ava still has obsessive attachments to Swamplandia! as the place of her origin and where her memories come from. The ultimate dysfunction is that, even when removed and the markers of her home are gone, she can rely on that attachment. As she expresses with the reference to the Seths, her family is always going to be the family from Swamplandia! with their own singular experiences, memories and attitudes, all of which will affect how they live in a global world. As she also declares, they (her family and the Seths inside them) are winning. Her view calls back to an image that Ava previously describes of "estuaries near Swamplandia! where salt water and freshwater mingle, and it's a crazy party down there: manatees and ten-foot saltwater crocodiles and freshwater alligators, bottlenose dolphins and bluegills..." (300). This image of a natural phenomenon and the positive connotation of party seem to insist that the local and the global can co-exist as long as place is given meaning, imbued with a function, with agency.

In contrast to the previous narratives, leaving in the Bigtree's story is as much a form of dysfunction as staying as long as an attitude of obsession drives the act of leaving. But Russell's novel clarifies that place can be more transient and that myths are malleable. The attachments are still present. They can be moved and bended as place and the sustainability of place change under the pressures of globalization but still remain regional. Although place may become more fluid, region is still relevant, and it achieves a function through the story of *Swamplandia!* influencing the characters and charging the analogies of globalization.

The Lives of Flammable Objects

To avoid the pitfalls of many contemporary Southern writers in my own writing, my novel focuses more on the residents and how they perceive and understand their home than on what home physically looks like. It does not rely on setting or the construction of sense of place. Following the examples of writers and filmmakers like Ward and Zeitlin, I attempt to transform both the land in which the residents live and its objects into a character using an aesthetic based on attitudes of obsession and dysfunction to create a function of place. More specifically, my goal is to make the land an extension of the family by giving it agency, giving it history, and so, in effect, giving it life. For when the land or the region is a character, it does not matter that the land looks the same as other places due to the consequences of globalization and commercial influences, because it does not act the same; it engages with its residents in a distinctive way. Through the creation of such an engagement, my novel illustrates the claim that regional writing does not have to depend on visible differences in textual qualities and elements such as setting, language, or objects to convey regional differences or to remain authentic.[7] Novels set in different regions could depict similar or virtually indistinguishable landscapes. They could share many if not all of the same objects and have characters with the same names, and they would still represent their respective and unique regions because each place has a different legacy and history. When a writer gives place obsessive attachments that acknowledge such legacies and histories, place will function differently, creating distinctive emotional engagement or dysfunction for its residents. By emphasizing how land and object have meaning and, for that

[7] Those qualities and elements are not required to be stripped from texts, rather they are not the measure for regional writing. Authors should still feel free to execute dialect and other authentic variations, so long as they are not the basis of a distinction for the setting of the novels or films.

matter, varied meaning between characters, thus informing or directing their responses, I have striven to write a novel that executes an authentic, yet fictional, illustration of regional life.

The first chapter of *The Lives of Flammable Objects* launches the basis for the novel's attempt to develop a function of place. It initiates the process through which the character of Juniper Owens, the main protagonist, becomes established through her attachments to the town of Three Forks, Kentucky, the southern town of her origin—to which she has returned from what she actually considers her home: London, England. To a degree, her journey is a traditional prodigal return, which the novel references to signal potential themes of lingering and repetitive mythology that consume this family.

The chapter draws comparisons between the two places. As Juniper returns to Kentucky from London, she is struck with the difference of the land from the temperature outside the airport to the flickering roadside on her way back into town. However, the aim of this scene is not to create a divergence between the two landscapes and reinforce that the South is different. For example, as Juniper endures the heat of a Southern summer, she recalls a childhood memory that introduces the reader to the complicated family history that would motivate her exodus from the South in the first place. These reflections and observations act to attach her own history to each place, to show that each forms on the basis of her construction. This construction is important for two reasons: first of all, for the rest of the characters the landscape does not stand out as they have no other sense of comparison since they have never left, and, secondly, the specific way in which the land triggers her relationships in her personal sense of history serves as the key element that forms not only Juniper's character, but also the character of the land. Her memories and interpretation of the town thus show that place can have an individual history rather than serve as a sign of a static and textbook version of historical facts. So the reader may

then begin to appreciate that Three Forks is not a stagnant physicality but rather a place that elicits specific emotional responses from its inhabitants by being imbued with its own genealogy, in particular the genealogy of the Owens family.

Juniper's criticism of the view outside her car window enforces London as the exotic, lumping the Southern small town into general America, signifying the blurring of boundary, as she sees it all as wild and underdeveloped. But many parallels nevertheless unite the South and London, such as the fact that land is traversable no matter where she goes and she realizes that the passage of time means there is historical connection between the two types of foliage. The land has been conquered by humans in different intervals. It suggests that a few hundred more years and the rest of the wilderness of the South will be coiffed and trimmed back just as much of Europe or the outskirts of London. Everywhere was wilderness at one point and, of course, as time goes globalization will continue to standardize the visible signs of place. So even as she marks the different views outside her window, the reader has the impression that the two locations are more alike than Juniper might imagine, and thus the difference between them becomes less about what each place looks like and more about the way in which each place causes her to react, to feel as than land acquires agency within the novel.

The novel's development of the function of place is not restricted to land itself, however. The setting of region is not just a flat geography boundary. Instead it is additionally formed by the array of objects that appear within it. In other words, a fictional place is not represented solely by the physical descriptions of land itself and what grows there but by buildings, heirlooms, and other often man-made objects that are located there. In order to be more than the equivalent of decorative knickknacks or standard literary backdrops, to be truly meaningful, these objects need to acquire as much history and agency as the land itself. In the case of my

novel and Southern regional texts, generally this meaningful acquisition depends on the creation of the attitudes obsession and dysfunction for object as well as land.

For Juniper, obsession of objects rather than land emerges with two significant objects linked to Three Forks: the photograph of her father and the ruins of Bell Tavern. These two objects are connected by place as the picture was taken in front of Tavern, but more so they are connected by Juniper's reminisce of her father, whose death is the catalyst for the narrative and her emotions towards him as a paternal figure. These two objects gain agency and function because they become saturated with Juniper's emotional ties to her father. In her need to negate a loss that is not even fully accepted, Juniper consistently returns to these items, which act to 'preserve' her father, preservation being a major perspective in her life as the readers know Juniper works in art preservation and restoration. She keeps careful tabs on the photograph through her travels, though she does not constantly look at it. It is, instead, more like a mindful reassurance, like tapping a pocket to check for keys. It acts as a piece of him that she has taken with her everywhere as well as a piece of Three Forks, since the tavern is a noted marker for the town. Her constant attention amounts to an obsession that then positions the tavern as a parallel to her father rather than a picture background, reinforcing the sense of the place's agency.

Her obsessive attachment is more fully developed when Juniper abandons her journey home for a detour to the old tavern. Agency and function emerge through details of the tavern, which is reputedly haunted after the fire that nearly destroyed it over a century ago and claimed the lives of the family that owned it, a history that purposefully foreshadows the Owens family narrative. However, instead of just foreshadowing, the history implies the duality of haunting, as this sense is both a superstition and an actual human condition. The tavern is most assuredly haunted, but, again, in a subjective and individual way to Juniper. Her particular dysfunction is

the indulgence and almost hope in such a presence. For it is at the tavern that she still feels a connection to her father. Memories are the mode in which our minds seek to haunt us, and the tavern allows Juniper to access those memories and feel a more tangible connection to her father. It no longer works simply as a signifier of setting, but assumes the status of a character with agency. This set of standing stones becomes, in effect, a sign, a placeholder for her deceased father, and returning to it acts as a coping mechanism that Juniper adopts throughout the novel. Moreover, as a sign of obsession and dysfunctionality, she consistently intermingles the presence of her father in relation to place, whether in her recollections of her childhood or his visit to see her Europe. For Juniper, his 'survival' depends on the continuation of a tangible location rather than a breathing body.

Her obsessive attachments of her father to place then produce an attitude of dysfunction, which for Juniper, is one of her most destructive attitudes. Reverence through obsession can lend itself to the preservation of place rather than of the self. For some characters this dysfunction is bred through a need for tradition. For Juniper, it occurs through her theme of preservation, emphasized further by her actions in the chapter eight.

After the tavern, the crucial signifier of her father for Juniper is the house that he built, which sits atop a large hill that overlooks the town. Much like the Bell family constructed the ruined tavern, the Owens family has a similar figure in the log house where Juniper grew up. Built after the parents' divorce, the house was always meant to serve a link between the family members, as Juniper's father explains to his daughter during the construction. It is a place to which they can return at any time. Providing for his daughters is a primary motivating factor for Charlie and one of the ways he provides is through this house, this place. His desire to provide place is perceived by each daughter differently, however. For Juniper, it is associated with the

log house, especially as it has remained virtually the same over time; even her room is untouched since she left it. In fact, it is the ability of place to remain fixed despite absence that frustrates Juniper, as the cabin remains unaltered by her father's death. Yet, because it fixed, it thus ensures her obsession takes an even greater hold on her, which is why Juniper does not join the exodus when the wildfire breaks through from the neighboring national park and into the small town of Three Forks. Instead, she makes her way to the house. She is consumed with her desire to preserve the standing monument that is her father's work, neglecting the obvious idea that she is her father's greatest work and that his concern would have been for her safety.

At one point, in an attempt to explain part of her reasoning, Juniper agrees that the log house is not her home, but her father's. This statement, without any further clarification, provides the basis for her return despite the fire, separating the house from herself and clearly defining its relevance in terms of her father only. She risks her own life to ensure the safety of her father's house and the contents that she deems the most capable of preserving his legacy and presence in her life, the first being his will, which she is supposed to carry as executor, and the second being the same photograph that she carried in her passport. While she eventually gives up the will, the photograph remains in her grasp at all times, even as the fire begins to consume the house. She thus directly attaches her father to the object and to the place represented within the image. That she is willing to die for these things exemplifies the power of place through its connection to character, her actions illustrating the attitudes of obsession and dysfunction that, as responses to the agency of Three Forks and the objects that characterize it, help to distinguish the narrative as an example of effective Southern regional fiction.

In contrast to her younger sister, Laurel Owens is less concerned with preserving her father through obsessive attachments. In her experience, her father is a much more flawed man.

While Juniper reveres him, Laurel is conflicted in both her love and animosity towards him. However, the relationship with her father is still a primary factor in her character. Her ambivalence is a foil to her sister's idolatry. So, instead of a desire to preserve her father, Laurel is spurred into a closer self-reflection by her father's death, particularly in terms of her associations with other family members such as her husband and two step-daughters. She is forced to confront the possibility that perfection has nothing to do with love and that she must accept her own failings.

The second chapter, which is driven by her point of view, opens with Laurel at the funeral home, surrounded by flowers. In these beginning chapters, the reader discovers that each sister is wrapped in an anxiety triggered by place. For Juniper, the transition of place causes unease. As the reader is introduced to Laurel, the source of the angst comes first from a sense of futility, which is something of a standard trope for women in Southern literature. The arrangements sent by dozens of well-meaning mourners, for examples, fuel her distaste as the funeral home runs out of room, and she echoes her father's sentiment that flowers are pointless. According to Charlie, it is their impermanence that renders them foolish. (This idea mirrors the criticism in the critical essays of authors who return to specific scenery tropes of the South that are rendered irrelevant by the passage of time and impermanence.) Again, décor for the sake of tradition, whether in the narrative because it is the expected action when someone dies, or, for the ease of the reader because it is a recognizable figure of the region, does not necessarily satisfy or solve the issue to which it is presented.

To solve this problem by allowing these objects and the land greater relevance within the story, the novel links the hostility that Laurel feels toward the flowers to her personal history, particularly her failed attempts to grow a garden in her backyard. Thus the flowers that signify

tradition become personalized, and her own obsessive attachment to land is presented and developed in terms of her character. Despite her best efforts, Laurel is incapable of producing a garden that survives. When he was still alive, her father suggested burning the ground to begin anew. Charlie thus mimics the core concepts of the critical essay, in effect, as he advocates for the relinquishing of place when it no longer serves the desire for growth. Laurel rejects this idea, instead choosing to give up completely. She doesn't try to grow anything else. While Juniper returns to Three Forks as a way to preserve family, Laurel acts as if to avoid place because of its attachment to family. Though less explicit in the second chapter, through interactions with a young mother at the funeral home and Laurel's tense reactions to her step-daughters' movements, the novel suggests that Laurel's strained relationship to land is due, at least in part, to Laurel's inability to have children. Thus the land gradually comes to serve as metaphor for this loss, which Laurel has dealt with for years, and which becomes interlaced into this new and fresher wound of her father's death. Land and objects thus once again act as markers for legacy, their relevance based on the symbolic references to family, of both the fleetingness and unpredictability. The reasons for her father's death and her infertility remain unidentified throughout the novel, and their mystery emphasizes the metaphors of family rather than causality. The causes of each outcome are irrelevant to the resulting attachments that Laurel forms to the land and the flowers as a way to channel her frustrations and grief.

Laurel returns once more as the narrative point-of-view in chapter seven, and at that stage in the novel her complex feelings about motherhood and her lack of natural children take on a more central presence as the effect on her of the death of her father has had time to subside to an extent. But still both remain intermingled, especially in the climatic conflict with her step-

daughters, who become more developed sub-characters during the evacuation of Three Forks as the wildfire enters the town boundaries.

The blowup between Laurel and her step-daughters occurs as she prepares them to leave town and they refuse to leave without their father, who is unable to get to them and whose status, whether alive or dead, at this point in the narrative is uncertain due to the escalation of the fire. Hayden, the eldest step-daughter, instigates conflict, choosing to the lock herself in the bathroom, risking her own life and those with her due her refusal to leave despite the approaching fire. As readers do not have the perspective of Hayden's point-of-view, they must rely on Laurel to understand the young girl's motivations. While at first there is a great disconnect between Laurel and her daughters, Laurel, in spite of her anger, has suffered a grief that allows her to sympathize somewhat with Hayden and Alyssa. Since she has just lost her father, she can relate to their panic and immobilization in the face of danger. The possibility of fleeing Three Forks, the only home any of them have truly known, seems an impossible feat with their family group splintered by Laurel's husband Cal's absence. In the end, none of them can leave the place without trying to preserve the family. In a uniting act, they all risk safety to stay in Three Forks, specifically they go to find Cal. This search becomes an especially powerful action for Laurel because it takes her and her daughters to the edge of the fire in Three Forks, where they find a solace and connection to each other. Their connection partially negates the previous trauma that Laurel has felt and her avoidance of land as a signifier of a lost possibility for family. Instead it reattaches her to family she has, who now can possibly accept her as wife and mother.

Though perhaps not as overt as Juniper's attachments to land or place, Laurel's act of driving into the fire and towards Cal is similarly based on the relationship of Three Forks to

family structure. Only by staying in town can Laurel and the girls attempt to preserve their family. Their actions, therefore, constitute a dysfunctional act in much the same way as Juniper's refusal to abandon her father's home to the fire. Laurel and her girls cannot abandon Three Forks without knowing if their family will survive intact. Given agency by the fire itself, place becomes an anchor point for preservation of the family. Laurel and her daughters could have easily evacuated and waited for further information on Cal outside of Three Forks at one of the designated evacuation points, as is suggested from a minor character, but they decide against it. For each of them there is a greater connection to the lost father figure by remaining on site, in place. As much as it is for a connection to Cal, for Laurel the connection is also about her father, for whom she still grieves. In order to feel a greater bond of place and family, she risks the danger of the fire, an act in response to the function of place that exemplifies further the attendant responses of obsession and dysfunction, attitudes that signify the region more distinctly than mere signs of the tangible land to which they are attached.

As perhaps the most visible and obvious sign of the agency created for Three Forks, the wildfire drives much of the dysfunction of the characters as it challenges the strength of their obsessive attachments. The fire works as both an object and as part of the land in the narrative and prevents the reader having only a narrow view of land as static and stable, an inert landscape. Though the novel establishes some of this agency by virtue of the land's influence on character through memory, agency likewise emerges through the evidence of the power of nature to influence more directly. Whether through earthquake, erosion, hurricane, tornado, or fire, land can and does act. And, in this novel, the land and the fire act in several ways. In a subtler way, the fire symbolizes the temporality of place as defined by objects that can easily burn down, thus connoting the idea that simple sense of place is a fragile construction to rely on. But, more

overtly, it actively drives characters into contemplation and decision, advancing plot by either reinforcing or testing the devotion of characters to land and the family that it represents and responds to its agency. In this case, Juniper and Laurel risk their lives against the fire.

In contrast to the sisters, the character of Drury Hollis directly attempts to give his life over to the fire. For the majority of the novel, Drury appears to be an outlier. His connection to the Owens family is obscure, and it is this lack of an acknowledged, tangible attachment through either land or object that pushes Drury into a self-sacrificing stance. When the reader meets him through Cal's point-of-view in chapter six, he is a detached figure. He has withdrawn to a near isolated cabin in the woods. He shoots at intruders. He is determined not to leave his home even as the fire comes. Much like Charlie's daughters, Drury has deep familial and obsessive attachments to his home. The cabin is full of pictures of those who have come and gone, those who are his blood relatives, and those who are not blood, but seem to have a similar place in his mind. Unlike the girls, Drury is not exchanging or risking his life for the preservation of place. He is consciously allowing the destruction of place and himself, and his withdrawal stands as a suicidal and destructive act. Although this choice seems to be in conflict with the idea of preservation that has been present so deeply in other characters when land is attached to family, Drury sees this dissolution is completely practical for the same reasons. He, just as the other characters, feels a profound relationship between place and person. However, his is not a public attachment as it is for the others. His attachment has been hidden and buried for most of his life. In order to save the attachment Juniper and Laurel feel towards their father, Drury must destroy and sacrifice his own. As in case of both sisters, the fire drives Drury to dysfunction in respect of the signified relationship of place to the departed Charlie Owens.

The potential irony of each character's dysfunction is that Charlie had a much different perspective on the links between a person and land. He is well aware of impermanence through his comments of flowers and of the power of fire to be unyielding and destructive. Yet he also shows great respect for the attachment of land and to land. Charlie does not have a point-of-view narration, but, through those who grieve for him, the reader understands that he is someone of utter reason and practicality, traits that apply to his attitudes of attachment. His primary focus is to provide for his daughters, who are very different people. To Juniper, he gives his support and his will. To Laurel, he gives grave plots. Though a peculiar gift, especially for a wedding present, when Laurel recalls the memory in her later chapter, it is with fondness for her father's morbid practicality and even with a clearer understanding of his motivations. She thinks on his determination to get his own plot next to his parents, to be near to those he loved even in death. Laurel goes so far as to say, "that after a lifetime all anyone could ever, if lucky, claim was a plot in a graveyard. The only bit of land that ever really matters, that ever truly belongs to us, and no one ever lives on it" (224). It is Laurel's observation, but it comes from watching her father buried. It comes from her acceptance of his perspective on the importance of knowing where one will be in the end. This importance of land in death, particularly through Charlie, emerges with several instances. One occurs as Juniper handles her father's will, which stipulates that, while his estate must be divided among his surviving relatives, a cemetery plot is to go to a specific individual. The fact that this instruction for the plot is separated and referenced highlights Charlie's concern over to whom the final bit of land belongs and his need to attach people and family to place as well. It also signifies the link between family history and objects that give meaning to the land.

The second event occurs after the first and second chapters from the reverse perspective as the initially unnamed point-of-view watches the gravediggers as they prepare the ground for Charlie's burial. In those moments, the land again becomes connected to the identity of those who rest within it, particularly through the object of the gravestone. The unnamed narrator muses on the ability of a stone to signify an entire person's life. There's an implied question of its accuracy. And, in regards to Charlie, who has yet to receive an official and permanent marker, the reader must surely be curious as to what identity will placed there for all of time, because, even if inaccurate, this place, this piece of land, will signify and attach to Charlie once he is buried. Death only reinforces attachment. But then this is one of the questions that moves the narrative: who is Charlie Owens? Each character sees him differently; each attaches him to different places, motivated by different obsessions. Is any one person correct? Are they all wrong? And does it matter if they are, if the connections feel authentic?

While these questions apply to the obsession and dysfunction of the Owens family to their patriarch, they can also apply to the construction of region and place. What is the South? Is any one version correct? Are they all wrong? And does it matter if they are, if the explanation allows the region to supersede its own mythology into a viable and surviving literature within the world market? Everyone sees the South differently. Region is not stagnant; place is not unalterable. But, just as for each character in *The Lives of Flammable Objects*, region is not about the land itself or the objects on it. Region in fiction is only authentically defined by the ways in which characters relate place to themselves and their family, how they respond to the land as a character with agency that can and does act. Region is thus a sign for those who live there, their beliefs and motivations. Only by using place to signify people, rather than using

setting to signify region, can regional literature combat the inauthenticity that comes from easy reliance on available images and tropes and thus remain current and relevant.

Function in Faulkner

Up to now, my analysis has mostly focused on narratives released within the current century since my greatest concern is the direction of authors writing now. Still, any discussion of Southern canon is incomplete without mentioning William Faulkner. He is the figurehead of the early 20th century Southern Renascence and the benchmark for any emerging Southern writer, and one obvious example that land is an important figure for Faulkner is that he goes so far as to develop his own county of Yoknapatawpha as the setting of his novels.[8] And, as part of that development, Faulkner foreshadows the aesthetic I have attempted to illustrate as he imbues land and objects with obsessive attachments and characters with dysfunctional attitudes. Some examples include Quentin Compson's pocket watch in *The Sound and the Fury*, which is a symbol of his family's heritage, or the statue of Colonel Sartoris in *Flags in the Dust*, a novel that deals with the legacy of the famed ancestor, who is carved in effigy and overlooks the

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[8] While Faulkner is a figurehead due to the breadth of his work, it would be an oversight to not acknowledge Margaret Mitchell's expression of Tara as one of the more famous singular uses of land in Southern Literature. In *Gone with the Wind*, land is vital to the development of Scarlett through the novel. Many of Scarlett's more poignant actions, from the covering up the murder of a deserter soldier to her second and calculated marriage to Frank Kennedy, are in service of Tara and keeping herself connected and owner. These acts of dysfunction lead to being ostracized at times from the rest of a more traditional community, especially in Atlanta. But Scarlett rarely has any care for this perception as confirmation of her success and identity come from the endurance of Tara.

Early in the novel, Gerald, Scarlett's father, offers this advice, "Land is the only thing in the world that amounts to anything, for 'tis the only thing in the world that lasts…'Tis the only thing worth working for, worth fighting for—worth dying for" (49). While it appears to translate more directly to livelihood, in the case of the O'Haras land symbolizes the preservation of their family amid war, which is only accomplished by attachment to and preservation of Tara. The most important romance within the plot of Mitchell's novel is Scarlett's love for her family's land, one that her father promised would come to her in that same previous scene. Though she at first denies it, even Ashley, the married object of her fixation, confirms her love for a clump of dirt in his hand as more powerful than her love for him. Yet by the end of the novel, when seemingly abandoned by her husband Rhett, she finds comfort in returning to Tara. At its core, the novel is about Scarlett understanding her father's words insomuch that she sees Tara as a part of herself. Thus *Gone with the Wind* seems less about Georgia society in the Civil War, and more about the qualities that characterize the lived experiences of a region through the eyes of a woman driven by her attachment to place.

railroad he built, and its impact on his descendants. But the novel that reveals perhaps the most about the function of place in Faulkner is *As I lay Dying*.

The novel of the Bundrens revolves around death of the matriarch Addie and the subsequent journey from their rural community to the larger town of Jefferson for her burial. With a rainstorm washing out the bridges needed to reach their destination, neighbors question such a rigorous venture for a dead woman. However, Anse, Addie's husband and Bundren patriarch, insists on completing the journey as it was his wife's request to be buried with her kin in Jefferson, where she was originally from. For much of the novel, since Anse is portrayed as a very unreliable character, many of the neighbors and other people they encounter doubt his motivation in transporting his dead wife's body, and the reader may even begin to question whether the request was real in the first place or if Anse is merely manipulating an accepted form of obsessive attachment to get something he wants. It is only once Addie is allowed her own chapter in which to narrate, closer to the end of the novel, that the reader becomes convinced of the request and understands just how deep the attachment goes for Addie and how her request reflects a deep misery in her life. In her own words, Addie perceives the land as part of the blood. In this obsessive attitude, she attaches the meaning of land specifically to that of family.

As it depicts her obsessive belief and her wish to be near her own 'blood' in death, the novel reveals how disconnected Addie is from her husband and four of her five children. With the exception of Jewel, who the reader learns is the outcome of her affair with the Reverend Whitfield, Addie has no sense of ownership over her own children. She sees them purely as a product of Anse. This subversion of traditional family structure adds to the Gothic nature of Faulkner's South and shows that familial attachments for obsession, which in previous novels so far have been about survival and an uplifting form, do not have to be positive or conform to

prototypical relationships of family. Indeed, Addie feels more of a kinship with the dead in Jefferson than her most of her own living family, her obsessive attitude giving the land agency through her request (leading to the dysfunction of those she leaves behind who adhere to it). It does not reinforce a happy or normal form of family connection, just as region is not always a source of pleasant experiences or people.[9]

Addie's confession is limited to the reader, however. Her husband and her children are unware of her disconnect from them and, outwardly at least, attempt to honor her request to be buried in Jefferson. To the risk and detriment of their own lives, they provide the novel with its instigating dysfunctional act, upholding the obsessive attachments of the dead over the safety and security of the living, which comes to fruition when the eldest son Cash breaks his leg crossing a river. However, the journey is not an altruistic outing for any of her family. Anse most clearly manipulates the need to fulfill Addie's obsession of place. Unlike the previous examples of the paternal in the narratives of Ward, Zeitlin, and Russell, Anse cares about protecting himself. He takes money from his daughter and uses the visit to Jefferson as a way to get new teeth and a new wife. For Anse, the importance of family connection is that it gives him something to sacrifice as he benefits himself. Through the patriarch, Faulkner shows a negative side to family

[9] While not explored in depth here in my thesis, I found similar themes of the destructive nature of attachment to place in the South in the works of other canonical Southern writers like Flannery O'Connor and Cormac McCarthy. Their respective novels, *Wise Blood* and *Child of God*, both begin with mentally disturbed characters who are stripped away from their homelands. For Hazel Motes, he returns from the war to find his hometown deserted and family gone. For Lester Ballard, the first chapter is the selling of his family lands, leaving him homeless and lost. From there, both characters begin odysseys of mayhem, violence, and self-destruction, essentially actions of dysfunction that occur due to an inability to maintain obsessive attachments to place. Though it may seem as if the retention of place might have saved them, it is more likely that because of such strong attachments it is the loss that drove them mad, and thus the negative connotation resides in the possibility that if they had accepted more cleanly the loss and relinquished attachment each man may have found greater peace of mind. Again, since the Southern Gothic and Grotesque was on the rise during this period and after, so, like Faulkner, these two authors found ways to subvert the mythic idolization of the region.

attachment and illustrates how dysfunction is not always built on an earnest desire to respect or positively reinforce obsession.

But Anse is not the only one seeking his own gains. Dewey Dell, the only Bundren daughter, is pregnant and seeks a way to terminate that she knows she will not find in their small town. Twice in the narrative she approaches a pharmacist to try to obtain what she needs. On the second try once in Jefferson, she is so desperate that she trades sex in the cellar for the prospect of getting the medication she wants. Jewel, the only child Addie loves, attempts at several openings to leave his family behind, but catches up to or returns to them on several occasions through the journey. For him, burying his mother is about following obligation, not a generous concession. In either case, the children are conflicted between their own needs and the family's journey for their mother, and their conflicts create two levels of dysfunction. In other words, they accept their mother's obsession to their own risk as they also manipulate her obsession for their own gain or opportunities. This is not to say, however, that they are callous in their regard, unlike Anse. Jewel does have deep emotions for his mother. In the beginning of the novel, he suffered from a denial of how sick she was. Then, in the end, he rescues her body from a burning barn, due to a fire started by another son Darl.

Throughout the novel, Darl is eerily perceptive and seems to understand his mother's indiscretions and motivations, which is why he goes mad and burns down a barn in an effort to destroy her body. If his mother's obsession is based on her body and returning it to the land of her family attachment, by trying removing Addie's body Darl performs a reactionary form of dysfunction, by which his actions reinforce the existence of obsessive attachment but in such a negative form that he rejects it. Since his act of arson leads to his committal to an asylum, his

dysfunction reasserts that a response to obsession whether positive or negative proves that the land has agency to alter character vectors.

Although the Bundrens are a selfish lot and a group whom Faulkner uses to portray the grotesque nature of the Southern family, the novel ends with Addie's wish fulfilled and her body buried with her family in Jefferson. Despite their respective dysfunction, each family member contributes to the initial obsession. While Faulkner is not overly specific with details of setting (instead more concerned with the inner complexities of the character's thoughts and development), he still creates the means though which to give agency to place. And this creation becomes an essential part of the narrative. Perhaps the only saving grace for the Bundrens is that they accept the mother's need for a specific plot.

As I Lay Dying deals with the global issues of mortality and the emotions and motives that drive a family to stay together. But, what makes it a regional novel is not that the family in question lives in the South but that the land as Faulkner depicts it has the ability to bend and test the bonds of the Bundrens, and not always in a flattering light. Faulkner provides a strong contrast with fallible bonds of the familial. He shows that such bonds are not always a sustaining element, but sometimes connections that people sustain in spite of their destructive force. This alternative view helps in presenting a region of balance, that life in a specific area has flaws as well as positives. More importantly, it clarifies that writers do not have to lionize region in order to write about it. They only have to showcase how region affects the emotional lives lived there, by giving function to region via land or object.

Legacy: A Conclusion

In his travel essay "The Soul of the South," Paul Theroux discusses the complexity and the South and its many paradoxes as he ventures through it. He notes how Southerners themselves tend to claim "with grim pride, or with sorrow, or misquoting Faulkner—that the South doesn't change" (350). Theroux, however, after his own exploration, has seen first-hand how wrong those Southerners are, how the South has changed in its cities and even, though more slowly, in its small towns. His argument of a changing and malleable South is one that I have championed in this essay as not simply an observation but a reality. And, if this is the reality of our region, it is the duty of Southern writers not to get caught up in the myth of the unflinching and static South, which Southerners lament with "grim pride," and likely accept because it is the image that is repeated with their literature and other cultural markers. Unfortunately, this myth holds them back both as a society within the global world and as a literature that has a history of influence and reverence well beyond the handful of states that make up its region.

From Captain John Smith's descriptions of the bountiful wilderness that motivated colonists to the shores of what would become Virginia and the Carolinas (Lemay 26-33), Southern Literature has continuously ventured past its own borders and found audiences outside the region. Over ten percent of *Time Magazine*'s list of Best 100 Books in English for the nearly the last century is composed of Southern novels (Lavaco and Grossman). Pillars of Southern Literature like Faulkner and Mitchell have influenced writers and readers from France to Vietnam and Russia, (Boudraa; Stewart)[10]. Beyond them, the general impact of Southern

[10] Suzanne W. Jones' essay "Who is a Southerner Writer?" addresses how the prominent figure of the South has caught the attention of writers well outside the region, particularly in Britain, thus allowing the region to blend with the international. Writers outside its boundaries take on the task of writing about the South in new ways or take on Southern writers and works, like Tennessee Williams, for their own "cultural productions and advertising purposes" (2).

Literature has grown exponentially with the rise of globalization as well. As Michael O'Brian notes as early as 1998, there are "scholars in Odense who write about Walker Percy, in Berlin who concern themselves with John Esten Cooke, in Vienna who read Flannery O'Connor" (3). Much of his essay explores the relationships of the South in modern culture around the world only a few years before New Southern Studies became the mantle to include discussions of the prolific international connections that were becoming a staple of Southern Criticism. The point here is that the impact and prominence of this cross-cultural legacy was not built by authors who reiterated myth or romanticized the South, but by those authors who challenged and reformed the image of the region, a valuable precedent in such because, as discussed, the audience for the South is not just Southerners.

In the 1960s posthumously published collection of her essays, Flannery O'Connor writes frequently on the South and its literature. In the piece, "The Regional Writer" based on receiving a scroll from the Georgia Writers' Association for her second novel, she discusses the growth of Southern writing, particularly its audience and how the Southern writer can find success and meaning. O'Connor herself is part of the legacy of writers who opened the door to these growing and global audiences for Southern writers. However, her essay also addresses the fear that, just as it gains an audience, Southern Literature will falter due to blurred lines of region. As contemporary Southern authors give into this fear, regurgitated and outdated versions of the South are published and disseminated, losing the outside audience more than any "blurred" concept of the region.

The issues of alienation for the South and the burden of being a Southern writer with the expectations of certain images are present in several of O'Connor's essays like "The Fiction Writer and His Country" and "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction." But it is in

"The Regional Writer" that she states, "It is not a matter of so-called local color, it is not a matter of losing our peculiar quaintness. Southern identity is not really connected with mocking-birds and beaten biscuits and white columns any more than it is with hookworm and bare feet and muddy clay roads" (57). Essentially, O'Connor establishes that being Southern has nothing to do with what place looks like. Identity is not tied up in image. She denies that the myths of the South have anything to do with the identity of the South. She strikes down both the antebellum romance and the grotesque/gothic that even made her popular because it is not these images but rather the authors' desire to communicate about life in the South that makes a text of literature Southern. Even though she feared the blurring of region, she would never have condoned resorting to myth.[11]

O'Connor also once advised writers "to remember that the serious fiction writer writes about the whole world, no matter how limited his particular scene" (77). Through this advice, she reminds her readers that regional writing is not about ensuring differentiation or alienation from the rest of the country or the world, but rather acknowledging that the South is slice of life the same as anywhere else. Southern Literature is no more important than the literature of the North or the West or the East. But it is a way to communicate with those directions. As New Southern Studies sets to bridge those connections with the rest of the globe, Southern Literature should maintain pace along with it. To do so, I have attempted to explain and illustrate an aesthetic that dispenses with myth and embraces the legacy of Southern writing and was exemplified by Faulkner and O'Connor, whereby authors actively reframe the South but maintain the relevance

[11] While O'Connor would not have proliferated myth, this is not to say she was tied entirely to total realism. In "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," she responds to criticisms of the unrealistic nature of her stories with a leaning towards the idea of Hawthorne's "romances", in such there is still authenticity to her fictional South even if it is not everyday life, or even common to encounter escaped convicts on old backwoods roads. To compare, within my close readings like *Swamplandia!* and *Beasts of the Southern Wild*, not all of the novels rely on solely on the absolute real life of the South but they seek to portray an authentic story.

of place by allowing it to influence the story actively, to function as place, in all of its many changing forms. While this call is a version that has echoed since Mencken's critiques of the South, contemporary Southern writers will find it easier to unload the burden of that regional title by adopting this aesthetic and providing attitudes of obsession and dysfunction to quantify and express the ability of place to act and influence within a narrative. The creation of such an aesthetic consistently in the Southern Literature will reinforce the idea that the value of place lies with the people who reside there. Theroux believes what made the South worth it for the traveler was "the heart and soul of its family narratives—its human wealth" (350). And, as readers likewise venture into the novels of the South, the contemporary writers of the region should not seek to create a genre of expected experiences and setting, but a literature of the relationships between people and place.

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