WHEN THE EVENING COMES: A NOVEL

AND

AND IT BEGINS LIKE THIS: ESSAYS

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ON THE CRISIS EXPERIENCE IN BIRACIAL LITERATURE

For the black man or woman, the experience of being seen through the eyes of another and fully understanding how one is seen can be a traumatic experience. Franz Fanon talks about such a moment in *Black Skins, White Masks* when a white girl calls him a Negro. With this call Fanon recognizes his own marginalization and difference. W.E.B. Du Bois theory of double-consciousness stems from a similar experience he had. In African American literature this moment often marks a pivotal moment in the protagonist's narrative arc. Contemporary novels that feature biracial characters like Danzy Senna's *Caucasia* or Heidi Durrow's *The Girl Who Fell From the Sky* also have such identifying moments that recall both Fanon and DuBois. This moment, defined by sociologist Everett Stonequist as the crisis experience, is a hallmarking feature of these reconfigured passing narratives, often acting as a catalyst for the protagonist to begin a self-exploration of an understanding of their identity in a world that tries to define them as being white or black, a process that forces the character to disavow one for the other. In examining further how the crisis experience operates, I will look at Matt Johnson's *Pym*, specifically the book's biracial protagonist Chris Jaynes. With Johnson's *Pym*, the crisis experience sparks Jaynes' own journey toward what he believes is an understanding of White pathology, but it's also an attempt at discovering his own ancestral black roots. Through the character of Chris Jaynes, Johnson's *Pym* is an example of a book that uses satire to deliberate target Whiteness—from the White world of publishing, white academia, and how White pathology has infiltrated every aspect of contemporary society, including the habits and expectations of the White reader himself.

The focus of trauma criticism has taken work from leading theorists like Cathy Caruth and others to focus on effects of trauma and how they can be realistically presented in literature, but this criticism has largely centered around psychological and physical traumas resulting large-scale events such as war, mass-murder, terrorist attacks, long-term oppression but also individual experiences like rape, abuse, sudden accidents, and the death of loved ones. Postcolonial critics have even applied the trauma theory to cultural traumas or national traumas like the trauma resulting from slavery or colonialism. While there has been work done linking the trauma of slavery to African American experience, particularly in the novels of Toni Morrison, where there's been less exploration is the application of trauma theory to trauma that results in the everyday racism people of color experience in their daily life and how the experience of that trauma eventually comes to shape one's sense of self and their place in the world. One critic, Ron Eyerman in *Cultural Trauma: Slavery and the Formation of African American Identity*, argues that the formation of African American identity should be explored through the history of the cultural trauma of slavery. Cultural trauma is the dramatic loss of identity and meaning, what Eyerman refers to as a "tear in the social fabric" that affects a group of people that have achieved some degree of cohesion (2). The trauma of slavery should be looked at as "not as institution or even experience, but as collective memory, a form of remembrance that grounded the identity-formation of a people" (1). As Eyerman explains, for African Americans, it's the *memory* of slavery and its representations in speech and art that have come to ground their identity. In his book, Eyerman starts with the post-Civil War period after slavery had been abolished and discusses the ways in which the notion of a unique African American identity emerged

and reconfigured throughout history. “Whether or not they directly experienced slavery or even had ancestors who did,” Eyerman argues, “blacks in the United States [have] identified with and [have come] to identify themselves through the memory and presentation of slavery (14). Eyerman’s argument is useful in thinking about the link between African American identity and the traumatic experience of recognizing oneself through someone else’s gaze and seeing how they are viewed as lesser, something foreign, something Other. This experience is the culmination of years of being witness to the various cultural forms, from “books, newspapers, schools and their texts, advertisements, films, and radio” that have worked their way into black man’s mind (Fanon 131). These cultural forms, with their racist depictions of the black man or woman as the savage, the brute, the bad man, and the Uncle Tom for men and the jezebel, the mammy, or the welfare queen for women are examples of the type of every day racism Forter spoke of. The black man (or woman) is constantly surrounded by these cultural forms, and they “work their way into one’s mind” (131). They are, what Greg Forter identifies as being “mundanely catastrophic traumas” that over time, affect a sense of self.

In thinking about trauma theory, not much attention has been made on the experience of the mundanely catastrophic. In defining it, academic Greg Forter offers this explanation:

“the trauma induced by patriarchal identity formation rather, say, than the trauma of rape, the violence not of lynching but of every day racism. These phenomena are indeed traumas in the sense of having decisive and deforming effects on the psyche that give rise to compulsively repeated and highly rigidified social

relations. But such traumas are also chronic and cumulative, so women in the fabric of our societies, that they cannot count as ‘shocks’ in the way that Nazi persecution and genocide do in the accounts of Caruth and others” (Forter).

It is the trauma of experiencing a hundred pinprick assaults on the psyche. These assaults can range from the constant witnessing the stereotypical representations of oneself in the cultural forms Fanon mentions, but it also can include microaggressions felt in the classroom and workplace, said by friends and peers, to the omnipresent effects of systematic racism experienced in one’s daily life.

In Fanon’s *Black Skins, White Masks*, the culminating moment of experiencing these traumas is when he relates the story of hearing the child’s words “Look, a *Negro*!” and through this call, he become stripped of his subjectivity. He is not an individual but an identity, an “object among other objects” (Fanon 89). I would argue here, that this “Look, a Negro” moment Fanon explains is its own type of traumatic “shock.” Fanon uses this experience to describe how the black man lives out the trauma of the recognition of his marginalization. This moment marks a shift in which he has to renegotiate his identity in relation to this recognition of difference.

Du Bois’ idea of double consciousness echoes Fanon’s. In the opening pages of *The Souls of Black Folk*, Du Bois describes a similar moment when he was made to feel his racial difference. A white girl at school cuts him by refusing his visiting-card “peremptorily, with a glance.” (15). The girl disdains him on the basis of what she sees, his skin color, and that refusal is itself expressed through a blind look that rejects Du Bois without knowing the person he believes himself to be—someone who is not different from her or anyone else. Du Bois describes this experience of alienation from white

society as being “shut out from their world by a vast veil” (8). His identity as an African American is dependent on how he is viewed by a racist’s society—a society that thinks it sees him even as it “veils” him. This personal experience becomes the basis of the truth of the “Negro” condition. The Negro is a:

“sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second-sight in this American world—a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one’s self through the eyes of others, of measuring one’s soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity... This history of the American Negro is the history of this strife—this longing to attain self-conscious manhood, to merge his double self into a better and truer self” (Du Bois 8-9).

W.E.B. Du Bois’s idea of double consciousness is the central, if not recurring, theme in the criticism in the canon of African American literature. Theorists like Henry Louis Gates and Michael Awkward have shown how African American writers have evoked the theme of double consciousness in their work using Mikhail Bakhtin’s concept of the “double voice.” In his *Discourse in the Novel*, Bakhtin explains the double voice as being any utterance that “serves two speakers at the same time and expresses simultaneously two different intentions: the direct intention of the character who is speaking, and the refracted intention of the author” (324). There are always “Two voices, two meanings, and two expressions” that are “dialogically interrelated” or that always know about the other. A double-voiced word contains two meanings—a literal or monologic meaning, or the dictionary definition of the word, but also an implied or

dialogic meaning. Consider, for example, the word, “talented.” The literal/monologic meaning of the word would be someone who has a special ability or is gifted in some way. A monologic utterance would come from a colleague who is happy for the other person’s achievements, saying “oh, you’re so talented,” and the receiver of the remark would take the comment at face value. However, in a different example, one in which the speaker is jealous, the tone takes on a different meaning. “He’s so talented,” then designated a worldview shared by the person, but not the person referred to. What’s important in the implied/dialogic meaning here is that it appears in the social relationship between the participants in the dialogue.

Bakhtin uses the term double-voiced mainly in describing irony and parody, but satire also operates as being double-voiced. Henry Louis Gates has done work connecting double-voiced discourse to the black vernacular tradition, specifically the act of signifying which, with its verbal strategy of indirection, coded messages, and double meanings, is an indirect form of satire. In signifying, the speaker never directly addresses the weaknesses of his or her target. Negro spirituals, for example, are full of signifying and coded messages. The trickster tales, for instance, shrouded in humor, often conveyed serious social critiques about racial inequities. Told during and after slavery, these trickster tales were necessary since blacks couldn’t risk a direct attack on white society. Charles W. Chesnutt’s *The Conjure Women*, a story collection similar to the *Uncle Remus* tales, presents a freed slave, Uncle Julius, who entertains a white Northern couple with fantastical tales about antebellum plantation life. Coded with these stories is a social critique on racial injustice. George S. Schuyler’s *Black No More*, published around the

time the one-drop rule was being codified into law, is a biting satire on the issue of “the color line”.

In Mat Johnson’s *Pym*, the character’s identity-formation is a response, or a reconfiguration of what, is known as a “crisis experience,” the term first appearing in Everett Stonequist’s “The Problem of the Marginal Man,” where he identifies it as being the second stage of the “life-cycle” of a mixed-race person’s development (10).

Stonequist defines the crisis experience as:

“The individual, through one or more defining experiences, becomes aware of the cultural conflict which involves his own career. This may be the result of a single experience, which climaxes a process of summation, or it may dawn in a more gradual and imperceptible manner not clearly recallable by the subject. The typical traits of the marginal man arise out of the crisis experience and in response to the situation. The individual’s life-organization is seriously disturbed.

Confusion, even shock, restlessness, disillusionment, and estrangement may result; a new self-consciousness develops to mirror the newly realized situation (11).

Judith Berzon, in *Neither White Nor Black: The Mulatto Character in American Fiction*, takes Stonequist’s concept of the crisis experience and applies it to American literature, recognizing it as a one of the key patterns in the scope of fiction focusing on biracial characters. Berzon recognizes the crisis experience as being a “single, shattering experience” where the individual is “faced with the existential crisis of redefining himself in terms of his social and psychological environment” (122). How the individual faces this crisis is the subject of these fictions. Despite the differences between Stonequist and

Berzon concerning *when* the crisis experience occurs (and if it's one or can be multiple moments), there are other points in Berzon's application of Stonequist's concept worth mentioning. The crisis experience acts as a catalyst for the character in which "he must reconstruct his conception of himself as well as his place or role in society" (Berzon 121). It is an important, defining moment for a character in which he or she must change their perception of who they thought they were.

The crisis experience is, in my view, the biracial formulation of the Du Bois' double-consciousness, which in turn echoes the traumatic experience detailed by Fanon in recognizing his own marginalization. The biracial character, particularly one who looks not quite white or black, as is the case with the character in Matt Johnson's *Pym*, is in a unique position. He/she can't quite fully assimilate into either world despite always being forced to reside in one. What I am interested in here, is the moment that comes after such a character does finally choose one of these worlds. So often the character chooses the "white" world as we see in novels centered on biracial characters that have the passing trope. Another, more contemporary way of looking at this are novels where a character enters the largely white world of academia. These characters enter this world, adapt believing they are or can be "one of them" and then come to find out that in reality, they are not. This realization is their crisis experience, often also a catalyst for the character to begin their own self-exploration of their identity.

Chris Jaynes, the protagonist in Johnson's *Pym*, has this crisis experience early on in the novel. In the book's opening, Chris Jaynes learns that he has been denied tenure at his university. "Is it because I refused to be on the Diversity Committee?" Jaynes asked the President during a meeting to discuss why his application for tenure was denied

(Johnson 13). The president remarks how Jaynes was hired to teach African American literature, not just American literature. “You were retained to purvey the minority perspective,” he further clarifies, and Jaynes, in his defense, points to other faculty, white academics, who have deviated into teaching other fields outside their realm of experience—“Yeats scholars who end up following their way to Proust. You have a film professor who was hired as a German linguist,” Jaynes argues, to no effect” (13). Jaynes argument doesn’t convince him, however, and he is denied tenure. Jaynes, finally fed up with being a “Professional Negro” has reviewed to purvey the minority perspective any longer. This realization is further clarified when Jaynes goes out for a drink at the town’s sole bar and meets another African American, Mosaic Johnson, a self-proclaimed “Hip-Hop Theorist” (17). It becomes clear to Jaynes that Mosaic is there to become the new black academic at the college. “I looked at Mosaic Johnson and I saw myself there. I saw myself showing up in this town, seeing it as foreign territory I was hopeful to invade” Jaynes thinks after he’s introduced to Mosaic, and for this reason Jaynes advises him not to join the school’s diversity committee, if and when it comes to it. Jaynes offers this advice because he sees a representation of himself in Mosaic. He is a younger version of him having stepped onto this white college in this white town, but it turns out that Mosaic is actually Jaynes replacement for the job he lost, and Mosaic is keen to play the part of what he feels is the “strong black man” that Jaynes would not, and yes, he will be on their diversity committee if they ask it. Jaynes is quick to remind him though that despite what he thinks, he will instead be their “angry black guy”, their Other, a token stereotype needed to fulfill their Diversity Committee to assuage their guilt from provoking any real

change. Despite Mosaic's desires for otherwise, no matter what he tries to do he'll always be seen as this to them.

This moment is the catalyst for Jaynes' own journey. It is his own type of crisis experience that marks his search to understand what he calls "the pathology of Whiteness" (Johnson 14). If you want to understand it, Jaynes argues, then "you have to look to the source of its assumptions. You want to understand our contemporary conception of the environment, commerce, our taxonomy of humanity, you have to underlie the foundation of the modern imagination" (33). Jaynes wants to identify how the pathology of Whiteness has been constructed in the hopes of learning how to dismantle it. For him, this project had led to his obsession with *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*, the only novel by Edgar Allan Poe. In Poe's *Pym*, a black crew member heads a mutiny which results in Pym and a few survivors becoming shipwrecked, eventually drifting to an island near the South Pole where, it turns out, all of the inhabitants are black. The Tsalalians are described as having a complexion be "a jet black, with thick and long woolly hair," the character Pym relates in his narrative. They are so black that, we come to learn, even their teeth are black. The Tsalalians, attack Pym and his crew, the only survivors being Pym and another character by the name of Dirk Peters. The two of them manage to escape and at the end of the narrative they are drifting in a canoe toward the Antarctic when they see a giant, white-shrouded figure rise out of the chasm, its hue the "perfect whiteness of snow" (Johnson 32). Jaynes is fascinated by Poe's *Pym*, and he believes that the origins to the pathology of Whiteness begin with this tale. The plot of the novel becomes a quest as he embarks on a journey that takes him to

the South Pole, the source of pure Whiteness, to find Pym's trail and make contact with the lost black civilization described in the narrative.

Not only is this journey one in which Jaynes seeks to understand the origins of White pathology, but it is also an attempt to find his "ancestral home" (Johnson 30). He is trying to find his black roots, to understand African part of his ancestry that has largely been denied. "I like looking for myself in the whitest of pages," Jaynes explains in his analysis of Poe's *Pym*, "I like finding evidence of myself there, after being told my footprints did not exist on that sand" (27). He is looking for the part of himself that has largely been erased—from history, from culture, and from his own understanding of his own identity.

Toward the end of *Pym*, Chris Jaynes stumbles across popular landscape painter Thomas Karvel who was rumored to have been hiding out in Antarctica. Karvel takes him and Garth home to a meal of Welsh Rabbit, as well as to meet his wife, Mrs. Karvel. Jaynes notes of how Mrs. Karvel appeared intrigued by them both, that her "smile was a little too wide, her laugh a little too quick, her retreat to the kitchen a little too nervous." Jaynes identifies this as a possible reaction to his racial identity. "I often forget that to some I actually look 'black,' not just ethnically but along the 'one-drop' line," he writes in a footnote. "I become comfortable in one category in the world's eyes and then am surprised by the next person's interpretation when it's altogether different. The difficulty lies not in the categories of looking 'white' or 'black' but in the inability to simply choose one self-image to rest in, never knowing how the next person will view or interact with me" (239).

Jaynes is a marginal figure struggling to find his place, and throughout the novel he's constantly having to reconcile his identity. This continuing reconciliation and the effects it has on him echoes the identity crisis identified in Du Bois's *The Souls of Black Folk*. Du Bois wrote of the "twoness" of the black American who "has two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings, two warring ideals in one dark body" (2). Berzon argues that Du Bois's double consciousness is not enough to capture the unique experience and position of a biracial person, especially one who is able to pass. Where Du Bois's double consciousness does apply is through this moment of the crisis experience, the moment when the Jaynes is forced to see himself through someone else's eyes, and the traumatic shock that incurs when this recognition results in the understanding of one's own marginalization.

A prevalent parallel among the canon of African American literature is the use of satire and the ways in which it's been used to critique the concept of black identity. *Pym* is a merging of both these indirect and direct forms of signifying through its use of targeted social satire. Like other novels in the African American tradition, *Pym* employs satire as a tool to critique the ways in which racial identity has been constructed. *Pym* is a social critique of the construction of whiteness, but it's also a critique on this pathology. Jaynes, uses satire, a historically European form (meaning white), to critique the academic world that has excluded him. The book then, this written account, is a taking up of the master's tools to dismantle the master's house. Jaynes has dedicated his career attempting to enter the ivory tower of academia. It is a world that has rejected him, quite literally. Jaynes recognizes this in his crisis experience moment. Jaynes' desire to understand the idea of Whiteness as a pathology stems from this recognition of this

marginalization. He is, after all, biracial, both white and black. Jaynes believed he could have both aspects of his identity, but it's during his tenure review that he realizes this is not the case. To academia, a largely white world, he is and will always be seen as different.

In the author's preface to Johnson's *Pym*, the reader learns that a character by the name of "Mr. Johnson...an assistant professor of language and literature" has had a hand in preparing Jaynes' manuscript, and that Jaynes has taken his advice to relate the events of his narrative "in a nonthreatening story form for those who, even if they don't believe my story, would be willing to still take a bite and try to swallow it nonetheless. It was also Mr. Johnson's decision to present these revelations under the guise of fiction" (Johnson 4). This metafictional turn, this reference to the authorial hand in the construction of the text (albeit in the fictional representation of Mr. Johnson), is intentional, purposely calling to mind Poe's *Pym*, which also includes a similar type of explanatory preface.

In the past, Blacks were not allowed to write because writing was, for Europeans, the "visible sign of reason itself." Europeans privileged writing as the measure for the Africans capacity for progress, their place in the metaphorical great chain of being. Not being able to write kept them in their place, so to speak, at the bottom of this chain, considered the lowest of the human races or first cousin to the ape. Simply the act of writing was the "ultimate sign of difference between animal and human" and therefore denied to Blacks. Therefore, the act of not just writing, but taking up the form of satire is a deliberate authorial strategy.

The circumstances surrounding Poe's novel might also help explain Jaynes' desire to lash out with the weapon of satire. When James Kirke Paulding, Poe's intermediary with Harper Brothers, sent word in March of 1836 that the firm had declined to publish his projected volume of tales, he advised Poe to "apply his fine humor, and extensive acquirements to more familiar subjects of satire." In effect, Poe was being told to conform his fiction to the palate of popular literary taste. Harpers said as much in a letter sent several months later, informing Poe that his works were "too learned and mystical." Poe found himself obliged to abandon plans for his volume of tales and turn his energies to the fabrication of a long narrative which would please the American reading public—the same public whose fondness for "stupid" books he'd decried in a review two months earlier. At some point during the composition of *Pym*, Poe decided to conceal his authorship behind the persona of Arthur Gordon Pym, perhaps as an attempt to disown the work he'd already recognized as inept, but as Kennedy argues, Poe's concentrated effort to achieve verisimilitude suggests that he hoped to pass off a deliberately gruesome and extravagant tale as a factual account of a nautical adventure, and by doing so he'd satisfy the requirements of Harper Brothers, capitalize on the reading tastes of the public, while still maintaining his artistic self-respect by turning the situation into a joke.

Perhaps this cheeky behind-the-curtain look toward the book's author and the choices he makes to what kind of story to present to the reader is its own commentary of the choices marginalized writers make when they construct a text. Similar to Jaynes' desire to teach courses beyond the scope of African American literature, what of writers who want to write the same? "Everyone has a role to play," the college president told Jaynes when he was denied tenure. Like Jaynes, are black writers forever meant to write

stories about black experience? And what if they don't? Choosing instead to write stories about white characters' lives? are they appropriating the white world? For Fanon, even speaking correctly is a sign that the black man (or for him, more specifically the Black Antillean) is appropriating the white world. In Johnson's *Pym*, he is doing far more than speaking correctly—Jaynes adopts satire (as well as parody and other traditionally European forms) to tell his story, but the text is also a type of appropriation of Poe's *Pym* as well—mimicking its structure, its style, and even the motivations for writing the text itself. Fanon writes how “all colonized people position themselves in relation to the civilizing language: i.e., the metropolitan culture. The more the colonized has assimilated the cultural values of the metropolis, the more he will have escaped the bush. The more he rejects his blackness and the bush, the whiter he will become” (Fanon 3). Couldn't the white world of academia then, be an extreme example of this assimilation? Of the black man's ultimate rejection of his black identity as he assimilates into the white world? These questions are underlying in Jaynes' preface.

Black humor that developed during slavery masked slaves' true feelings and beliefs while maintaining dignity under extreme conditions. DuBois' “veil” in this case could be a mask,

“What could appear as plain dumbness to whites could appear to blacks as ‘cutting satire’. The same can be said with *Pym*'s use of humor. Jaynes says in his preface that he tried to make his story nonthreatening in the hope that those “would be willing to still take a bite and try to swallow it nonetheless” (4). Under the suggestion of Mr. Johnson (which—how does not one think of the author, Matt Johnson here?), Jaynes signifies. Jaynes uses humor to give his readers a nonthreatening story about his romp through the

Antarctic as he searches for Poe's Pym, and indeed the story is funny. Jaynes brings along his friend Garth, a guy with mainly two fixations in his life—Little Debbie snack cakes and the schmaltzy WASPy utopian landscapes of the painter Thomas Karvel (aka a fictionalized parody of Thomas Kinkade). There is also Chris's Jayne's cousin Booker, the captain of the trip to Antarctica. Booker is a paranoid former-civil rights activist with a dog named White Folks. When Jaynes does reach the Antarctic, he finds Pym alive but is living in the company of abominable snowmen that he labels "white honkies". These snow creatures enslave the men when they can't pay up for a promised deal of Little Debbie snack cakes. Unbelievably, even more ridiculous scenarios happen as Jaynes and his crew try to escape from the snow creatures and make it back home.

Weird, fantastical, and funny, the story Jaynes tells appears to be a nonthreatening fun tale meant to entertain the masses, very much calling to mind Poe's decision to appeal to popular audiences with his *Pym*. That said, Johnson's *Pym* still is very much an attack—on White pathology, on White academia, and to some extent the White world of publishing. Jaynes is double-voiced speaking here—conveying two meanings—the nonthreatening tale meant to entertain, but underlying that is a critique on the reader himself, because who is he laughing at here when he reads about Jaynes' white honkies? Is it not the representation of Whiteness not just represented but parodied in to such a grotesque extreme? Johnson's *Pym* is an attack presented under the guise of social satire, doubly cloaked by fictional character Jaynes but also of the actual author Matt Johnson through his structural mimicry of Poe's *Pym*.

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WHEN THE EVENING COMES

PART ONE

I.

It'd been said that on a quiet day a sound could carry for miles. Although trees could absorb the sound and there's also the thrush of branches against the wind, muffling what noise could be heard. Summer bursts of rain as the water pounded against the earth. There were nature's inhabitants—the birds perched on branches or the frogs with their mating calls filling the woods with their croak and thrum, their whistle and pitter. A year before it was locust season and everywhere a person went they could hear their relentless humming. Late at night sometimes one could hear the howl of a nearby dog, at least that's what most told themselves it was as they listened to its cry resounding through the dark.

In Edgeville that morning though there was none of this. It was early, the sun had just begun its slow climb, and only those who needed to were rising at this hour. There was no rain and no storm, no yelping dogs, no rustling of leaves from a wind's gust. Only quiet as the stifling muggy air forewarned the day's coming heat. So, it stood to reason then that someone must have heard. Either when he was taken, that first scream before he was shoved into the trunk with such little air that by the time it was opened again he was barely conscious. A cry, surely, that first scream before those boys snuffed it out. Someone must have heard their own drunken holler as they packed into the Ford and drove, flying through the desolate roads of the town, still buzzed on beer as they thought of what to do.

Or when the trunk opened again. Light once more where there was darkness, and he saw the gun in his face and gathered the strength enough to call. Maybe though, they

told him to shush. Maybe his voice was too weak from the thirst, from being inside the trunk so long. Maybe the threat kept him quiet as he was forced out, out, out of the trunk and onto his feet again. Maybe he believed it was just a prank gone too far, because what would they want with him? What would they want with a plant worker making just a couple bucks above minimum wage? Each day he worked his hours, passing by the others—men with itinerant desires but whose souls had been crushed with the realities of work, men who looked forward the ready-made meals at Jerry's—steak tips with gravy, green bean casserole, a slice of apple pie from behind the thick glass case. Men whose mouths tasted of beer and smoke, who carried with them the hard look of a dream continuously deferred. He did not know them but he could not blame them either for who they'd become. He was cordial to them but quiet, always keeping a distance.

It was a prank, he must have thought, some bored kids with nothing else to do in this town, and he'd been the unlucky one they found, and so he complied because soon it would be over. Soon they would give up and let him go and he'd be back home with his wife and kids. He must have convinced himself of this as they forced him up to the barn. He must have thought—*if I wait a little longer, if I hold out a little longer*, as they reached the entrance. At what moment, though, did he realize there was no point of return? Was it when he felt the grass beneath his feet turn to gravel, as the air? Was he still quiet even as they shoved him toward the corner? Did he still believe right up until he felt the cold metal against his skin? Or did he give one last beckoning call before one of them finally made the shot?

For years Mary would wonder how far his cries must have carried. She tried imagining the likelihood of someone hearing—a lost traveler searching for his way, a

farmhand working his land, a hunter steady his aim on a target. How many lovers had snuck out into the woods and stood silent as they listened to the echo of someone else's pain? They must have held their breath and closed their eyes, waiting for the sounds to stop so they could convince themselves it was nothing.

It is possible though, that those who heard the shot believed it was meant for someone else. There is also the curious sound of animals in pain—rabbits or raccoons, some birds can sound like humans in their terror. A wounded vulture, crying and staggering through the trees, can have the high pitch sound of a person injured.

No, none of these are unmistakable from the sound of a man, no matter what anyone would want to believe, and so the question becomes how far his cries of help would have gone, and more importantly, how many would have heard it. If that is, anyone had chosen to listen.

II.

They planned to meet at the abandoned tobacco barn off of Route 11. Mary had grown tired of all the time they spent together in the back of Ben's Impala, his hands alternating between being in her hair and between her thighs. Sometimes they met down at Mission's Creek because it was close to Mary's house. Ben would pull his car off the main road so no one could see, park, and then make the quarter mile hike to the water. Ben told Mary once that him and his brother Thomas used to come down there a lot to fish and Mary knew then the creek must have held some special significance. After a while she grew tired of this place too. With the full heat of summer in full sway she didn't want to be out in the woods the whole time, and Ben couldn't spend all his money on wasting gas to let his car's air conditioning run, so Ben suggested the barn.

It'd been months of secrecy. Of late night whispered talks on the phone and of carefully coordinated meetings. "You know if we told everyone none of this would matter," Ben kept saying, but Mary was forceful in her decision to keep their relationship private. She lied at first and told him it was because of her parents, that she wasn't sure they'd understand, but the truth was she didn't know what they would or wouldn't understand, and anyway it'd been enough of an answer for Ben, that is until his mother got liver cancer, and now he kept urging her toward a different decision.

Ben said the barn was haunted. He retold the story Mary had also heard. She never believed it but listened anyway and pretended she knew nothing of it the first time Ben took her there. "They tried to burn it down," he explained, pulling her up the slight hill to the barn's entrance. His voice was pitchy from the excitement of showing her, and

the words came out in a rush. “They’d set the barn on fire but they were met with the black residents of the town who put it out before it could get too far.”

Thirty years ago a mob had tried to burn the barn to the ground in retaliation. A group of men were angry because every week when they went to the tobacco warehouse a mile outside of the town, the owner, a black man by the name of Macon, always managed to get the best deal. It was because he produced the best product, everyone knew, but it still didn’t matter, and a group of the others finally had enough. They came out with the intention of burning not just the barn but the fields but were stopped by a countering mob.

Mary didn’t know much about the story beyond that. She knew two men had died, their ghosts said to be what haunted the area and the barn. Macon’s tobacco fields did also get burned that year. The barn though, the barn managed to not take in too much harm, and within the next few years Macon managed to build it back. He built it but got sick right after and died, and the family sold off all the land.

The barn was larger than Mary expected, and inside she half expected it to be full with the dried leaves. Mary tried to imagine the smell of the cured tobacco, like a fresh cigar not yet touched by a flame, as she breathed in the stagnant air.

“A barn like this was used to put the leaves to hang to dry,” Ben said. “There were these laths full of the tobacco plants and you’d hang them in rows going all the way to the top of the shed.”

“Something’s moving up there,” Mary said after Ben pointed to the rafters. He kneeled down and picked up a rock and then threw it, causing a ricochet of sounds before a raccoon came scuttling down.

Anyways,” Ben said after the animal was gone. “Later on in the year, once the leaves have dried brown, you take the laths down where they’re stripped. The leaves are pulled from their stalks and placed in a tobacco press lined with paper where they stay until it’s time to take the whole thing to be transported to the auction.”

Brightleaf. Burley. Cavendish. Fire-cured or flue, sun-cured or air. This was North Carolina and tobacco for many, was their lifeblood. Mary did not know much about tobacco but she knew this town’s identity was wrapped in its existence. Even her family, her grandparents and beyond, had been tobacco farmers. It was inevitable if one went back far enough in any of the residents’ family lines to find a connection to the plant, but now—now tobacco farms were dying, and what once had been a cash crop for families now had them struggling to survive.

Ben’s family was one of them. They’d grown other crops, corn and wheat mostly, but their living had been selling the golden leaves. Ben, his brother Thomas, their mother, and his mother’s boyfriend Lucas had all worked together in the fields, and for most of Ben’s childhood they’d done well enough to scrape by, but then Lucas left her and his mother got sick. Then it became Ben and his brother trying to keep the everything afloat, but tobacco farms were a dying breed. The recent government buyout of tobacco coupled with the rise in taxes and sanctions meant there were few family-run tobacco farms left. With just Ben and Thomas, they weren’t enough to do the work necessary so Thomas sold off what acres of land he could, the animals too, everything until all that was left was their house. They used the money to pay the medical bills, and Thomas got a job at Duke Power, meeting a similar fate like all the others his age and older, a fate Ben would have soon enough.

“Well?” Ben had said, taking a step back from Mary and holding his arms out in the air. “It’s cool in here at least, which is what you wanted, and no one ever comes.”

“Why not?”

“Why does no one ever come? Who knows. I think they believe in all those haunted stories. Besides, it’s far enough out that no one’s going to bother.”

“I don’t know, Ben. Do you think it’s bad to come here considering its history?”

“What do you mean?”

“You know, an abandoned tobacco barn in a town where tobacco is dying?”

“I don’t believe in symbols,” Ben said, shrugging. “Besides Mary, the past is the past.”

Ben always said things like that. The past is always the past, what’s done is done. It was his way of coping, this incessant need to move on. She thought it was a way of dealing with the fact that he didn’t know his father, he was gone before Ben could take a breath, and that his mother was dying. He was avoiding what he should be facing, and Mary often let it go, but other times he responded this way when she talked about the racism of the town, of her own fears. “The past is the past,” he’d say. “Things have changed. You’re making too big a deal about it.”

If they ever fought it was because of this. His downplaying of what she felt, and his assuredness made her question, made her always doubt.

Ben walked around the perimeter of the barn, first looking around to make sure there weren’t any more animals, but he also looked for snakes because he knew how much Mary hated them. Mary watched him move, watched his tall, lean frame as he

crouched in the corners of the barn. He finished searching and then turned to her. "This is a good place," he said. "This can be our place."

"All right."

Ben smiled, pleased with himself and what he'd done, and after that this was where they met when they got the chance. Once, maybe twice a week when they could coordinate it together. They had picnics sometimes at the front of the entrance. They played games each of them brought from home. Checkers mostly, or backgammon or pinochle despite neither of them being very good. Ben kept a deck of cards in the dash of his car and they played with that the most. Ben taught Mary to play poker with his deck.

"We need to play for something," he said the first time, shuffling the cards between his fingers. For weeks, Mary had begged him to teach her before he remembered to bring the deck. They sat outside on a yellow linen tablecloth that was Ben's mother's. Mary brought ham and cheese sandwiches. Earlier that afternoon she'd packed the slices of bread full of the butchered meat, layering stacks of American cheese on top. Now the heat had melted the cheese. Ben, after picking up a sandwich, smeared a glob of the cheese between fingers before licking it off.

They drank warm Cokes and ate oatmeal pies for dessert. Ben had gotten them last minute from the grocery. He took them out and blushed when he handed one to her.

"I ate these all the time as a kid," she said, biting into the pie. "I forgot how sweet they are."

After they finished eating Ben pulled out the cards and said he was finally going to teach her how to play.

"But we got to play for something."

“Why? Why do we have to gamble?” Mary asked.

“Because it’s not the same without stakes. There needs to be a sense of risk. It’s boring otherwise.”

“Life’s already full of risks. Can’t we just play?”

In those days Ben was different. His mother wasn’t sick and him and Thomas didn’t have the burden of taking care of her. The idea of risk was still a novelty for Ben, the idea of losing not mattering because he didn’t believe he had much to lose.

Ben dealt out the cards and explained to Mary the game’s rules. Ben wanted the stakes to be higher because the ones in his life weren’t high enough, and so when Mary had asked her question Ben brushed it off.

“Are you not going to teach me if we don’t bet?”

“Maybe.”

Mary sighed and emptied out her pockets. “I don’t have much to begin with,” she said as she looked down at the change.

“That’s okay. We’re not playing for money anyway.”

Ben reached over to the knapsack he’d brought and pulled open the flap. He brought out a plastic bag of jellybeans and dumped them in front of her, the candy forming a small pile in the space between them.

“Come on, let’s play,” he said.

Ben won the first round. “You should have let me win!” Mary chided when it was over. She watched as he gathered the jellybeans to his side. He grabbed a handful and popped them in his mouth.

“Why would I do that? It wouldn’t teach you anything. Now you have to play again to try and get them back.”

“Oh come on. What if because you took everything I decided to hell with this game and never want to play again?”

“Well then I still win,” he said and laughed. “Is that even true anyway? You don’t want to play again?”

Mary paused, recognizing his bait. “Fine. Once more.”

They played for the rest of the afternoon, until air began to cool and Mary knew it was time for her to go. She’d lost every round that first day, but she slowly got better each time they met to play. Or maybe he began to finally let her win, she wasn’t sure. With Ben, she could never be sure.

Over the next few weeks they settled into a habit with coming here. On weekends Mary woke, first going into her closet to pull out a dress. A blue buttoned down shirt-dress. It wasn’t flattering as she wanted it to be but it was clean and light enough to keep her cool. As she changed the morning daylight showed marks on her body she hadn’t noticed before. Scratches along her arms from the tree branches. A bruise on her hip from when she tripped and fell hard against the earth. She rubbed her fingers over her skin, wincing slightly from the bruise, as she pulled the t-shirt off her body and let it drop onto the floor. Her hips shimmied out of her underwear, and she left that too piled next to her shirt before changing into the dress.

The birds outside had started their dawn chorus. Mary hesitated by the window as she listened to their clamoring beck and call. She wanted to be out before her parents

were awake so as to avoid their questions. It would be easier to think of a lie after she'd come home, but none of it would matter if she couldn't leave the house in time.

Mary snuck out of the house while her parents were still asleep. They were heavy sleepers but even still she crept down the stairs and out the door, careful with each of her movements, of the sound each footstep made, each painful creak in the floorboards from her weight bearing down. She made down her hallway to the back door and stepped outside, and the moment the sun hit her skin she bolted—running first past the small patch of earth meant for her mother's flower garden with its sprouting weeds overtaking the soil, and then past the small array of Chestnut Crabapple trees in full bloom, and going farther, running a few yards down, the distance between her and the house steadily increasing, her chest beating furiously all the while.

Mary believed that the sum of her life could be measured through running, in how many breaths it took to get to the house and the edge of the woods, for instance, and how many more it would take before she needed to rest. There was the beat of her heart as it pulsed and how many times her chest lunged in and out as she ran. Even though it was a quick run for her, she knew it would not take long before the burning in her legs began, or for the ache in the arches of the feet to come. It would not take long before the branches from the leaves of the trees to nick her arms and legs, or for her to feel the pounding in her chest.

Mary ran until she reached the invisible line of where their land ended and the start of the woods started. She'd stop briefly to wipe the sweat from her forehead to keep it from stinging her eyes. She took one more deep breath. Exhaled. As the morning sun burned behind her she turned away and continued on into the depth of the woods, for

now, she believed, her day would begin.

III.

That morning Ben got to the barn first. Mary was down at the bottom of the hill resting briefly before beginning the walk up to the barn. She glanced up and saw him standing there, thought to call out his name but at the last minute changed her mind. Ben was pacing back and forth. He kept glancing back at the barn's entrance and shaking his head before looking off into the distance. He walked farther away from the barn and stood a moment before kneeling down low near the grass.

Mary was usually the first one there since Ben's schedule was more erratic. He never knew how well his mother was to be able to be left alone, and Thomas lately had been taking double shifts at Duke so they could catch up on unpaid bills. The past few weeks they'd met far less than they used to, and the last two times Ben hadn't come at all, messaging at the last minute to say he had to cancel their plans. She thought it was because he was still angry at her for not agreeing to meet his family. He seemed to ask her every time they were together, and each time she'd said no. On their last meeting Ben had gotten angry. "My mother's dying, for fuck's sake, Mary," he muttered before immediately apologizing. "I just don't understand. I don't understand why you don't want to."

Mary waited a few moments longer before walking up the hill. It wasn't until only a few feet separated them that Ben noticed her presence.

"I didn't see you," he said, standing back up.

"What's wrong?" Mary asked as Ben furrowed his brows. He was sweating, the front of his shirt drenched with perspiration. He pulled on the hem and wiped his face before looking back at the barn.

“It’s something with the barn isn’t it? Something inside?”

Ben nodded. It was enough for Mary to walked further toward the barn. With slow steps she walked up to where the entrance was, stood underneath its frame, and that’s when she came across the smell. Like seared meat left outside to rot. The smell overtook her and she buckled down, feeling as if she would faint, but she gained her composure enough steady herself.

“What’s in there? What is it? A dead animal?”

“Mary, come on now,” Ben said, reaching out a hand for her. “Come on back. Don’t go.”

Mary didn’t listen. She held her breath and moved further to look. It only took a few more steps inside before she saw the body, crumpled in a heap in the corner of the barn.

Mary suppressed the urge the vomit and stumbled out of the barn. She ran and as soon as she saw the light she breathed in the air, almost choking on it as it filled her lungs. She tried to calm herself before opening her mouth to speak.

“Are you all right?” Ben asked. He reached to put a hand on her back but she pulled away.

“No, I’m not.”

“You saw it then. You saw what was inside.”

“It.”

“What?”

“You said *it*. That was no it. A man was in there. What I saw was the body of a man who looks as if he’s been in there for days.”

“I know.” Ben sighed. “I know.”

“What happened? Why is there a dead man lying in the barn?”

“I don’t know.”

“He was murdered. Did you see that? Someone shot him. Who would do that?”

“You keep asking me these questions as if I know any of the answers,” Ben said.

“Well, I have one more question,” Mary said, “and that’s what should we do?”

“We should go. We should get out of here and not come back.”

Ben’s voice was calm, steady, but his expression—Mary could see the fear on his face, the questioning over what had been done. Mary knew though that they couldn’t leave, couldn’t just forget what they’d both seen.

“Ben, you know we can’t do that,” she said.

“Why not? We could just leave. No one knows we ever met here. Maybe it would be different if someone knew but no one does. Let’s leave and never come back.”

“We can’t do that because there’s a man in that barn, Ben. Someone killed him and left him there to rot. We can’t just let that go, or at least, I can’t.”

“Mary—”

“No Ben. Someone has to know. This isn’t right. You know that. I don’t understand why you’re even arguing with me about it.”

“And what are we going to tell the cops when they ask what we were doing out here? What answer are we going to give?”

Mary tried to think of an answer. Ben nodded at her silence. “See, you don’t know either, and we can’t tell them the truth. Whatever we did say we’d have to explain why

we were together, and then not just my family would know but yours too, and most likely also both of our friends. Everyone would know about us then. Is that what you want?"

"We have to do something. I don't care. We have no choice. Don't you see that? It doesn't matter because we have no choice. We have to go to the police."

Ben sighed again. He kicked his heel against the grass. "Shit," he said. He looked up at the sky. "Shit, shit, shit."

Ben was quiet after that. He closed his eyes and for a moment Mary thought he was praying and so she didn't say anything. In the distance she could hear the *pit-ti-tuck* of summer tanagers, their call often heard in this part of the woods.

"Ben," Mary finally said, her voice low. "Ben," she repeated, the second time making sure he heard her.

"Okay," Ben said, opening his eyes and shaking his head. He swept his dark hair away from his face and straightened his shoulders. "This is what we're going to do. I'm going to drive out of town and see if I can find a pay phone and call the police. There's one I think at the gas station at the next exit out of town on the interstate."

"I'm going with you."

"No, that's not a good idea."

"Well, what do you expect me to do? Stay here and wait?"

"I think you should go home."

"I'm not going home. I can't, not after this. I'm going with you."

"I can do this Mary. Besides, if you came it might make more people notice. No one is going to notice me. No one ever notices me."

Ben was right. He often joked about it. He was good at blurring in the background, at fading from people's view. He said it was because he was quiet, that he took too long to say what was on his mind while others always felt the need to speak. Mary wasn't sure how much of this was the reason but she found it funny how unassuming Ben managed to be how unnoticeable despite what she felt was a contrast to his looks. There was an olive-tinge to his skin, making it so he tanned well from the sun and it always seemed to retain a bronzed tone whereas his friends' skin burned red from the work in the field. He was tall, over six feet, and his insecurity over it caused him to hunch his shoulders. He was always trying to make less of himself in public spaces because of his height. He always needed a shave, preferring the way a beard obscured his face, but after more than a few days growth of stubble Mary always bugged him to shave it all back off. His hair, dark with a slight wave, was long enough that it could be gathered into a ponytail at the nape of his neck. Instead, Ben was always brushing it out of his eyes.

Mary thought that maybe the reason he never cut his hair or wanted to shave was because he was trying to hide behind his looks. From the photos Mary had seen she noticed Ben carried the same good-looking features of his brother Thomas—the defined jawline, heavy brows, but in Ben there harbored an ache, a longing that was forever present in his expression. There was a hunger for more than what this world had offered him, but in the brief years of his life he'd learned to suppress its tender yearning.

Mary knew no one would notice Ben if he were to go on his own. With his plain clothes, his muddied boots, his frayed jeans, and the wife-beater shirt with the sweat stains at the armpits—no, he would get no second glances in this place full of farmers and

handymen and plant workers. She knew that she would, with her dirtied dress and her brown skin. She was someone others would notice, would always notice if they were made to recall, especially if she was with Ben.

“I can go back home and get different clothes,” Mary said, refusing to relent despite knowing how foolish it was not to. “You could drive me and wait down by the road and then we could go together.”

“Mary,” Ben said, his voice low, a purr.

“I could wait in your car,” Mary interrupted. “No one would notice me in the car. I could sit down low in the seat.”

“You and I both know that’s a bad idea.”

“Yeah, I know,” Mary answered. She looked back at the barn. She could not get the image of what was inside out of her head. She could not let it go.

“Come on, Mar, we have to get out of here.”

“Okay.”

“Promise?” she asked.

Ben took her hand and squeezed it once. “Of course,” he said.

A person moved through the world with no knowledge and no assurances. It was only hope and faith that guided them through the belief that they were making the right choices, but who could say now that the person’s hand Mary held wouldn’t lead to the greatest heartbreak of her life? She didn’t know, as no one could know, but still she believed him when he told her it would be okay.

He walked with her to his car. He hugged her tightly. She felt his body heat against hers. Ben pressed his wet lips on the side of her cheek, leaving a kiss before he pulled away. "I will call you once I do it," he said. "Once it's over and done with."

Mary pulled away and Ben waited, watching her as she began to run. Her heart, the beat of it thumping hard and she listened, but before she succumbed to its rhythm again, she turned back to Ben. When he saw her face he raised a hand up in the air, a wave meant to reassure her. *Everything's going to be all right*, she imagined him saying again to her, and even though she knew it wouldn't be, she raised her own hand back in response. She started to run again, quickly picked up her pace, but not before thinking that maybe she had made a mistake and she should turn back around, that she shouldn't have left, and yet she did.

IV.

Mary was not unfamiliar with death. It was not a mystery, not some intangible idea she hadn't yet grasped. Dead flies on the windowsill, their wings burnt off from the strong heat of a light bulb. Caught lightning bugs trapped in glass jars for hours until their oxygen supply ran out. Mary had watched Ben kill garter snakes lurking in the barn, hacking their bodies to bits. An old saying went that if you killed a snake and left it intact it could come alive again, thus making it necessary to cut the snake to pieces and bury each in a separate spot.

A fish's heart could beat after it had died, The first time Ben severed one he'd looked past the skin to find the flesh and organs. He found the heart, a small clump of red. His fingers reached in, tore it out, and gave it to Mary to hold in her hands. "Feel it," he whispered, and she remembered its viscous softness. How small it was. She held the heart as it continued to throb, this heart, pulsating and still full of life. When it finally stopped Ben took the heart from her hands and placed it back inside the fish. His own purposeless gesture of meaning.

Death was dirty and wretched, Mary knew, but it was another thing to witness what she'd seen—this man, his body bloated from infection, the blood vessels having broken down, becoming visible, marbling his skin. It was quite another to know that this was once someone's father, their brother, their son, so no he was not a snake or a fish nor any other animal, though he'd been treated like one.

For the rest of the day Mary waited for a message letting her know Ben had done what he promised. She even carried the foolish notion he'd stop by somehow, messaging her in advance that he was in his car down by the road waiting for her to try and get

away. She thought he'd at least call, but then she realized he might be afraid to even do that. As the hours passed and he still hadn't responded, Mary began to worry.

She thought about calling the police herself, but remembered Ben's point about needing to offer up a reason for why she'd been there. She sometimes went to be alone, she could say. It was quiet and close enough to the house. It was a space to get away.

Mary could imagine their looks already, their side glances and raised eyebrows. She imagined them straightening in their seats before beginning to take notes on their tablets. "Get away?" they'd ask. "Get away from what exactly?"

No, she thought. Ben said he would tell them. He promised and so she just had to wait a little longer, despite the urgency looming inside her to call. *Wait a little longer*, she told herself. *He'll call. Wait.*

At dinner she was quiet. Her mother, Lena Holden, had made a rib roast, the first in a long while. The grease from the meat had already started to harden in the bottom of the pan by the time she set it out for them all to eat. The family rarely, if ever, ate dinner together anymore. The roast was one of the recent changes Lena had taken upon herself to do. "Our daughter's leaving for college soon. We need to make the most of her presence while it lasts," she told Will, her husband, and he nodded and said he'd try. Will was what they used to call a circuit rider—a traveling preacher who went county to county to preach the Word of God. It was a practice that had declined over the decades, but Will had a roster of churches that he alternated between every month, giving sermons both on Saturdays and Sundays, and another on Wednesdays for those whose jobs kept them working on the weekends. It was a job that kept him away from home more than he preferred, and because of it he was either not at dinner at all or often late.

Will was here tonight though, cutting through the thick slab of meat on his plate as Lena finished placing down the rest of the spread. Lena had taken to making elaborate meals to make up for the time they'd lost together, so instead of the instant potatoes and tv dinners of Mary's youth, Lena cooked braised pork shanks with garlic Brussels spouts, or chicken cacciatore with mushrooms and tomatoes. She ordered cookbooks online and learned to prepare a new meal every evening. Tonight's was the rib roast.

"What's up with you today?" Will asked, leaning over the edge of the table. Will was not a large man, but he knew how to measure his words for emphasis. His business was in the power of words and he used them effectively—the pauses at the end of a question, the raised tone in his voice, and his mannerisms. He knew how to get what he wanted through words and words alone.

"What do you mean?" Mary asked, feeling defensive toward the question.

"You're not eating. You're quiet, almost sullen. So I ask again—what's going on?"

"Nothing's going on."

"She's probably stressed about school," Lena said. She sat down at the table across from her husband after having waited until after everyone else had gotten their food and was settled. She broke a piece of the roll on her plate and popped it into her mouth. "She's leaving soon, you know, and we still haven't really thought about the logistics of it. When we're leaving, for instance."

"Yeah, you're right," Will said. He cut thick chunks of the meat on his plate while he talked. "We need to get you settled. When do you have to be there?"

Mary was about to begin her freshman year at Marymount College. She had not told her parents when she was applying since she could only afford to apply to three schools. She'd picked the three largest colleges and the three farthest from where she lived, and one of them, Marymount, was private. She hadn't expected to get in, and even still hadn't expected to get enough funding to go, but they'd offered her a scholarship that covered full tuition.

When she told her parents, they said they would support her with books and incidentals until she was able to get a job. She knew how much of a sacrifice for them it was to give her this much, and the guilt she'd felt made her wish she could have left without having told them at all.

"Classes don't start for a few weeks but there's early registration," Mary said.

"So what does that mean? You didn't answer my question Mary. When do we need to take you?"

"I think, I think maybe I should go on my own."

Both of Mary's parents were quiet. They'd always assumed, expected rather, that they'd come with her. Holden reached and picked up the paper towel by his plate and brought it to his lips, wiping the grease away before crumpling the towel between his fingers. "That's an interesting idea," he said, "but I don't know if it's good one."

"The drive is several hours one way," Mary said, knowing what else she could say to persuade her father. "Most likely you're going to have to get a hotel and stay the night before driving back. That money could be better saved elsewhere."

"She's right," Lena said.

"I suppose."

“And then there’s your schedule—”

“I would make the time,” Will said, cutting her off from finishing. “You know that.”

“I know, it’s just—I just think it’s unnecessary. That’s all.”

“We want to be there. It’s an important moment,” Lena said.

“Yes.” Will nodded, picking up his knife and fork and cutting into the last few pieces of roast on his plate. “We’re both going. Now, you need to tell us what time we need to leave.”

“Next week,” Mary said.

“Okay, good. That wasn’t so hard?” Will smiled, seeing that the situation was resolved.

Mary still hadn’t told Ben about school. He’d convinced himself that after graduation she would stay here with him. For a while she let him entertain the fantasy that they would stay together. He would get a job at the plant with Thomas, the both of them alternating between that and their responsibilities on the farm and to their mother, and she—where was she in this equation? Ben was never specific when it came to her. Perhaps they would get married. Or perhaps he would leave the farm behind and they’d get a place of their own.

It was a dream with few practicalities, and Mary let him have it because until recently she had not known what was to become of her life, but after the letter of acceptance came and she’d mailed back her confirmation, she continued to let him believe. Each time they met Mary thought she finally would, but the weeks went by and before she knew it summer was close to ending and she was about to go.

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The days passed by and Mary still hadn't heard from Ben. No phone call, no response to any of her messages. She figured he must have told the police and was trying to avoid her so no one would know she wasn't involved, but there was no mention of what happened in the papers. Nothing on the television either about the body that'd been found. Mary thought for sure by now there would have been, and anxiously she waited. She thought her mother would hear something at the elementary school where she worked. The other teachers were always gossiping, the only time during their day when they were able to talk to other adults, and so that brief fifty minutes in the break room when they took their lunches was a hotbed of information about the town. Surely, her mother would have heard something there, but every afternoon she came home, tired from the day, her typical cheeriness strained, but no sign of concern or worry on her face from hearing of the news.

For the past few days the biggest story on the television was the concern over a situation that happened at Marymount. Mary was passing through the channels, pausing briefly at each one before continuing on, when she heard the name of her school mentioned. She turned the volume on the television up and listened.

A sophomore at the university by the name of Jenny Clark had gone to a frat party where she'd had too much to drink. She'd passed out on the lawn in front of the other houses. Two other students, junior Kip Treece and sophomore Brian Moore, walked by and saw her. One of them, Brian, recognized her as a student living in his dorm, and they both decided upon themselves to try and carry her home. Halfway there Jenny had woken up and, disorientated, fought both of them off and ran down the street.

At least, that's the story both Kip and Brian told the police when asked even though Jenny had said otherwise. Jenny told the police they two boys raped her. She was pressing charges not only against both Kip and Brian, but was planning to sue the university for their mishandling her rape allegation.

"You're going to have to be careful when you go there."

Mary turned and saw Lena standing in the entryway. Mary hadn't heard her come home and glanced at the clock, seeing it was just after four. She watched as Lena slipped off her shoes and piled them next to the door's entrance.

"I know," Mary said, shifting her attention back to the television screen.

"I almost don't want to you go."

"You don't want me to go to college because of what *may* happened? Bad things like this happen everywhere. They happen here."

Lena's eyes narrowed on her daughter. "Are you sure you're all right? That everything is okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

Lena opened her mouth to speak but whatever she wanted to say she decided against at the last minute. Instead, she let out a long sigh and reached to pull the knot of her hair. She fluffed out the dark curls, then rubbed the back of her neck. She looked again at her daughter, waiting for her to speak, but Mary was content on staring at the television.

"I just worry about you is all. You're right, bad things happen everywhere, and you don't think I know about here? You forget the era I grew up in."

“I’m sorry,” Mary said, suddenly realizing. Both of her parents had grown up in the segregated south. Lena, along with the rest of her family, had spent their childhoods and adolescence picking tobacco. It was long, brutal work, work Mary had to remind herself she’d never experienced, and she felt a brief sense of shame from chastising her mother.

“It’s okay. Like I said, I’m just worried. There’s nothing we’ll be able to do for you once you’re gone. Nothing except believe it’ll all be fine.”

Lena smiled before leaving Mary alone in the living room to finish watching the news. By now the story about Jenny Clark was long gone, and the program had turned to the talking about the weather.

“There’ll be scattered rainstorms throughout the rest of the week,” the announcer said. “Periods of flash flooding are likely in certain areas.”

Mary stared at the red highlighted areas marked to get the heaviest amount of rain. She watched for a few minutes more before changing the channel.

V.

By the following Saturday Mary decided she'd had enough of waiting for Ben. Holden had gone for the weekend to preach at a church in Catabwa County and Lena was carpooling with a group of other teachers to go to regional conference. By mid-afternoon both of her parents were gone, having left enough cash in an envelope on the kitchen table for emergencies.

Once her parents had left, once she was contained among the silence of the house, she picked up her phone to call Ben. It had been over a week and no word. It was not like him to go so long without talking her, and he knew she was waiting.

A fear lodged deep inside her. She thought back to the man in the woods. So much of his blood had dried in the grass. So much of him exposed. Her mind focused in on the image and just as quickly she pushed it away, afraid if she thought too long she might never recover.

Mary dialed Ben's number, listened to its ring. He could be any number of places. Taking care of his mother, helping her attempt to eat, if the nurse wasn't there he'd be the one to help bathe her and dress her. He could be out in the fields tending to their dying crops. He could have gotten a bottle from the family liquor cabinet and drove to where he couldn't be found. He could have taken his grandfather's rifle, a Weatherby Mark V, an heirloom kept in a glass display case. He could have taken the gun and gone to the woods to practice his aim.

Or, he found out what happened and had gone on some other purpose. Maybe he believed that those who'd done what they did would come back to the barn, and he was

waiting for them now. The rifle cocked and ready as he listened for footsteps approaching the door.

Voicemail. “Ben, I still haven’t heard from you and I’m worried about what happened,” Mary began. “Mom and Dad let for the day and won’t be back until tomorrow, so I have some time. I’m going to go back to the barn. If you get this in time maybe I can meet you there. I need to know what happened, if you called or not, and if the police did anything. I’ll talk to you later.”

Mary hung up the phone. Ben couldn’t ignore her for forever, and she was sure if he heard that message he would call back. She waited a few minutes, enough to imagine him looking at the missed call and at the voicemail message, then dialing to play it back. She waited longer still, debating to go through it, thinking if he’d just call her back and let her know what happened she wouldn’t have to.

Five minutes went by. Ten. “Okay,” she finally said, going to the door and putting on her tennis shoes. “If this is how it’s going to be so be it.”

It did not take her long to get to the tobacco barn. Her body instinctually knew the way, and her desire to know fueled her to run faster, so before she knew it she was at the bottom of the hill to the barn. The news had said it’d rained and it was muddy in patches where the sun had killed the grass. She almost slipped and fell a few times but continued anyway to trod up to the barn. She got to the entrance, thinking maybe somehow Ben had gotten her message and was somewhere nearby. For a moment she almost thought she’d heard him call out to her. “Mary, wait, don’t go,” she could hear him saying, but when she turned around there was nothing but the woods she’d come out from.

The barn's entrance—she took a few steps more. Her chest ached, the rhythm of her heart progressing faster and louder in her chest. A few more steps and she was inside. Sweat glided down her face, down her neck and back, but she didn't wipe it away. It was dark inside the barn, as it always was, except for a few glimpses of sunlight coming through some of the cracks. She closed her eyes, trying to compose herself before going further.

It was the smell that made her remember, that forced her to open her eyes again and look. She remembered it from before, the smell of rotting flesh stinking from the heat of the sun. It made her want to vomit, and every time she thought of it she had to contain herself. That smell, she would always remember it.

Now the smell was gone. In its place was the smell of dirt and grass, of her own body's odor from running here. She could smell the damp wood of the barn, and if she were to move closer to the planks, maybe, just maybe she could pick up the scent of tobacco. All this was there but what she did not smell was that of the man who'd died here.

Mary opened her eyes and looked around. The barn was empty. There was no man and no blood. Someone had come and cleaned it all away. Someone had come and made it disappear.

"This doesn't make sense," Mary said, turning, turning, turning. She walked over to the spot and stood, believing if she stood there long enough maybe the body would appear before her eyes. "I don't understand."

Mary reached into her jeans pocket and pulled out her phone. She dialed Ben's number. "Ben," she said, her voice almost breathless. "I'm at the barn. There's nothing here. The man's gone. What did you do?"

She hung up. She wasn't sure why she'd made the accusation at the end, but part of her was convinced Ben was involved in this somehow. She hadn't heard from him, there was nothing on the news, and now the man had disappeared. Ben needed to call her and tell her what was going on or she needed to find him and make him answer, and tonight was the only time she'd have to find him and get him to do it.

Mary walked outside into the sun.

VI.

The evening rain made the air smell sweet from a mix of dew from the magnolia blossoms and the cooled earthy musk of the woods. By the time Mary would arrive at Ben's house she would be full of the thick, heady scent. She had no car and so had to walk. She waited until evening, when most of everyone would be sitting down to dinner, before she left the house and walked down the main road north in the direction of where Ben lived. It would take her almost an hour to get there if she kept up her pace.

Twice, a car slowed beside her and the passengers inside offered her a ride, and twice she declined, saying she was just going a little further up the road, and she took out her phone, her finger on the dial, and twice the men inside, both of them older, gray-haired and balding, with slack-jowled faces that looked as if the skin had been squeezed out too long, twice these men saw her phone and saw her expression and shrugged before speeding off. After the second time she'd ducked closer to the woods, hoping the trees would obscure her figure to those driving by.

They'd met this way. Ben told her later that to him she'd been only a glimmer, a flash of blue on the side of the road. The midday sun had blinded his view and he squinted to see through the car's glass. That was the reason he gave for the brief seconds he'd rubbed his eyes closed, letting the car veer right. She was a blur and a blur only, it didn't register to him what it was, that the blue was the color of her shirt, and that she was a girl on her way home. Ben hit the brakes, hard, but managed not to hit her. She went tumbling anyway, falling down into the ditch by the road.

"God, I'm sorry," Ben yelled as soon as he got out of the car. The words came out faster than he could think. "I didn't see you at all. It's this sun. I'm sorry."

“You could have hit me,” Mary said, standing. Her voice calm, measured, despite what had just happened.

“I know, but I didn’t.”

“Thanks for that, at least.”

“I’m so sorry.”

“How many times are you going to apologize?”

“At least one more,” Ben said. “Maybe twice. I’m sorry, it was an accident.”

“I know,” Mary said. She pulled down on the bottom of her shirt, straightening the fabric. She swept off bits of grass and dirt that were on it, refusing to look in Ben’s direction.

“You look familiar. You go to Clarkson High?”

“Yes, my last year.”

“I went there. Two years ago.”

On a second glance Mary thought she recognized him. He was a farmer’s son, that she could tell from the darkened arms. Ben offered out his hand and hesitantly Mary shook it. The skin felt clammy and warm. When Ben let go she wiped her palm against the front of her jeans.

“Yeah, Ben Groves. Okay, I think I remember you,” she said.

“So where were you going anyway? Why are you walking out here all alone?”

“I don’t have a car. How else am I supposed to get anywhere?”

“Yeah, that makes sense. I’m sorry.”

“There it is again.”

“Okay, well, let me make this up to you and give you a ride home.”

“I’m not getting into a car with a man I don’t know.”

“You just said earlier you recognized me.”

“That doesn’t mean I know you.”

“True,” Ben said, nodding. He gave a laugh. “Well, how about I just drive alongside you while you walk? Just until you get to where you’re going. Then we can talk.”

Ben was awkward and fumbling and she could sense his earnestness a mile away, and it was perhaps because of all of this that she agreed. How stupid it was, she would think in retrospect, how easily he could have taken her if he wanted, if his intentions had been different, but she had seen a softness in him, in his mannerisms and his speech, and she knew, or at least believed, he would mean her no harm. She told him yes and Ben nodded, almost running to get back inside the car of fear she might disappear, and Mary continued on, the hum of his car the background sound to their conversation as he drove next to her on the road, and when another car did come he turned on his emergency lights to let the driver know to pass, and when she’d finally reached the turn leading up to her house, she paused, surprised at this unexpected fluttering in her chest, and when Ben asked her if he could see her again, she surprised herself again by saying yes.

###

Halfway to Ben’s house the sky had opened up, soaking the earth with rain. Mary trudged on, at first believing it would only be a short burst and then would be over, then realizing there was no point in turning back, only going further. She was shivering by the time she saw Ben’s house. The sun had quieted down to darkness and there were only her instincts to lead her on the trail to his house. The house was built at the turn of the

twentieth century. A two-story, folk Victorian farmhouse. It had a front gable and side wing with a low pitched, pyramid-shaped roof.

Mary stood by Ben's window, looked through the glass obscured by the rain. The light was on so either he or his brother was inside. She'd have to take a chance that it was Ben.

When the window came to the window and pushed open the panel, Mary held her breath and closed her eyes. "Mary, what the hell?" Ben said, his voice jolting her back. "It's pouring out there. Jesus, hurry up and get inside."

She climbed through. Ben pulled back on the panel but left it cracked open slightly so as to let the cool breeze come in. They both listened to the beat of the rain on the windowsill.

"What happened Ben? I've been waiting for you to tell me. You just disappeared. What happened after you called?"

"You're wet," Ben said. He nodded at her shirt dripping water into a puddle around her muddied feet. The outline of Mary's bra showed beneath the thin fabric of her shirt. Ben blushed when Mary caught him staring.

"It's not like you haven't seen what's underneath already," Mary said, ignoring his sudden sheepishness. "Now tell me what happened."

Ben ignored her, went to the closer and got a shirt and threw it in Mary's direction. "You're gonna get sick. Dry off first and then we'll talk. The bathroom's down the hall but be careful. My mom's asleep in the living room."

"Okay," Mary said, clutching the dry shirt to her chest. She left Ben and went to the bathroom, trying to be as quiet as she could.

Until today, she'd never been inside Ben's house. The closest she'd come was one afternoon when Thomas had taken his mother to the doctor. Ben had picked her up, having planned a picnic for the two of them, but on the drive realized he'd forgotten a pie.

"It's okay, we don't need it," Mary told him, but Ben insisted, driving back to the house. He'd pulled her along up to the porch and was at the door when Mary stopped.

"It's a nice day I'll wait out here," she said.

"Come on, it'll just be a minute. No one's here anyway."

"It's okay. I'd rather be outside."

Ben paused, gave her a keen look before deciding not to push it, and hurried inside to get the pie.

They had not been together long then, no more than a few weeks, and Mary preferred to keep Ben at an arm's length. To see his house, to see the machinations of his life was too much for her. She liked him best as an abstraction and if she were to go inside she was afraid he would become too real to her, him and his life and its problems and faults. It was selfish, she knew, and wasn't right, but she couldn't bring herself to go inside, to make real this person she wasn't sure yet she wanted to fully know.

Ben had let it go because it was early in their relationship. Perhaps even he didn't believe they would be together as long as they had, but as the weeks turned to months and their relationship intensified, Ben began to recognize her distance. Mary imagined it was why Ben felt such a need for her to meet his mother, as well as Thomas.

Shouldn't she want to, though? Mary thought. Shouldn't she want to become more intimate with the particulars of his life? She should want to know what facial

features he'd inherited, what mannerisms and ticks and concerns, and she should want them both to meet her. Even if her fear was that either of them harbored biases, she should want to show them they were wrong, that she was more than whatever they could have ever possibly believed.

As Mary walked down the hall to the bathroom, she glanced at the photos of the family cluttering the walls. Most were of Ben and Thomas as children—Ben and Thomas holding a catfish they'd caught by the line, both of them standing side by side in front of their house before the chipped paint and the broken siding. The grass was neatly cut and roses bushes bloomed. There were school photos of all their years and baby photos. Beyond that there were photos of family members Mary didn't recognize. She looked briefly at their stoic expressions, at their cold smiles, and just before she'd reached the bathroom and slipped inside, she wondered if one of them could have been Ben's father.

Mary changed quickly into the shirt Ben had given her. It was his old high school basketball one, the Wildcats emblem faded along the front. Mary looked down and ran her fingertips over the imprint. "I didn't know Ben played basketball," she said before noticing that the year was off. This wasn't Ben's shirt, it was his brother's.

Mary pulled open the door again and looked out, trying to make sure she didn't see Ben's mother, or that Thomas wasn't home. She took a step out into the hall and was about to walk back to Ben's room when she heard a noise. A shattering like glass as it hit the floor. Mary froze, holding her breath.

"Mom, are you okay?" Mary heard a voice, Ben's, call out. She saw him come into full view. He'd been in the kitchen and he held a plate in his hand as he looked out

into the living room, his eyes moving to the cracked glass glittering even underneath the dim overhead light. “What’s going on?”

“I thought—it slipped.”

“It’s not a problem. Here, let me help.”

Once, Ben’s mother had been a vibrant force. Dominating and strong, she could work the fields as best as any man. Her auburn hair a wild fire she had to continuously brush away from her face as she drove their tractor. She was used to dirt and grit, her body used to the long ache from work. She tried to teach her sons to be like her, to never back down and to settle into the life she’d set for them. Their father, long gone with no answers left to give her sons for when the questions would come. She taught herself to be strong in his absence, setting an example for them to become.

Now she could barely walk a few feet without needing a walker.

Ben went back into the kitchen and got a small broom and dust pan. Gingerly, he swept up the bits of broken glass while his mother watched. Her gaze followed him as he went and dumped the remains in the trash. Ben got another glass from the cupboard, filled it with tap from the sink, and carried it back to his mother.

“I’m sorry,” she said. “I’m sorry I can’t even get a glass by myself anymore without bothering you.”

“Stop it,” Ben responded. He sat down on the coffee table in front of the sofa. Unpaid medical bills were scattered on top and he pushed them aside. “None of this is your fault.”

Mrs. Groves coughed, pulled the afghan tighter around her body. Ben had told Mary his mother had decided to spend the last weeks of her life at home rather than the

hospital despite both of her sons' objections. "It's too sterile," she said. "All those bright lights and those nurses too accustomed with illness to care." She'd told them if the outcome was going to end up the same that she'd rather be at home surrounded with the familiarity of her life. Ben had deferred to Thomas on the decision since he was the eldest. "Only if we get a nurse too," he'd said, and so during the day when both of them were at work a nurse came to take care of their mother. Her name was Bree. "Like the cheese?" Mrs. Groves had asked, but Bree hadn't known what she meant.

You haven't had Brie cheese before?"

"No, I don't think so," Bree answered.

"Well, we'll just have to get you some."

Bree was a tiny thing, thin and plain. She had hair the color of egg's yolk, flat strands that she could barely pull together in a bun. Bree had light brown freckles on her nose that made her look as if her face was always unwashed. Bree never talked much, which surprised Ben considering her job. He thought if given the chance she'd be prone to conversation but he found when he was in her presence she clamored up.

Bree was a good nurse though. At least, that's what Ben always told her. Despite her stature she was strong, able to help carry Mrs. Holden to the bathroom during the times she couldn't make it herself. She was attentive and caring. Bree brought all the latest magazines and paperback mysteries from the checkout line at the store, paid for them with her own money, and read from them when Mrs. Holden couldn't fall asleep. Bree was a comfort to her during the times neither of them could be there.

Ben was beside his mother now. He set the glass of water down on the floor beside his mother. "This is here if you need it," he said, then leaned down to tuck the afghan tighter around his mother. She closed her eyes and smiled.

"I did not deserve you and Thomas," she said.

"Go to sleep. If you need me just call."

Mary tiptoed back to Ben's room before he could get up and notice she'd been there listening. By the time Ben had come back to the bedroom, she was sitting on the bed, holding her wet shirt in her lap.

Ben didn't speak when he entered the room. He rubbed his eyes and walked over to his desk, pulled out the chair, and sat. They both looked at each other, both of them quiet, until finally Mary spoke.

"Is she all right?"

"Yes," Ben said. "Just tired. She'll be asleep soon."

"Where's Thomas?"

"I don't know. I guess work. He usually works in the night shift anyway."

Gone was Ben's light-heartedness, the expression on his face seemed strained.

"I don't know how to do this," he said. "I don't know how to watch my mother die."

"What have they said? How much longer?"

"I don't know. A few weeks maybe? No one knows. The doctors don't know anything, they're just shooting answers off the cuff."

"What can I do?"

“Nothing,” Ben said. “You know what scares me though? What has always scared me? To us the cancer came on suddenly. One day she went to the doctor and then she had it, but really the mass had been growing in her body long before. It’d been there, waiting, growing bigger. It’s like you go through the world never knowing what will be the thing. You do your best, you do the best you can and you don’t know what it’s going to be. I watched on tv how in Wilmington the scaffolding from a building collapsed and crushed a couple of people. Instantly, they died, one of them a kid. Ten years old. Can you imagine? And he had no idea what was coming. None of us ever know what’s coming.”

Ben looked away from her, focused his attention on the objects on the desk. A year ago, he’d thought about applying for college, regretting his decision in high school to never go. He’d requested applications from the schools and filled them out, but when it came time to mail them he’d changed his mind. On his desk they sat still, reminding him of the life he’d refused to let himself dream.

“No, we don’t,” Mary said. “We never know, but right now your mother’s alive, and she’s out there sleeping. It’s not enough and it’ll never be enough, but she’s there, at least. For a little while longer, she’s there.”

“Yeah, you’re right.”

“Ben,” Mary said, pausing, wondering if she should wait a little longer to ask him again, but she’d pressed on anyway. “Tell me now what happened after I left. Where did you go? Did you call the police?”

“I thought I’d just go out of Edgeville, you know? Like we talked about,” Ben began. “I got in I-90 and kept going, thinking the next stop I’d turn off and find somewhere, anywhere, a gas station or a grocery store or some place, but when I got to

the exit I drove past it and then drove past the other. I kept going until half an hour went by and I was still on the interstate and I didn't know where I was. I finally turned off at the next exit. Millersburg, I think it was. I drove until I found a food mart that had a pay phone out in the front entrance. I went to it and called the police."

"What did you say?"

"What do you think? I told them there was a man who'd been shot and left for dead at the abandoned tobacco barn everyone said was haunted. I told them I didn't know how long he'd been there but someone needed to come, then I hung up the phone and got the hell out of there."

"Jesus Ben, then why didn't you tell me all this before? I've been waiting to hear from you, to find out what happened. Why didn't you call?"

"I was scared Mary. I didn't know what else to do. I thought maybe it was best if we didn't talk for a while, just in case. Who knows if someone was still out there watching us. What if they'd never left?"

"We would have seen them."

"Would we have?"

Mary didn't respond, thinking back to earlier. "Someone cleaned it all up."

"What do you mean?"

"I went back to the barn. Today, earlier, just before I came here. I went to look and he was gone. The blood and everything had been cleaned up. It was like nothing had happened."

"The police probably went and cleaned it up, but why'd you go back? You shouldn't have done that."

“Because there’s nothing in the papers and nothing on the television. There’s nothing! I’ve watched and waited and nothing. I don’t understand it. It doesn’t make any sense. Why wouldn’t there be something in the news about it?”

“I don’t know,” Ben said. “Was there tape or anything?”

“No, nothing.”

“Like I said, maybe the police cleaned it all. That’s the only explanation that makes any kind of sense.”

“But why nothing in the papers about it?”

“I think—” Ben stopped, sighed. “I don’t know Mary. What do you want me to say? I know as much as you do about all of it.”

“Okay,” she said. “Maybe they found him and are investigating.”

“Yes, probably, and they want to keep it secret while they search for clues.”

“Do you really think so?”

Ben paused. He got up from the desk and sat next to Mary on the wrought-iron bed. The springs creaked, a screeching sound that came every time either one of them moved.

“Yes,” he said. “I’m sure they found him and it’s all over. It’s all over.”

Ben repeated the words, reciting them like a prayer. Ben didn’t believe in God and so maybe this was his absolution. “It’s all over,” he murmured, forcing a truth into the words.

Ben reached for her, wanting to take her hand, and he held hers in his. His hands were mostly unremarkable. They were coarse and weathered-looking. Thick calluses had formed along the sides. His nails were stubs, bitten down to the quick from his own

nervousness. Like the rest of him, his hands were tanned from all his days working outside in the sun, the summer making his complexion darker, and often she had thought about how much they were the same. Now, as his hand held hers she could see that his skin was darker than hers and yet because his faded, because by summer's end his would return to the color of cream, the contrast becoming more significant, marking the difference between them.

Mary kissed his fingers and palms, ignored the cracked lines and their roughness. She knew that these were hands that had picked the burs from cotton, the dew sticking to his bloodied fingers, they had stripped tobacco leaves, had shucked and planted and sowed, had chopped down trees for firewood and carried the heavy logs through the winter snow so the family wouldn't freeze, had milked cows, had bridled a horse and ridden it during the night as the cool air whipped against his face, hands that had felt the touch of another's, had rubbed hair soft as duck feathers between his fingers, hands that had unbuttoned a dress and pulled the fabric down, had glided against the cool skin of a girl's back as she climbed on top of him, and hands with touching could make a girl shiver, could make her moan with want, and later sigh, and these were the hands that Mary dreamed about—tracing down the spine of her back, touching the curls of her hair, touching every part of her, feeling every curve and muscle and bone of her body, and Ben's hands were hands that helped his mother as she shuffled from room to room, that massaged calamine lotion in his skin and put lavender oil on her pillow so when she slept she breathed in spring, and Mary knew that with these hands he would hold his mother's when she took her last breath, and later, afterwards, these would be the hands to bury her as well.

The marks of the world were on us, Mary thought. It was often as simple as looking at a person's hands to know who and all they've been.

Sleep came quickly, a sweet release from the day. They held each other in the dark, Ben's breath in her ear, his body entangled with hers. Mary didn't remember falling asleep, only how one moment she was and the next she was being woken up to a thrashing. Ben's movements jolting her conscious.

"Ben," she yelled, her eyes wild with fear. She slapped him hard, the sting forcing him to wake. He opened his eyes and stared back at her.

"I don't understand."

"You had a nightmare. That's all it was. Just a nightmare."

"Mary, I lied," Ben said. His body shook as he sputtered out the words. "I lied to you. About everything."

"What do you mean?"

"I didn't call the police."

"Why did you tell me you did?"

"I tried to. I went, like I said. I drove and drove and I found that gas station. I went up to the phone but it was broken, and I didn't want to go inside, so I got back in the car and kept driving, looking to find another pay phone, but before I knew it I had driven another twenty miles. I didn't know what to do and I couldn't find another phone and I just thought—I figured someone would find out eventually."

"So you just—you just decided to leave it to someone else? Is that what you're telling me?"

"Yes. I've been sick over it, but I couldn't do it. I was afraid."

“All those times I’ve told you about this town, about the people here, and you always shrugged it off. You made me feel as if I imagined it, and now you’re telling me you’re the one who’s afraid.”

“What do you want me to say? I can’t say anything other than I’m sorry.”

“Well, someone called,” Mary said. “Who was it? Who else could have known?”

“I don’t know.”

“I still don’t understand why you didn’t do it. You were afraid? We had nothing to do with it.”

“But we were there. We found him.”

“He was murdered, Ben.”

“I know, I saw.”

“Someone kidnapped him and brought him there and stuffed him in that barrel. Who knows how long he’d been there before we found him.”

“I’ve been thinking—what if someone knew we met there? What if it what happened had something to do with us?”

“Why would it?”

“Maybe someone found out and—”

“And so they murdered a stranger to send a message? That doesn’t even make sense Ben.”

“Well then why there? Of all places? Why at a place where we’ve always met?”

“Because no one goes there. You know that. Because no one goes there except for us.”

“And that’s why I couldn’t tell them,” Ben said. “No one goes there except for us and so we would have been the first suspects.”

“I don’t know you,” Mary said. “I don’t know who you are.”

“What does that mean?”

“It means what I said.”

Ben kept staring at her, hoping his gaze would force her to explain, but she refused to speak anymore about it. She was angry at Ben for lying to her, but worse, worse was that he had not called. How long had that man been in that barn, his body slowly composing, waiting for the animals to come and take apart his flesh? And who then had come to take him away? Where’d he go if Ben wasn’t the one to call? Was it the person that brought him there, after realizing the error, who had gone to get him out? What if he was in the woods somewhere, his body buried deep in the earth?

The worst was that Mary felt just as much to blame. She hadn’t called either, let a week go by and refused to do anything. She’d believed Ben would make the decision for her, that he would do what needed to be done. She’d left it to him, and even though he’d convinced her it was necessary she’d still believed he would follow through and that was her mistake. She should have never believed in anyone but herself and what she knew was right, and what was right was telling the police. This she knew, felt within the very depths of her, and if she could understand that what did it mean that Ben couldn’t? What did it mean that he had decided not to tell, was too afraid to tell? What did it say about him that in the end he’d been too afraid to do this necessary thing?

Ben reached for her and she said no. He touched her shoulder and she pulled away. “Mary, of course you know me. Of course you know who I am. Don’t say that. Come on, stop this. Stop it.”

“It’s a crime, you know. What we did. The fact that we didn’t say anything. We’re accessories, and wherever that body is now we’re also to blame for it.”

“The police found him.”

“You don’t know that Ben.”

“Yes, I do. I know because I believe it. That’s the only choice here. You just have to decide with me, believe with me. They found him. It’s over. It’s done.”

Mary did not want to argue. She knew there wasn’t a point to continue on. “I should go,” she said.

“It’s still raining. Just stay the night. You can leave in the morning.”

It was late, and with the cloudy night sky there wouldn’t even be the light of the stars to guide Mary back home. She relented and crawled in the bed next to Ben.

Ben collapsed on the mattress and fell back asleep. She watched him, his body this time peaceful and still. Ben believed it was all over. What he’d seen, what they’d seen—he had moved on from it. The past is the past and so he’d let it go.

Mary lay beside Ben in the darkened room. She thought back to their beginning. A glimmer, he’d called her. A flash, shining bright against the blur of the trees. “I did not see you, but now I do,” he told her at the end of the walk, right before she left him, and she’d thought of it almost every day that they’ve met. What she knew now was that Ben did not know her, and more importantly, she did not know him.

The rain outside quieted, and when enough time had passed Mary slipped out of bed and opened the window, crawling out into the night. She tried to shut the window back but she couldn't from the outside, and so she left, leaving the trail of her footprints behind.

Ben would find them in the morning and Mary imagined for a moment he'd think about following before stopping, only to realize it didn't matter because he knew where they led.

PART TWO

I.

Roger sat on the edge of the bed. He held an unlit cigarette between his lips, used his tongue to move it back and forth.

“I thought you were quitting,” Mary said, glancing back and forth between him and her own reflection in their doorway mirror. For the past half hour she’d been trying on clothes and now it was time for them to go and she wasn’t ready.

“I haven’t lit it yet.”

“Well, don’t in here. I’ll never get the smoke out of my clothes in time. I don’t want to walk in there smelling like an ash tray.”

“None of them would mind.”

Somehow, Mary felt that wasn’t true. They might not outwardly mind but they would silently judge.

Mary changed her mind once again about the outfit she had on. She unbuttoned the paisley blouse and the denim skirt and went to the closet to find something else.

Tonight, they were on their way to a party. A friend of Roger’s, another senior, was hosting a gathering with a few others from his group. Like Roger, they all came from the same small upper-middle black community in Winston Salem. Their parents grew up in the post-segregation era and scraped by to success, becoming doctors and lawyers, dentists and professors. Unlike Mary who was here on scholarship, their parents could afford to send them here, and they felt they had claim to every experience offered within the walls of the university. The world, to them, was just as much theirs as any white

person. Ensconced under the privilege of money, they'd grown up believing that what they wanted could be theirs for the taking, as long as they worked to take it.

Mary had been dating Roger for close to six months, since the start of the school year, and in that time she'd gotten to know his friends but still felt as if they weren't her own. She knew they were friends with her by extension because of her relationship to Roger but in all their get-togethers Mary felt distant, separated, not quite part of their close-knit group. Part of it was because Mary was always the youngest one there, a freshman amidst upperclassmen on their way toward graduation, graduate school, and jobs. Roger always told her no one noticed her age, or at the very least didn't mind it, but she wondered each time she sipped from a drink she technically wasn't allowed to have or they asked her about her upbringing, about her life growing up in the rural part of the state. When the conversations shifted to something on campus, she tried to offer her perspective but often felt it was disregarded. She was only a freshman. How could she know the particulars of the situation? The context? She had not been here long enough to know.

Despite what Roger said, she was an outsider to them. They looked at her and saw the girl Roger was seeing, a girl whose identity remained fixed only to him.

And tonight, they were going to Amil's, a woman Roger had been with long before he met her. It was during their first year together. "It wasn't a serious thing," Roger had told her the first time they'd all met, "the guilt over a few drunken nights kept us trying to make something out of nothing. Besides, everyone sleeps with everyone in our circle."

Roger's comment had led Mary to wondering who else he'd been with among his cohort of friends, or who else he'd been with period. She suspected it was a lot of women, even Amil had made off-handed comments that implied as much, but Mary never asked him. Part of her was afraid to know the answer, worried it might make further question why he finally chose her, but also she felt eventually Roger would offer up the information if he felt the need for her to know it. Besides, he had never asked her about past boyfriends and so she felt as if she should do the same.

Still, she always thought about it when they were out. Roger was good-looking, with smooth, unblemished skin. There was a deliberate to his actions that made him appealing. When he focused on you, his attention couldn't be shifted otherwise. When he looked at you, talked with you, he was yours, that is, until he wasn't. He also dressed well, in nondescript but expensive clothing that didn't need a label to signify its caliber. He drove a BMW, which, while used, was enviable compared to the majority of students who didn't even have a car. In social situations, she saw the way the female students looked at him—at how they not-so-casually found a way to touch his arm, in how they leaned a little too close, providing a peek to their cleavage. Others were more brazen, tucking phone numbers in his pants sleeve pocket, sometimes even attempting to grab his crotch in the process. Some would flirt with him right in front of her, ask him out in front of her, all the while she'd stand there, drink in hand, wondering if she was being seen at all.

Mary stood looking at her pile of clothes in Roger's closet. Most were items Roger had bought her. He had a habit of doing it despite her objections. It wasn't fun to buy just for oneself, he argued when he presented her with bags emblazoned with department store logos. When they were out in a store and she eyed something, he'd tell

her to get it, explaining that he'd put it on his parent's credit card. She rarely wore any of it, keeping most of the clothes in the bags Roger had bought them in, except for times like now when she knew she'd have to face his friends.

She'd gone through most of everything, trying it on and taking it off, then adding it to the pile on the floor. She was not sure why she had the sudden anxiety over what to wear.

Even though in some ways she always got a little like this right before, tonight felt a little different. Maybe it was because of the time—it'd been almost a month since most of them had seen her. Maybe it was because of Amil. The last time Mary saw her she'd drunkenly made a comment that Mary couldn't let go of. Maybe it was because in all these situations she felt like an outsider—too young and too inexperienced to know any better or contribute anything of substance. Perhaps, though, it wasn't just one thing but all of them.

“What should I wear to this?” Mary asked Roger now. She placed a number of tops on the bedspread and stared at them, undecided.

“It doesn't matter what you wear. No one will care. They'll just be happy to see you.”

He paused, a moment's hesitation, before continuing. “What about a dress?” Roger asked.

“It's not that fancy, is it? It's just a get-together.”

“No,” Roger paused, thinking. “It's just—”

“Just what?”

Roger took the cigarette from his mouth. He got off the bed and went to the closet, searching until he found a cowl-neck sweater dress he'd bought for her weeks ago.

“I’m not even sure that’ll fit,” she said apprehensively.

“Well, try it on and see.”

The dress did fit, but Mary was self-conscious about her middle. She went to the hanging mirror on the closer door and stood. She alternated to the side and then the front again as she looked at her body, at the flaws the dress barely seemed to mask.

“This won’t work,” she said, reaching down to pull it off.

Roger was already dressed in dark jeans and a black turtleneck. She looked at his reflection in the mirror. In the past few days he’d stopped shaving, letting the beginnings of a beard grow. She’d been surprised at this recent change in his appearance, not just with his beard but letting his hair grow as well. For as long as she’d known him, he was a clean-cut, crew cut, sort of man. Now though, he used a pick to puff out the beginnings of an afro beginning to take shape.

Roger stood up from the bed and went to her, wrapping his arms around her waist. He leaned in and kissed her neck. The scruff of his beard scratched against her skin.

“You’re beautiful. Don’t you know it by now? Don’t you understand it?” he whispered.

Mary nodded her answer.

“Say it.”

They often played this game. Roger believed in the power of verbal assertion. If you say a thing you’ll believe it. If you give voice to it it’ll come true. “Octavia Butler literally wrote out her success in her journal,” Roger used to tell her. ““So be it. See to it!” she used to tell herself, and it came to pass.”

So now, whenever Roger sensed her doubt about a thing, whatever it was, he’d make her repeat an affirmation until he was convinced she believed otherwise.

“This is dumb,” Mary said.

“Say it anyway,” he repeated, his voice stern. Mary relented and told him yes.

“Now pick something to wear.”

Mary decided on the sweater dress Roger suggested. She pulled on a pair of black tights and then went to the dresser to find the brush for her hair.

“Okay,” Roger said as she set the brush down. “You ready?”

“I think so. Just need my shoes.”

“All right, I’ll get our coats and we’ll go.”

###

Mary had met Roger a couple of weeks after she got to campus. They’d met at a party held for new students. Mary’s roommate, Camille, had invited her. Camille had a sing-song voice, always uptalked her sentences. She ran a straightening iron through her relaxed hair every morning so that it was bone-straight by the time she was ready to head for classes.

Camille explained that the party was being hosted by a group of graduate business students. That was enough to make Mary not want to go. She had no idea what she’d even talk about with any of them, and she knew the moment Camille found a guy even remotely interested in her she’d leave her there at the party alone. Camille insisted though that Mary come. She even let her borrow one of her outfits, a sequined dress that was cut too short for her, making her self-conscious over the exposure of her legs.

“You look good,” Camille said, a hint of envy in her voice. She reached and fluffed her hair, making her curls appear even more disheveled, wild even.

“This is too much.”

“No, it’s perfect.”

Even though Mary believed that Camille was completely different from her and that the two most likely would never be friends, that night on their walk to the party things between them felt different. They talked about school, gossiped about the boys in their classes. Camille told her she was thinking of majoring in special education despite her parents’ objections.

They got to the address. Camille walked up the steps of the house with Mary behind her. She lingered a few moments near the Greek Revival columns, a brief moment of hesitation, before she pushed it aside and knocked. A black student opened the door. His tall, broad frame hovered over the two of them. His eyes were bleary red. He glanced at both of them quickly.

“You can come in,” he said, pointing to Mary. “Only you.”

“What? Why just her?” Camille asked, her voice already rising in anger.

“Look at the door.”

Taped to the side of the door was a paper bag and both of them understood instantly. It was the brown paper bag test resurrected. The custom originated in New Orleans where a brown paper bag was taped to the front door and anyone darker than the bag wasn’t allowed to enter. Black students across the South adopted the paper bag test during the early twentieth century.

“You’ve got to be fucking kidding me,” Camille said.

“Look, they’re not my rules.”

“But you’re darker than that,” Mary said, noting his skin tone, a rich mahogany color, but noticeably darker than the paper bag.

“It’s for the women.”

Camille cursed at him again. “Again, not my rules,” he repeated.

“I’m not going,” Mary told them both.

“No, you have to go,” Camille said. “You have to go and at least tell me about it. Maybe you can meet someone who’s got some friends that you can introduce me to later.”

“Well, make up your mind.”

“I’m not going,” Mary said again. He shrugged before shutting the door to them both.

“Damn it Mary, you couldn’t have at least done that for me?”

“What would I have been doing exactly? You think anyone in there would have cared about you beyond your skin color?”

“Fuck you,” Camille muttered under her breath. “You’re nothing but an Oreo anyway.”

The shock of the insult floored Mary. “As much as I can see you’re the one trying to be something you’re not,” she said, not realizing at first the hurtful implications of her statement—the shame and denial Camille must have felt over her skin color, the desire to be lighter, to be closer to the European features that were so prized in society.

“I didn’t mean that,” Mary said.

“Yeah, yeah you did.”

They stood there on the porch not knowing what to do, each of them silent. In the background they could hear the commotion of the party. They heard a crash, the sound of glass shattering against the floor, and then a corral of male laughter following.

“They’re the fucking Oreos,” Mary finally said.

“Yeah,” Camille scoffed. She smiled, appearing to forgive her for what she’d said.

After a few seconds more Camille took out her phone, dialed one number and then another before someone finally picked up. Mary listened to her relay again what happened to them.

“I know, it’s ridiculous. Whatever. What else is happening, do you know?” Mary heard Camille ask. “Cool. Where at? What’s the address?”

When Camille hung up she said they’d been invited to another party, one a couple of blocks from where they were now. “So you want to go to this or what?”

“I think I’m just going to go back to the dorm,” Mary said.

“You sure? It’s still early.”

“Yeah, it’s okay though. You go and I’ll see you later.”

Camille left her on the porch. Mary watched her disappear into the dark, and then she sat down on the front steps of the porch.

She’d not been sitting long before Roger came stumbling out of the house. He almost tripped over her before she yelled at him to watch where he was going. She stood and he’d grabbed onto her by accident before quickly pulling away.

“Sorry, sorry,” he said. “I didn’t know you were there. Who can see anything out here?”

Roger looked her up and down and Mary suddenly became aware of how she must have appeared. Mary began pulling on her dress. She ran a finger over her hair, smoothing it down.

“I see you though. Or, at least, now I do,” he said.

“Do you?”

Roger didn’t answer her question, gave her a Cheshire-like grin in response.

“Why are you sitting out here?”

“They wouldn’t let my friend in.”

“Where’s your friend now? I don’t see her.”

“She left.”

“Oh,” he said. “I see.”

“What about you? Why are you leaving?”

A friend convinced him to come to this, he explained. It was before he knew what kind of party it would be.

“And what kind of party is that?”

“I thought it was obvious.”

It was, but Mary wanted him to say it out loud anyway. She gave him a blank look in response, being careful not to show a hint of understanding.

“Well, the paper bag thing for one. We should be above this shit. It’s worse enough that HBCU’s used this as a discriminating screening process for enrollment. Now here we are using it as a screening process for dating.”

“Dating? What?”

“That’s what this party is. The whole purpose of the event was to find girls lighter than the bag for the brothers to get with. Didn’t you know that? I thought that was why you were sitting out here instead.”

“I’m sitting out here because my roommate couldn’t get in and after that I didn’t want to.”

“Good for you. Where is your roommate now?”

“At another party.”

“I see.” He sat down on the steps and looked out onto the street. “I shouldn’t be here,” he said.

“I’ve felt that way about a lot of things lately,” Mary said, and he laughed.

“Yeah? What other things?”

Mary didn’t answer, but if she had she would have told him she felt like the moment she stepped on the campus she recognized that she didn’t belong. She felt lost and alone amidst the majority of white students, while similarly, she felt as she stood out at every social situation she was introduced too. She felt it in her classes and so she sat in the back. She felt it in her the dorm while walking the halls or using the shared communal space to study or read.

Mary had grown up in a town where she was a minority and so she was used to this feeling of isolation, but this time it all felt worse. Perhaps it was because this time she got it from the black students as well. It was obvious Camille’s comment about her being an Oreo was one she’d harbored about her the moment they met, and Mary wondered if other black students thought this about her as well. Never mind that she was the one on scholarship while students like Camille got her college paid for by her parents. As far as she could tell, she was the only one she’d met who’d come from a rural farming community and not from some middle-class suburb.

“I guess you’re not going to tell me, huh?” Roger said, interrupting her thoughts.

“Well, maybe another time then.”

Roger asked her out that night but she told him no. He then asked if he could walk her home and she told him no to that too.

“It’s late. You have to let me walk you home at least.”

“No, no I don’t.”

“Come on, let me be a gentleman at least.”

She wasn’t sure why at first she eventually relented to let him walk her home, or why she said yes when he asked her if she’d want to go to Sunday matinee with him the next day. It wasn’t just because of his persistence, although that was part of it. It felt familiar to her, this pleading, his persistence. We’ve been here before, she thought, and yet. It gave her a feeling of security in a way she hadn’t felt in a long time. She wasn’t proud that this was the reason, but in his present she felt safe. Sheltered away from not just her past but whatever storm she felt inevitably to come.

II.

The drive to the party wasn't far, but in order to get there they had to pass by the strip of frats and sororities, their own Greek Town that stretched for several blocks.

Because it was Friday evening, everyone was out in full-force. Some of the girls appeared half-drunk already as they held onto each other's bodies to keep from stumbling along the brick steps. Their blonde hair framed around their faces like halos as they traveled to one of the houses, sidestepping shattered glass and crushed beer cans that littered the way.

They passed groups of students playing beer pong on the balconies, students sitting on the lawn chairs in the front of the buildings with coolers packed to the brim. With the evening sun disappearing a slight chill had entered the air, but no one seemed to mind. They were loud and boisterous as they walked to their respective parties to begin their long night of drinking.

"Look at them," Roger said, an air of contempt in his voice. "Carefree and ignorant."

"Careful," Mary said. "They all might here you."

She was joking but took note as Roger glanced at the window, making sure it was completely raised and that there was no way the sound of his words could have escaped from the space of the car. "Don't you love how they flaunt it though? Their recklessness? I wish, just once, I could know what that is like. To experience that kind of abandon."

Roger sighed. They passed through Greek Town and the noise outside quieted. A few more blocks and Roger turned on Ami's street. It reminded Mary of the kind of old money aristocracy that used to be here. The houses were large, Greek Revival structures with chipped paint and broken shingles. There weren't many who chose to live in these

homes anymore—they were money pits to try and keep updated and not many could afford to heat them because of their high ceilings and poor insulation. Hundred-year-old Oak trees lined both sides of the street. Mary was terrified each time she saw their drooping branches. Lynching trees, she called them the first time she saw them, and Roger had laughed.

Amil lived in one of these rented houses along with two other roommates she'd recently taken, Mariah and Sarah, to make extra cash. It wasn't that she even needed the money since like everyone else her parents', both of them lawyers, paid for everything, but the money allowed her to pay for what she couldn't put on the credit card, like the alcohol for get-togethers like the one they were going to.

Mariah's boyfriend Marcus answered the door when they got there. Mary smelled pot the moment he opened the door but she couldn't tell if it came from him or inside the house.

"What took you so long? I thought for a moment you two weren't coming."

"We're not that late are we?" Roger asked. He looked at his watch and frowned. "It's only half past."

"Yeah, well, you know Amil. There's no CP-time bullshit with her."

Besides Roger, Marcus was the only other black man in their department. Marcus was also Roger's friend who'd hosted the party from the night the two of them met. For this reason, Mary always flinched when Roger mentioned he'd be at a gathering they were going to, still fostering anger over him for perpetuating colorism.

"I don't understand how you can still be friends with him," Mary had said the first time she he told her. "I thought you were better than that."

“It’s complicated. There aren’t many of us here. We have to stick together even if we screw up. He screwed up but he understands that now.”

“Does he? I don’t think he does.”

“Well, we’ll just have to check him, won’t we?”

Marcus was dark-skinned, with dreads down the side of his back that he typically kept pulled in a low ponytail. Black, square-framed glasses sat on the bridge of his nose. Like Roger, he often wore collared shirts and ties, clothes meant more for church rather than everyday wear. To both of them it was a statement to the others—that they were just as good, if not better, that they were more than whatever interpretations others’ thought of them to be.

“Yeah, yeah,” Roger said now to Marcus as he ushered Mary into the house.

Everyone had already settled into the living room when Mary and Roger came in. Most of the group Mary was familiar with. Marcus sat immediately on the sofa in the empty space between Mariah and a Masters student named Tris. Across from Tris was Darvis, an undergraduate sophomore who sat quietly watching the rest of the group. Besides Mary, Darvis was one of the only underclassmen there, but to Mary he was just like the rest of them—unfamiliar, distant, on a level she’d not yet reached.

Sarah sat cross-legged on the floor near Trey. Sitting on an ottoman in the center was Amil. When they entered Amil stood up immediately.

“Finally!” she shouted.

“Oh come on,” Roger said.

“Forgive me for being excited. Maybe it’s just because I feel like I haven’t seen you two lately. Or at the very least I haven’t seen Mary.”

Mary was not sure how much of Amil's emotion was genuine. She wouldn't have considered the two of them friends. Even though Mary had met Amil first out of the group, they only became acquaintances because of Roger.

Amil was light-skinned like Mary, with freckles along her cheeks. A few months ago she'd stopped straightening her hair and typically kept it at a loose knot at the top of her head. Tonight though she had it down. Her thick curls overclouded her face. She wore red lipstick and black liner to highlight her eyes. When she pulled close for a hug, Mary breathed in vanilla musk.

"Come, sit down with us," Amil said.

There weren't any seats left so Amil told Trey to be a gentlemen and give up his seat. They switched, with him sitting on the ottoman and Amil and Mary scrunched together on the couch beside Mariah and Marcus. Amil threw one of the pillows at Roger who placed it on the floor before sitting down.

"So what are we going to do about our department?" Amil asked them all. The rest of them were quiet as they thought about her question, one all of them seemed to know the context for except for Mary. She quickly glanced at Darvis to see if his face held a glimmer of understanding, but he sat there expressionless, unmoving in his seat.

"What do you mean Amil?"

"You haven't told her?" she responded, gesturing to Roger.

"Not yet."

"The school won't issue a statement of support," Tris piped up. "They won't do anything. They're just going to ignore what happened. It's ridiculous."

They were talking about the rape of Jenny Clark. The university's investigation provided "no new significant evidence" that would warrant criminal charges. Neither of the boys were charged.

"Why should they do anything?" Marcus asked Tris.

"Because it's the right thing to do."

"I mean—" Marcus coughed, clearly an attempt to buy time as he thought further about his answer. "Wouldn't it be like picking sides if they said something? Believing one of them over the other?"

"Believing one of them over the other? They raped her."

"We don't know that. Maybe she lied about it."

"Marcus are you seriously asking that right now?"

"What? I mean, it's a fair question."

"No, it's really not."

"I'm just playing devil's advocate here," he said, attempting to try and get himself out of the grave he was digging.

"That's what people always say when they're wanting to be assholes. She didn't lie."

"How do you know she didn't?"

"What makes you think she did?"

"Maybe she got it wrong then. She was drunk. She could have been confused—"

"Now you're victim-blaming," Sarah interrupted. "You're part of the reason women don't report sexual assault when it happens. I think the statistic is something like eighty percent never even report?"

“That statistic is even worse for black women,” Tris said.

“But we’re not talking about everyone here, only this one particular case.”

“Mariah how you even put up with this shit? Honestly.”

“Okay, okay,” Marcus said before Mariah could answer. “So let’s say she didn’t.”

“Stop with the ‘let’s just say’ shit,” Tris told him, yelling now. “She was raped.

Brian and Kip got off. End of story.”

“How about we talk about the boys for a moment,” Sarah said, shifting the conversation. “They’re both walking away scot-free! Community service! It makes me so angry to think about it.”

“You know if their races would have been reversed—”

“If their races had been reversed we’d be dealing with a lynching too now.” Sarah finished Tris’s sentence and she let out a sigh of acknowledgement.

“You don’t seriously think—”

“Mariah, girl, wake up. Where have you been? What world have you been living in that you could ever think otherwise?”

“Let’s not forget the fact that they’re both football players. We need to factor in the exploitative yet lucrative college athletics system into the equation here.”

“Tris is right,” Sarah said. “They got off because they’re football players. The university doesn’t care what they do as long as they jive and dance on that field for the donors and to sell tickets.”

“No,” Tris said. “They got off because they’re white. White is always right.”

“Or it’s because of both,” Mariah finally said, turning to them both. “I’m sure both factored into it in some way.”

“Okay well, what about her?” Amil asked.

In all of their arguing, none of them had really thought about Jenny. She’d disappeared from the conversation when she should have been the center.

“Has anyone even seen her? Jenny?”

“I did, once,” Mariah answered. “It was at that café on the edge of campus. The one open late.”

“Fretzone?” Amil asked.

“Yeah, that one,” Mariah said, nodding. “She was sitting toward the back, I think hoping she wouldn’t be noticed, but everyone noticed. To their credit though no one said anything to her. She sat for a while studying.”

“What did you do?”

“What do you mean ‘what did I do?’ I ate my cinnamon roll and left.”

“You didn’t say anything to her?” Now it was Tris asking the questions.

“What am I going to say?”

“I don’t know. I just feel like you should have said something. In solidarity maybe.”

“That’s what the school should do, or the department, and both are doing nothing.”

They had come full circle, back again to the subject of what, if anything, their department should do.

“A statement wouldn’t mean anything,” Mary finally spoke up. She blurted it out, not thinking, and was surprised when everyone quieted, turning their attention suddenly to her.

“Why won’t it?” Amil asked.

“They’re just words,” she said. “The school could make a statement but what would it do? I’m not convinced it would do much of anything.”

“It would show they were on Jenny’s side.”

“Words don’t matter,” Mary interrupted. She’d said it bluntly without much thought and was surprised when everyone turned silent and stared at her.

“What?” Roger finally asked with a look of incredulousness across his face. “Of course they do. How could you say something like that Mary?”

“Because it’s true.”

“Would you say that about Malcolm X? Martin Luther King?”

“That’s different, and anyway it’s always snippets of their words being used for agendas that go against what they spoke about.”

“Well, I don’t know about Malcolm X...” Sarah trailed off.

“Okay, but with King?” Mary insisted. “Look at what people say every time a protest is covered on the news and it gets out of hand. They trot out that quote, what’s the one again?” She gestured to Roger to answer.

“The ‘darkness cannot drive out darkness’ one?”

“Yeah, that one, but there’s another too,” Sarah said. “Give me a minute and I’ll think of it. It goes something like—it’s about nonviolence and a sword.”

“Ah, I know,” said Marcus, surprising them all. “Nonviolence is a powerful and just weapon, which cuts without wounding and ennoble the man who wields it. It is a sword that heals.”

“And here I thought you were as dense as you look,” Tris said.

Before they could get into another argument again Mary continued on. “Thank you Marcus,” she said. “My point is that people ignore everything else King said, sticking to those one of two quotes to present this non-confrontational, even passive, man. They whittle and simplify his message until it becomes propaganda for criticizing not just protests but any kind of resistance toward progress.”

“Okay, but now you’re contradicting yourself, babe,” Roger said. “First you’re saying words have no meaning and the next you’re arguing about the power of rhetoric. You can’t have it both ways.”

“Fine,” Mary said, feeling flustered. “I still think though that a statement is waste of time.”

“Why?”

“Because in the end what happens? Let’s say they do write a statement. Then what? A statement doesn’t change anything. It’s just a statement. Jenny was still raped. She still has to cope with that trauma for the rest of her life. Neither of those students are getting charged. They get to live their lives despite doing what they did. The world moves on. People forget. That is, until something even more terrible happens. Then it repeats all over. In the end what does it matter? What is a statement going to do against any of that?”

“Well then, what are we supposed to do?” Amil asked her.

“I don’t know but a statement isn’t it.”

“Action,” Darvis said. “We need to do more than just say empty words. We need to have action behind them.”

The whole time Darvis sat in his seat listening, waiting for a lull to respond. Mary was surprised that he hadn't contributed sooner because he seemed so focused on everything everyone else was saying. It was clear he had opinions about it all, but whatever they were he'd kept them quiet until now.

"Like what? Protesting?" Amil asked.

"Sure. I mean, that's what we're hedging around talking about isn't it? There's a group on campus that's beginning to organize."

"Yeah, we could protest," Tris said, not waiting for Darvis to finish.

"You're going to protest?" Marcus asked her, then he started laughing uncontrollably. "Who do you think you're talking to Tris? I know where you come from. I know your parents. You know good and well you'd never risk yourself or your future like that just to get arrested. You're not fooling me with this protest bullshit."

"Fuck you, Marcus."

"Fuck you back."

"Okay, okay, everyone calm down," Amil interrupted. "Maybe we should just start with the statement. We can do that first and then see what their response is."

The rest of the group agreed and the remaining hours of the evening were spent crafting their own statement in support of Jenny and the failure of their department to take a stand against what they felt was an injustice. The plan was to get all the students in their department to sign it and then forwarded it to the dean. With everyone on board, he'd have no choice but to respond.

Mary sat in silence as they made their plans. She listened to them talk, half-drunk from

booze and from the rush of their own excitement over the idea that they were doing something to make a difference.

Deep down though she knew it was all pointless. Nothing would come from such an action, but she remained silent and took long sips from her warm beer and watched.

When they finished, Amil stood up and went to the vinyl record shelf tucked in the corner of the living room. She pulled out one and delicately placed it on the vintage player. “I think it’s time for some levity,” she said as she set down the needle.

A few seconds later the opening of Sly and The Family Stone’s “I Want to Take You Higher” began to play.

“Wow, you went old school,” Marcus said.

“It’s a classic though,” Tris responded.

“Guys, will you just stop talking and listen?” Amil said. She slapped her hands against her thigh in concordance with the beat of the music. “Maybe you two need to dance it out.”

Marcus was the first, grabbing Mariah’s hand. Sarah didn’t get up, instead drank from her glass of flat coke and whiskey.

“Come on Sarah you know you want to,” Amil said, and Sarah relented, taking Tris up to the floor with her.

“Well?” Roger turned to Mary and asked.

“Sure.”

They all danced together in Amil’s living room. They all took turns with each other, swinging their hips to the music, sweat gleaming on their skin from the exertion.

Midway through the song everyone had apparently forgotten about their argument from before, about Jenny and the school, about the reason why they were here.

The only one who wasn't dancing was Darvis. He sat in his chair quietly watching, his gaze seemed intently focused on Mary, at least that's what she thought at first, but each time she tried to meet his eyes with her own, he would quickly look away.

III.

“So what was that?” Roger asked her in the car while they were on the way back to his apartment.

“What are you talking about?”

“Words don’t matter?” Roger said, repeating her earlier response.

“I was just saying what I thought.”

“Yeah, I understand that, but where is it coming from? What would make you believe something like that?”

Mary shifted in her seat. She tried to think of an answer that would satisfy Roger, one that would not provoke him to more questions, but she could think of nothing easy enough that would explain.

If she were to go back it would be the first week she’d come here, the night she had the dreams. They’d waited until she was finally steady, having left home and come to Marymount, far away from what Ben and her had seen. The college had let her move in early. She was one of a handful of students who’d chosen to do so and most of the others preferred to stay solitarily in their rooms or with groups of friends they’d already formed. None of them were interested in knowing her, much less talking with her, and so she decided to settle into her aloneness until the term began.

The first few nights her sleep was restless, hours of wrestling with the sheets. She woke often, first to use the bathroom, then to go get a drink of water, and then to the bathroom again. She changed her position in the bed, took off the sheets and pulled them back over her body. She took the pillow and folded it so it propped her head up higher. Nothing she

did could make her fall back to sleep, and so she spent the rest of night in bed staring at the blank wall before her, until the morning light creeped through the windows.

By the end of the week she was so exhausted that when night came her body collapsed and she fell asleep immediately, and that was when she had the dream—his body all blood and broken bone. The pure blood smear down the side of his mouth, dried blood beneath his fingernails from when he'd clawed at one of their faces, breaking through the skin, and of how he cursed in response, punching him back hard. There was blood from the scrapes on his knees, bare skin showing through the torn pants. Blood from when one of them cut too deep with the knife as they all sat sweating in the hot car as it made its way to the barn. Matted blood in his hair from when they smacked his head against the earth. They'd left him in the barn, a discarded mass of flesh left to rot in the sun, but they'd kept him breathing, leaving him to know that he would die there, that no one would save him, until finally he succumbed to darkness.

When she woke, she remembered the night she left Ben. His face an expression of wounded pain and guilt, and when he told her he had never reported to the police his eyes were rimmed with tears. He'd asked her for her forgiveness and Mary had finally lied and told him that she forgave him for what he'd done, but she couldn't.

The truth was she found him weak. It angered her that when it came down to it, he'd let his fear dictate his actions.

But then, who was she? She had done nothing either, and she was the one who left. If she was mad at Ben for his inaction, then what did it say about her own?

The dreams, she believed were manifestations of her own guilt, and so she let them continue. After she began dating Roger, they got worse, to the point where one

night while she was sleeping she managed to hurt him, clawing at his skin when he tried to wake her, enough to draw blood, speckling the pillows and sheets.

Roger suggested she take sleeping pills and bought her a bottle of over-the-counter ones, and on the nights when she stayed at his apartment she would, but the pills didn't get rid of the dreams, only made them longer, sometimes her mind changing the outcome. She heard the sound of his voice whispering to his body to get up, to try. "Get up," she heard him tell himself, despite the pain radiating throughout his body. If he could just move a finger and then another, move his arms, push himself up. If he could stand up. He must stand. It was not a question but a matter of will. If he could just force himself to move, to stand, to walk, to make it out of the barn and down the hill and past the trees, then it would be okay. In the end it would be okay.

It was only in the morning when Mary would remember the horror of what actually happened. She sat up in the bed and waited for her body to settle, for her heart to stop racing, for her to find enough sense of calm to continue with her day.

His name was Harris Thomas. Even that fact, a simple name, took close to a month for Mary to find out. Every day she'd check her school's computer, searching through the online newspapers for whatever she could find. The college didn't have her town's newspaper circulation and so she had to hope that eventually the news story would be big enough that a more mainstream paper would pick it up. She made a routine of it—toward the end of her day, before she made the trek back to her dorm room, she'd stop in the library and take one of the computers near the back. By this time the library was mostly empty since the bulk of classes were already over. It had become such a routine to her that when she did find something she almost missed it. Her eyes glided

over the name the first time. She wasn't sure what made her look again, but she did and realized this was the man. Harris Thomas. Harris Thomas.

He was twenty-seven years old when he died. He was married to a woman named Susan, but friends called her Susie. They had two children, a four-year old girl named Lania and a newborn named Marie. After high school he'd gotten a job at the power plant like so many others had done, like she assumed Ben had done, and he'd been working there up until he died. Had he lived a few weeks longer, he would have been with the plant for a decade.

Harris Thomas worked nights at the plant. Twelve-hour shifts four days a week, two on the weekend and two during the week. He was one of the few who enjoyed the night shifts, mostly because it allowed him time to get home and be with his children. Harris and Susie coordinated their schedules so that always one of them was home to watch the children while the other was at work. Susie worked at the public library in the next county, a good forty-minute drive away. Because of their schedules, there were days when they didn't see each other but for a few minutes, maybe a half hour at most. When one was stumbling to bed the other was waking to begin their day. When one was pouring coffee and scrambling eggs the other was pulling off their workday clothes to slip into bed, still warm from the body heat of the other. On the weekends life for them was different. Susie was off so when Harris came home they'd sit together at the table sharing breakfast, discussing their plans for the week ahead. On Saturdays especially, Harris rushed home. As dawn crept up on the skyline, he'd clocked out, grab his canteen filled with cold coffee from the night before, and took long gulps of it in the hope the caffeine push would jolt him awake to make it home.

On that Saturday though, Harris was late. He took the time to change out of his uniform into more presentable clothes. No one was sure why he did this, why this departure in his typically predictable behavior, but because of it he was the last of the shift workers to leave the plant, and while walking through the parking lot to get to his car, he most likely would have been alone.

And that was it at first. All Mary could find. After finding that article she'd called home to ask her mother about it. "Oh, yes, that story. They're talking about that way up there?"

"I heard a piece of it on the television," Mary said. I was just curious."

"Well." Lena sighed before continuing further. "He apparently disappeared, just walked off from his job and into the unknown. At least, that's what people here seem to think."

"Why would anyone believe that though? It doesn't make sense."

It was the fact that he'd changed his clothes that gave credence to the theory, her mother told her. It was also an easier explanation than any alternative, especially since there was no body.

There was a body, Mary wanted to say. She'd seen it. She'd seen him. As the days turned to weeks she began to wonder what, in fact, she had seen, if maybe it'd been a mistake. Perhaps she had imagined him there. Perhaps none of it had happened. She'd gone back and he was gone, any evidence of a body or a crime disappeared, and so maybe she'd been wrong all along.

That's what she convinced herself to believe until her mother called her a few days later.

"They found him."

“What? Who?”

“That man. The one you were curious about. He turned up.”

“Alive?”

“No, he was found off Interstate 68 on the way out of Edgeville. He was crumpled deep in the ditch. You know, barely anyone takes that route out of town anymore, so it’s no surprise it took them that long to find him. In fact, the only reason was because the person who did got a flat tire and was walking along the road when he noticed the body.”

“What do they think happened?”

“He was shot and then dumped there I guess. He was beaten also pretty badly. They don’t have any leads beyond that. Anyway, I thought you should know since you seemed so interested in the story to begin with.”

“Thanks.”

“There’s one more,” Lena said. “About a barn.”

“What about the barn?” Mary tried to keep her voice calm so as not to raise her mother’s suspicions, but her heart raced.

“That barn near our house. I don’t know whose property that belongs too. The Millers maybe? It’s connected to what happened in some way.”

“How do you know? How did they find out?”

“A call it looks like. Someone called anonymously.”

Ben, Mary thought. It had to have been Ben.

Lena told her she’d send the articles from the town’s paper when they came out if she wanted them, and for a while after Mary would get an envelope with the neatly cut-out articles on Harris Thomas. Lena had sent her a profile done on him in which Mary

learned that he'd been a football star in high school. An injury to his knee during one of his games caused him to lose his scholarship. His nickname then was the Golden Glory, the name coming from an interview he'd given once after a win. "How are you feeling about all this?" a reporter had yelled out, referring to the three touchdowns he'd scored for the team. "Man, I'm golden," he'd said, grinning for a photo. Golden Glory Wins For the Team, the accompanying headline read, and after that the name stuck. The high school even reprinted his jersey to have the nickname on the back.

He was the town's golden glory and when he died the newspapers resurrected his nickname for all the headlines. *Golden Glory Disappeared. Golden Glory Found Dumped In Ditch. Golden Glory Murdered.*

In the beginning of her searching, Mary kept the articles in a folder she'd carried with her. Every week or so she'd add to the folder what her mother sent her or what she was able to search for on the library computers. When her mother stopped mailing her, when she could no longer find any new information, she took the collected articles paper-clipped together and placed them in a shoebox she kept underneath her bed.

It was a week ago when Lena had sent her another one. By now, it'd been months since she'd thought about him, somehow managing to tuck away his death like she'd tucked away all the articles about it. She still had her dorm room but was basically living with Roger in his apartment off-campus, and because of this she rarely checked up on her mail. She threw the letter in her bag, waiting until she was upstairs in her dorm room to read it, wanting afterwards to put it with the others. She sat on the bed holding the envelope in her hands, not wanting to open it, not wanting to know.

Finally, in one swift movement Mary tore open the envelope and took out the article. She unfolded the newspaper clipping and saw the headline—*Golden Glory Murder Finally Resolved.*

Three friends, led by one, a man whose father had been one of Harris Thomas's coworkers at the plant. He'd recently lost his job due to layoffs. One night, in anger, his father had complained about it, making a comment about the number of blacks who'd still managed to stay employed there.

"That's nothing but affirmative action that's keeping them there," he'd said.

And that was it. That was the reason, at least the reason the prosecution gave at their trial. Together with him and two others, they'd decided to solve the problem for themselves. They hadn't known Harris Thomas and in fact it could have been anyone walking out that morning, anyone they felt was undeserving of the job they felt was stolen.

Still, with all of this, the jury had found all of them innocent. In the end it hadn't mattered because they were free and Harris Thomas had died.

"Do we have to talk about this?" Mary said to Roger. "I'm tired."

"Just help me to see your side here. That's all."

"I don't believe making a statement is going to help. It's just an empty gesture."

"So you want to protest?"

"No," she said. "I don't want to protest."

"So you believe in doing nothing."

"I didn't say that either."

"Then what? What are you saying?"

“I’m saying Jenny was raped and it’s awful. I’m saying that women all over the country are raped. All over the world. Injustices happen all the time—people murdered, shot in the street, imprisoned for no reason. Nothing changes any of it because it keeps going, and it doesn’t matter what you do or who you are because it’s going to keep going. So writing a statement, while it might make you feel better, is just as pointless as us talking about it to death.”

“That’s an ignorant point of view.”

“Excuse me?”

“It’s not only ignorant but convenient since it absolves you of ever having to do anything.”

“Okay, well, write your statement then and see what happens,” Mary snapped.

Roger didn’t talk to her for the rest of the drive or even as they got ready for bed. Later that night, Mary had another nightmare. She jerked awake, then turned to Roger to see if she’d woken him, but he was still fast asleep. She reached over to the nightstand, fumbled through the drawer for the package of Unisom. She swallowed one without water and waited.

“Harris Thomas,” Mary whispered in the dark. It was the first time she allowed herself to say his name. She repeated the words again and again. A name made him real. A name made him more than a dream. A name made him more than an article headline. It forced her to bring to the forefront what she’d pushed deep down inside of her.

He had a name. He was a coworker. A friend. A husband and father. He was more than just a body in a ditch. He was more than a town’s former golden glory. To someone else, he still was.

She knew it was pointless. She knew, but she did not know what else to do but this, but to say his name out loud, to give substance to what she'd chosen to forget.

IV.

A few weeks after they get together at Amil's she called Mary, asking if she wanted to come over. "I feel like I haven't talked to you in a while," she said, pausing a moment to suggest they go out for lunch. "Plus, there's something I want to talk to you about."

Mary wasn't excited about the idea of spending time with Amil. They knew each other only within the context of Roger, and when Mary thought about Amil it was hard to disassociate her from the fact that she was Roger's ex. She agreed though because she thought it might be good for her to get out, even if it was with Amil. She realized that she'd closed herself off to mostly everyone. Her friends were Roger's friends, but if she could make Amil her own somehow maybe things would be better.

"Come in, come, come, come, come," Amil ushered Mary in. She gave her a hug, the two of them sharing a brief moment of forced intimacy.

"I meant to ask—does it feel weird to live here? In this building?"

"I like it actually," she said. "It makes me feel subversive in a way. This was a space never meant for me and yet I am living in it. I can go in any room. Do whatever I want. To me, knowing its history, it feels a little empowering to stay here."

"This reminds me. I have to show you something."

Amil took her upstairs. She took her inside one of the rooms she was using for storage. She felt along the wall until she found what she wanted, then she crouched down

and fiddled around until Mary saw Amil take a piece of the wall out, revealing a secret crawl space. “Look at this,” Amil said. “It’s like a little hideaway. I rarely come in this room, much less upstairs since both Tris and Sarah live up here and I wanted to give them their space, but one day I decided to go through all this junk—do some spring cleaning—and I found this.”

Amil crawled inside and sat on the floor. She asked Mary to join her. When Mary hesitated, Amil began teasing. “Don’t be afraid. I’ve been in here a few times already. It’s quite cozy, actually.”

“All right.”

Mary squeezed down in beside her. The room was narrow, not more than few feet around. The hot air felt suffocating inside. She was close enough to smell the aura of Amil’s perfume—a spicy, earthy smell that inhabited the space around them.

Cracks in the walls brought in light from outside. It was just enough for Mary to see the excited expression on Amil’s face for being able to show off her discovery. Mary was surprised at how comfortable Amil felt in the space, at the ease she’d settled down onto the floor, ignoring the silvery strands of cobwebs in the corners.

“I think this house might have been part of the Underground Railroad,” Amil said. “This might have been where runaway slaves hid.”

“Or it could just be a crawl space.”

“It could,” Amil paused.

“Can you imagine though? I mean, look at this space. You can barely move in here, and it’s so hot. I feel like I can’t breathe.”

“Yeah, I’m getting out,” Mary said, attempting to shuffle her way toward the door. Amil stopped her. She reached and touched her arm, coaxing her to stay. “No, Mary, just—wait a minute,” she said, pulling her back for a few minutes longer.

“What is it?”

“You were right about the statement,” Amil said. “The department did nothing. It ended up being kind of pointless.”

“I figured as much.”

“I just wanted to do something, you know? We talk and talk about action but that’s all it is. I know it was just a statement, but it was something. A first step. I just don’t know where to go next. Darvis seems to suggest we move toward protests.”

“I didn’t know you were talking to him.”

Amil raised her eyebrows. “Why? I think he’s got a lot of good ideas about what we should do. Teaming up with this black organization on campus to help spread our message, for instance, or possibly even starting our own. He even suggested we do some grassroots work in the community to get them involved.”

“That’s great,” Mary said.

“He’s the first serious guy since—” Amil stopped and Mary finished the sentence for her. *The first guy since Roger*, she’d said, realizing a few moments later that the subtext of her comment was that Amil and Roger had been more than what he’d always led on.

“I thought with you and Roger it was just sex,” Mary said. “A few drunken nights,” I think is what he told me.

“Oh, is that what he said? No, it was more than that. We dated close to a year. He never told you?”

“No, he didn’t,” she said. “Why did you break up?”

“Oh, I don’t know.”

“No, tell me.”

“I think he wanted someone to take care of. With me—I made him feel emasculated.”

“Because I’m poor.”

“No, well, maybe.”

“I can take care of myself.”

“No, I’m not saying that,” she said, stumbling over her words in an attempt to apologize. “You know Roger. It’s some sort of masculinity thing. Plus I always sort of felt invisible around him. I didn’t know who I was. Around him I never got the chance to figure it out.”

Mary shrugged, wished instead that Amil would get up and they could go back downstairs. They’d been sitting in the room so long that Mary’s clothes were drenched in sweat. Droplets ran along the back of her neck and along the sides of her face. She licked her lips and tasted salt.

“I feel like this is a secret room,” Amil said, looking around the space once more. “Even if it wasn’t part of the Underground, it still feels like a place that’s held some secrets, for both good and bad. Don’t you think so? I do.”

The idea was an interesting one, and it made her think of all the spaces people inhabit. Even their campus—Mary had heard a rumor that the buildings were built on the

backs of slave labor, and while she wasn't sure if it was true, she wondered about it each time she went to class. Whose hands had put together this brick and mortar? How many bodies had died to create these buildings she was now freely able to move in and out from? If she were to go further, to delve deep into the schools' history, she wondered what else she'd find.

"This room makes me think I can ask or say anything and it will stay within these walls. Do you want to try it? It could be freeing."

"What would I say?"

"I don't know. Anything. We say anything and it stays here. What would you say if you thought no one would know?"

"You'll know."

"I won't tell," she continued, sensing Mary's hesitancy.

Mary thought a moment. "Roger wants me to leave. He's applying to schools and suggested I try and transfer to be with him."

"What? That's crazy! Why would you even consider something like that?"

"I wouldn't," Mary said, feeling defensive. "He did have a good point though. With everything happening maybe it would be better to leave. If I could get enough funding, and I could live with him to save money on living expenses."

"So you're going to do it then? Start over?"

"I'm not sure."

"You could even re-invent yourself in a new place. Be a completely different person. Who would you be? I know who I would be."

“I don’t know who I am, and I don’t want to have to follow a man around in order to try and figure it out,” Mary said bluntly, an unexpected confession.

“Have you noticed how much of women’s conversations revolve around men?” Amil asked, letting out a frustrated sigh afterward. “Our lives too, when I think about it. It’s always how they hurt us, what they said. The ways in which they look and touch us. Their wrongs and indiscretions. Over what they did and don’t do to us. I don’t want to talk about men anymore.”

They both were quiet as they sat together in the dim light. Mary tried to think of what else to say, some other way to shift the conversation, but her mind went blank. Amil must have realized this too because it did not take long before she decided they’d spent enough time in the crawl space, and that, actually, if Mary wouldn’t mind if they postponed the lunch after all. Mary told her yes, that it was fine, and Amil nodded before crawling out first. Mary took a few seconds, just a few. Her hands touched the wooden floorboards. Dust formed on her fingertips as she smeared them clean. She looked around once more, thinking of other confessions she wished to say, but before she could open her mouth she heard Amil’s call and then crawled back out to join her.

V.

Roger suggested they take a trip for the weekend. “We should just get away for a while. Neither of us have classes on Mondays anyway. We could just have an extended vacation away from all the stress this place is causing.”

“Where do you want to go?”

Roger offered up the idea of them going back to his hometown. They could stay at his parents’ five-bedroom house.

“It’s a little early for me to be meeting your parents,” Mary responded.

She said it teasingly, but Roger stiffened. “Do you think so?” he asked, but before she could answer he continued. “They won’t be there anyway. They’re on some sort of Caribbean Islands destination cruise for the next couple of weeks. We’ll have the entire place to ourself.”

Roger wanted to get a group together, but Tris had a paper due and Sarah and Mariah had to work. If Mariah wasn’t coming Marcus wasn’t either, so the only person left to ask was Amil.

“I don’t know about you but the idea of bringing my ex and my current girlfriend back home seems like a bad idea.”

So it ended up being just the two of them. Marcus would pick her up after her last class on Friday and they’d spend the weekend at his home. It was a three-hour drive from the Marymount to where Roger lived which would put them at getting there a little after eight.

“Just in time to settle in and maybe get dinner, hopefully beating the rush,” he told Mary as they drove off the campus grounds toward the interstate exit. Once they

were out of town Roger settled in his seat, appearing to get comfortable with the drive ahead.

“This will be good, I think. A day or two away from the tension on campus. We can just relax and do whatever we want.”

“That’s Pilot Mountain,” Roger said, briefly pointing to the mountain in the distance. “We’re almost there.”

“I thought you grew up in Winston Salem,” Mary said.

“I did, but when I came to college my parents moved out of the city to here. They saw this house and fell in love in with it. It’s not that far from Winston-Salem so best of both worlds. For them anyway,” he said, giving a pause as if deciding whether or not to continue. “Truth is, I’ve haven’t spent time a whole lot of time back here since they moved. Christmases usually, but summers and breaks I was always off doing something else.”

Roger took the next exit. Mary looked out the window at the landscape that was both familiar and foreign to her. While she had never been to this part of North Carolina, it many ways it felt the same. Outside, she saw the tobacco fields scattered between homes off in the distance. Occasionally, they passed another structure that looked to her like it was one a tobacco barn, and she knew that this area too had been taken over by industrial farming. At one point, they went through the main street of an abandoned downtown. Signs still hung from the shop windows still marking what they once were. Chipped paint, broken and boarded up windows, rusted siding, weeds sprouting through

the cracks of the sidewalks—Mary took note of these features as Roger kept his gaze ahead.

Roger kept driving and eventually Mary lost her bearings in regards to where they were. There would be no more towns but communities. The only geographical features to orient her were the passing telephone poles she'd sometimes see, but even those began to be sparse the longer they drove. Soon, there was nothing but trees and the road ahead.

Roger pulled up to a railroad track. Roger put the car in park as Mary watched as the boom gates came down, signaling an oncoming train. In both directions, Mary saw only the empty tracks going off into the distance, fading among the trees.

"I don't see anything," Mary said.

"It's coming."

They waited a few minutes longer, and just when Mary was about to say that maybe Roger should turn around and they find another route, she heard the steady rumbling of the wheels turning on the railroad track.

"I know, it's backwoods," he said as they waited for the train to pass. "It seems quiet, at least."

"It reminds me of home."

"That's right. You grew up in a nowhere place yourself. I always forget."

"It wasn't nowhere."

"Right," Roger said, giving an uncomfortable cough.

The train passed and the gates went up. Roger drove across the tracks and on down the road. Mary looked out the window but there was nothing to focus her attention on. Every few minutes they'd pass by a mailbox next to a cleared path, but Mary could

never see where they led, what homes existed far beyond the trees and brush blocking their view from the road.

“It’s not much farther now,” Roger said.

They eventually pulled off the highway onto a gravel road that went down a small hill. Roger sat up straighter now, gripped both of his hands on the wheel. It was a bumpy drive as the car rolled along. She wasn’t sure if they were going anywhere at first, nothing but woods appeared in every direction. They passed an abandoned truck with all the tires missing. The front windshield was broken, a gaping hole existed in the center of the glass. If Mary looked closer, she could see a worn path leading somewhere through the brush.

“The neighbor’s been trying to fix that up himself,” Roger said. “Seems he’s been working on it for forever.”

They came to another gravel road that veered to the left. Roger turned on it and they continued further. This road was even bumpier, and at one moment Mary had to grip the car’s door handle to keep herself steady.

“Almost there,” Roger said.

Then, they came to the house. A two-story country French-style affair that looked out of place for where they were. The house had narrow windows and paired shutters with a steeply pitched side-gabled roof. A beige stuccoed exterior complimented the surrounding the trees. A circular driveway had been constructed in the front of the house where, in its center a tiered water fountain.

“This is beautiful.”

“It is a little grandiose,” Roger huffed. “The previous owners were this couple. The husband built it for his wife and then she left him. My parents got the house on a deal.”

Roger pulled onto the driveway, drove until it rounded off at the house’s entrance. He cut the car’s engine and immediately got out of the car.

“You coming or no?” he yelled, continuing on up the front steps. Mary opened the car door, got out, and followed.

The back wall of the living room had floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the woods. Mary got closer and realized that the house was situated above a river. She stared at the rustling water and the surrounding woods.

“There’s a path that leads from the house down closer to the water, but I’ve never been out there,” Roger said.

“Why?”

“I don’t have much interest in the woods I guess.”

Roger showed her the inside of the house, taking her throughout all of the individual rooms. On the first floor by the entrance was the formal living room where a large family portrait of Roger and his parents hung above the furniture. Roger pulled her along, taking her up the stairs, opening a door to a library, another to what his parents called a prayer room—a mostly empty space with a plush rug near the corner. Above it was a large board that held slips of paper tacked to it. Roger explained they were of people in the community who needed help.

He did not open the door to his parents’ bedroom, instead brought her to his. He pulled her in and then, taking her bag, set them along with his next to the dresser. “I’m

going to take a shower before we do anything else. Make yourself comfortable,” he told her as he stripped himself of his shirt and threw it on the bed beside her. He went into the bathroom, leaving her alone in his room.

She went to the closet thinking she’d hang a few of his clothes, but when she opened the door she saw it was packed with Roger’s belongings. Hanging from the racks were clothes he’d never worn, the tags still attached to expensive dress shirts and crisply folded jeans. On the floor were boxes upon boxes that filled up the remaining space. Mary opened the flaps of one and saw more clothes, but these coming from earlier moments of his childhood. The further she dug the farther back she was able to find until she found a box with his baby clothes. She held up a baby blanket, a faded yellow, the edges worn with threads unraveling.

“Got a little curious I see,” Roger said. Startled, Mary froze, dropping the blanket. Roger had come out of the bathroom with a towel wrapped around his waist. His skin was still wet from the shower. He stood behind her and she felt the heat of his skin.

“Caught me,” she said.

Roger leaned and picked up the blanket. “Were you looking for something in particular?”

“No. I shouldn’t have been looking at all.”

“Why not?” he asked, and then he lifted out one of the boxes. He opened it and inside was memorabilia—his graduation cap and gown, a champagne flute that had his school’s emblem etched in the glass, and several framed portraits. He held one up to show Mary. It was of him standing with a light-skinned girl. They stood in the middle of a football field. The girl wore a long, slinky black dress, tumbling curls fell around her

shoulders. Roger had his arm wrapped around her. Silver-looking crowns sat on top of both of their heads.

“Look at you. Prom king Roger,” Mary said.

“Yeah, well,” he gave a little laugh. “It was actually a big deal at the time. The school was majority white. I was surprised anyone voted for us, much less that we won.”

“I can see it. In fact, I’m not surprised. It fits in who you are.”

“Oh really? And who am I?”

Mary stiffed, not wanting to answer. “Come on, don’t hold back,” Roger said.

“Tell me what you think. Tell me who I am.”

“You want to be liked. You care what others think about you. You always striving to be better than what other people think of you.”

Roger laughed again. “I don’t think any of that is bad.”

“I didn’t say it necessarily was,” she said, continuing. “Do you think people can change?”

“Sure. It’s not like I’m making prom king again anytime soon.”

“No, I mean,” ignoring Roger’s comment. “I mean like the core of who we are. Do you think we can change that? We get older, and as we get older we learn more about the world, about ourselves, but I don’t know how much we actually change, how much we can ever become completely different people. Part of me feels as if we’re always continuing circling around the same iterations of our problems, they just manifest themselves in different ways, and I don’t know if at the core of who we are—I don’t know if we can ever change that.”

“What would you change about who you are?” Roger asked her, which, really, was at the helm of what Mary was trying to get at. She thought back to a year ago, to the person she’d been, and wondering how much of her was different, if none of her was. If she was to go back as the person she was now would she have made the same choices? And would those choices have led to here?

“I’m realizing there’s a lot about you I don’t know,” Roger said. He set down the frame and sat next to her in the bed. His hands pulled back her hair and he kissed her neck.

“You know what you need to,” she told him.

“Who are you, Mary Holden?” Roger reached behind her shirt, his fingers moving up her spine, further up to unhook her bra. She let him move on top of her as their bodies fell back onto the mattress. He kissed her, and again repeated the question—“*Who are you?*” he asked, and Mary answered by letting him slide his hands through her unbuttoned jeans, all the while wondering what other answer she should have given.

###

So consumed with each other’s bodies neither of them heard the sound of another car pulling up the drive, nor the garage opening, bodies entering the house, moving through the downstairs living room and kitchen. Mary was the first to notice, her instincts alerting her attention away from Roger and toward the door.

“I think someone’s here,” she said to Roger. He pulled away and they lay there listening. The sounds got louder—talking, a back and forth quipping between a woman and a man.

“We need to get up,” Roger said. “Hurry. Get dressed.”

She followed him, moving fast to put her shirt and jeans back on. Mary picked up the cardboard box and was about to place it back in the closet when Roger stopped her and told her to leave it. He took her hand and led her out the bedroom and down the stairs to whoever was there.

“Mom, dad. I thought you were on a cruise,” Roger said when they reached the bottom steps.

“We were, and now we’re back,” Mrs. Lackey said. She sorted through a stack of mail, making two piles. Once finished, she gathered one of them and dumped them in the trash. After this, she glanced over at Roger and Mary standing him. “Who is this?” she asked, turning her attention toward her.

As if on cue, Mr. Lackey appeared in the kitchen, having from gathering several large grocery bags from the car. “Well now who are you?” he asked Mary.

“I just asked that Paul.”

“Oh,” he said. He placed the bags on the table and then walked over to Mary, offered out his hand for her to shake. “Paul Lackey. Roger’s father. This here is my wife, Olivia.”

“This is Mary,” Roger answered for her. “She’s my girlfriend.”

“Well, how are you Mary?” Mr. Lackey asked. “It’s not to meet you.”

“It’s nice to meet you too,” Mary said.

“So you thought to bring your girlfriend home to our house while you thought we were away. Is that what I’m understanding?” Mrs. Lackey asked.

Roger blushed, embarrassed that his mother had caught him. He began stumbling over his words, trying to think of a response. “How was your vacation?”

“We got back yesterday. Today I realized we had nothing in the fridge, hence all this,” Mrs. Lackey said.

She was a thin woman, small in stature but almost regal in her demeanor. She wore a crisp cornflower blue pantsuit with matching heels that clacked against the floor as she moved. Her nails were manicured a peachy color, and her fingers were cluttered with gold rings. Her hair was styled in a bluntly styled bob, of which Roger later told her was actually one of several wigs she rotated wearing. Even having come from the store, she wore a full face of makeup—foundation to that had begun to settle into the lines on her face, a thick line of eyeliner across her upper lashes.

Mr. Lackey seemed the opposite of his wife. Whereas she was talkative with a voice that filled the room, he was soft-spoken, spoke only when attention was directed at him. He was balding, but what hair left on his head had turned gray. He wore a pair of square-framed glasses. When Mary looked closer at his eyes, she could see the cloudiness of his pupils marking cataracts

“You’re staying the night?” Mrs. Lackey asked Roger.

“We were planning on it.”

“Well, you both can help with dinner,” she said. “Roger, you can start with emptying the bags.”

Mary hoped that the Lackeys wouldn’t bring up the situation at school, that they’d exhausted the conversation already with Roger in phone conversations before they’d come. The longer the evening went on the more Mary began to relax, thinking they wouldn’t bring it up.

It wasn't until dessert when it came. Mrs. Lackey had gone to get the cake, a pineapple coconut affair she'd bought from the store, apologizing that it wasn't homemade as she placed on the table.

"It's all right. It looks delicious though," Mary said, letting Mrs. Lackey cut her a piece. She'd reached out for it and in the silence Mr. Lackey took the opportunity to ask his question.

"So what's happening down there at that school. It seems like a mess."

"Yes, I've been wondering that myself," Mrs. Lackey said. She looked at Roger. "You've been pretty quiet about it yourself."

"We try not to get into it," Roger responded.

"The news makes it seem terrible. I've been so worried."

"It's not that bad," Mary said, trying to ease her concerns, but Mrs. Lackey's shot her a look.

"Maybe not for you," she said.

"I'm sorry?"

"Olivia," Mr. Lackey interrupted. He gave his wife a stern look and she pursed her lips together, holding them to keep herself from saying more. She picked her glass off the table and sipped from her water, taking slow, careful sips as the rest of the family sat in uncomfortable silence.

"Mary is right, it's not that bad. Not yet at least. Not like anything either of you went through."

At this, Mr. Lackey perked up. He wanted to tell the story of how when he was in college there were protests over what some of the minority students felt was unfair and biased treatment.

“The whole thing got so out of hand. There were riots. Do you remember that? For a whole week there were riots in the streets. People breaking the windows of the downtown buildings, destroying everyone’s property, theft, all kinds of craziness. Do you remember Olivia?”

“Yes, it was a mess.”

“That’s when they called in the state patrol. They came and there was this face-off. A bunch of students got arrested.”

“Where were you?” Mary asked, disrupting Mr. Lackey’s story with her question. Both of the Lackeys quickly shifted their attention to Mary and she immediately regretted the interruption.

“What do you mean?” Mr. Lackey asked.

“Were you there? Were you part of it?”

“No, I wasn’t,” he said solemnly. “I spent most of my time in the library studying or trying to find a part-time job somewhere. I was trying to work, not get into trouble, and that’s what you should be doing.”

Mr. Lackey reached his hand and placed it on Roger’s shoulder, squeezing slightly. Roger smiled in response but kept his gaze down at the floor.

“You did nothing?”

“What would you have liked him to have done?” Mrs. Lackey asked.

“I—I don’t know.” Mary felt the back of her neck grow hot. She rubbed her hands together, smoothed her fingers over her knuckles. She glanced at Roger hoping he’d interrupt, saving her somehow, but he remained silent.

“I wasn’t about to be arrested and risk my scholarship or my career. I had one job there and that was to finish school. Nothing else mattered. Nothing else should have mattered. I wasn’t trying to change the world or end racism. Racism existed at that school long before I got there and it was going to exist long after I was gone. Not to mention that it was harder then, you know, you could not just get arrested but beaten to death. Over in another county a group tried integrating that restaurant, what was it?”

“Hillcrest Café,” Mrs. Lackey said.

“That’s right,” Mr. Lackey said, nodding. “Hillcrest. A group of teenagers went and did a sit-in there and the owner nor any of the customers were having it. They were outnumbered too, so they show up there and the owner’s warning them to leave but they continued on, sitting down, asking to get service, and the customers, it was the customers, they got together to try and kick them out. One of them had a gun, and I’m still not sure if he meant for to go off or he was just trying to scare them out, but it went off and killed one of them on the spot. He was just barely eighteen years old.”

“He should have never done it,” Mrs. Lackey said. “If he hadn’t he’d be alive today. He could have been sitting with us today.”

“Yeah, but then where would we be?” Mary said.

“Okay, well, I think Mary and I are going to study for a bit,” Roger said. He picked up both of their glasses and stood.

“That’s a good idea,” Mrs. Lackey said.

With this, Mary got up too, saying thank you to both of the Lackeys before leaving with Roger. As he walked with her down the hall he leaned over and whispered an apology in her ear.

Roger's parents being home meant that they couldn't spend much time together alone. In the parlor room they sat on opposite sides of the sofa and attempted to study, but every half hour or so one of the Lackey's would come in to interrupt. With Mr. Lackey it was some additional story he wanted Mary to hear.

With Mrs. Lackey it was questions. "I was just thinking—" she'd start, then use the opening to ask her a question about where she was from, what her parents did, and what she wanted to do in school. Every answer led Mrs. Lackey to more questions as she pried into knowing more about who Mary was. She wouldn't stop until Roger gently reminded her that they had work to do and she'd relent, leaving only to come back later.

Finally, Roger closed his book and told Mary they should quit and go to bed.

"It's still early," she said.

"Yeah, but it's not like we're going to get much anything else done, and I think my mother is going to keep on with her questions."

"I don't mind them."

"I do. She should leave us alone. God, she's relentless."

As if on cue Mrs. Lackey appeared in the entryway. "I wanted to make sure there wasn't anything else you needed," she said, directing her comment toward Mary.

"Oh, no. I'm fine."

"And Roger gave you a room?"

"I did," Roger said. "I assumed you wanted her in the guest room downstairs?"

“Yes, that’s good,” she said, pausing. “You’ll like it Mary. It’s quiet down there, and the tub has a jacuzzi.”

“I think we’re heading to bed actually,” Roger told her. “I am anyway, what with school and the drive—it’s been a long day.”

“I think I am too,” Mary said.

“Oh, well then, I can take you down to your room. Make sure everything is okay.”

“You don’t have to. I’m sure it’s fine.”

“No, I insist. Come on.”

Before Mary left Roger took her hand and squeezed it once, his silent goodnight to her, before letting go. Mrs. Lackey led her down a narrow, carpeted staircase. Mary felt the shift in the temperature drop as they descended.

“It’s much cooler down here.”

“See? I knew you’d like it. Upstairs all the air goes up to the ceiling. It’s so hard to cool or heat that space. It’s beautiful and I love it but you should see our bill.”

Mrs. Lackey walked with her, showing her the room and the bathroom. She pulled down the sheets for her, checked the bathroom to see if there were enough towels and toiletries, handed her the television remote and showed her briefly how to operate it.

“I don’t think I’ll be watching much television.”

“Sometimes I like it on to help me sleep, but whatever you want to do is fine,” she said.

Mary held the remote, not wanting to set it on the bed but not wanting to turn off the television either out of fear of seeming rude. “Thank you for letting me stay here,” she said.

“Well, Roger did bring you. It’s not like I had a choice.”

“I’m sorry,” Mary said, not knowing how else to respond. “He shouldn’t have brought me. He felt it would be a good idea to take a break from school, but it was—inconsiderate.”

Mrs. Lackey listened to Mary’s response but didn’t respond. She went over to the bed, loosening the comforter once more, then smoothed her hands over the fabric. “If there’s anything else you need go ahead and help yourself,” she said, then left her in the room to go upstairs.

Mary walked over to the dresser and placed the remote on it. There was a gift basket filled with snacks—small bags of chips, a juice box, packaged nuts, a container of breath mints. Mary hadn’t noticed it the first time but she went back in the bathroom and saw there was another basket in there as well, but that one was filled with travel-sized soaps and bottles of lotion. She took a bottle of Kiel’s lotion, opened it, and spread the cream over her hands as she walked back into the bedroom.

It was still too early for her to try sleeping. Glancing back around the room, she saw a door. Mary remembered Roger explaining the path the family had that led to the river. She walked to the door, making sure that it would stay unlocked if she closed it behind her, and went outside.

It was hard to see in the dark at first but after a minute or so her eyes began to adjust. She followed the path that she believed led to the river, letting her instinct guide the way.

It was not quiet out here. If she listened, she could hear the familiar sounds of the woods. Crickets. The deep, hooting sound of owls. Whippoorwills. She kept going until

she finally saw water. There, she lowered her body to the ground, sat in the grass. She leaned back and looked up, hoping to see stars, but the night sky was cloudy and all she saw was blackness. She closed her eyes.

Once, a time not too long ago, she used to do this—come out to these woods, spend the night in the grass and dirt. There was a comfort to it then, a sense of belonging she felt nowhere else.

There was no comfort now, only a deep sense of loneliness. She came out here to find a familiarity she no longer had. She sat, silent and still, listening, waiting, until before long she had fallen asleep.

###

Mary did not wake up until morning. The sun warmed her face, reminding her to get up, to hurry and go, and quickly she traced her steps on the path back toward the house. Unsure if anyone else was already up, she was careful opening and closing the door, and even back inside she stood a few minutes in the bedroom, her body still and waiting as she listened for nearby movement.

The bed sheets had been rustled further from how she'd left them and she realized Roger must have snuck down here sometime during the night. She imagined him in the dark, his body crawling into the bed and reaching over to find her not there. She wondered if he'd gone to the door, if he peered past his reflection in the glass toward the trees. If he'd opened the door, felt the humid heat against his skin as he took a step outside. His bare feet against the wooden deck, against grass, against dirt. Did he venture far into the woods looking for her? How many steps did he continue before deciding

against it, before going back? Or had he instead stayed behind the glass, shrugging before going back to the bed, satisfying himself with only the idea of her there waiting for him.

It was early enough for everyone else to be still asleep. Mary decided to sneak upstairs to get a glass of water before she showered and got dressed, but she got to entryway and saw the figure of Mrs. Lackey by the fridge. She pulled items out of the fridge and placed them on the nearby counter. Intermittently, she talked to someone off in the distance. Someone she couldn't see.

“So who is this girl? What do I need to know about her?”

“I’ve already told you, mom. We’ve been dating for a while. You know this.”

“I don’t remember.”

“That’s because you only listen when you want to.”

“Well, that’s not true,” Mrs. Lackey said. She opened a package of bacon and dumped the contents into a heated pan. “What do you want? Eggs? I can find the waffle iron. It’s here somewhere.”

“Cereal is fine, and you don’t have to cook for us.”

“You’re not eating cereal. I mean, honestly.” She opened the carton of eggs, began cracking several into a bowl. “Scrambled?” she asked, then answered her own question by grabbing the whisk.

“We’ve been together since the beginning of the semester.”

“She seems—a little cautious.”

Maybe because you keep asking her a hundred questions every time you get the chance.”

“I’m trying to figure her out. You brought a girl I don’t know to my home, which you should have known better, if I’m being honest.”

“I’m sorry, you’re right. It was inconsiderate,” Roger got up from where he was sitting and went to his mother. He put his arms around her waist and kiss her check. “You see though that she’s all right. You see that, don’t you?”

“Sure.”

“Oh come on.” Roger pulled away, took a few steps back.

“What is she?” Mrs. Lackey asked.

“What do you mean?”

“You know what I mean. She’s not black. Not all the way.”

“As far as I know both her parents are. They’re light I think, but they’re black.”

“Have you met them?”

“No, but I’ve seen pictures.”

“She doesn’t look all black,” Mrs. Lackey said, shaking her head in disapproval.

“Why should it matter?” Roger asked, clearly annoyed.

“You couldn’t have found someone else other than this high yellow girl?” she asked, finally getting to the point. “You always liked them light. Even in high school. That one girl—Carrie. She had those long golden curls. If it wasn’t for her hair you would have almost thought her white. Then that other girl before that.”

“You still haven’t explained to me why it matters what any of my girlfriends have looked like.”

“I just don’t understand, Roger. Do you hate yourself that much? Is that what this is? Do you hate your blackness that much that you’re screwing your way in some attempt to erase it?”

“Okay. We’re not going to talk about this anymore. I’m going upstairs. I’m not hungry anyway,” Roger said. “You know, you might want to try to get to know her before you form all these opinions about her or why I’m with her.”

Mary closed the door, crept back down the stairs. She swallowed down a hard lump that had formed in her throat. She hurried into the bathroom, stripping herself of her clothes and climbing into the tub. She ran the faucet until the water was warm enough and then sat down on the tile, letting the water fill around her. She scrubbed the dirt from her skin, scrubbing hard, watching as the harder she rubbed the washcloth against her body, the brighter the blood vessels underneath became, giving her skin a dull pinkish undertone. She waited as the color faded, and for the first time she felt a sense of shame—not just what she was but for what others saw as well.

VI.

Early Sunday afternoon they packed up and left the Lackeys. “It’ll give us enough time to get back and settled into the swing of the week,” he said, but really Mary could tell he wanted to get away from his parents. Mary couldn’t blame him.

Mary had spent all of Saturday trying not think about the conversation she’d overheard between Mrs. Lackey and Roger. She’d gone out of her way to be nice to her. She offered her help whenever she could, tried to answer each of her increasingly probing questions with as much diplomacy and grace as she could muster, but by the end of the day she was frustrated and exhausted. Mrs. Lackey still appeared to not like her. She pursed her lips with every one of Mary’s responses, scoffing even, at times.

Roger pretended not to notice. Mary thought to the night they met. Roger had been quick to call out his friends’ biases, but he had to have known about the party, it shouldn’t have been a surprise to him. She thought back to how he’d persisted. She’d been flattered at the attention. He could have left her sitting on the porch and gone back inside the house, back to any one of the girls waiting with boozy cocktails and warm beers in their hands in the hope that he would come and talk to them. Instead, he’d talked to her—asking if he could walk her home, and asking if she’d be interested in seeing a movie with him the next day.

He took her to the independent theater in town. While the weekends were reserved for the newest films making the festival circuit, during the week the theater typically played old Hollywood classics, films like Orson Welles’ *Citizen Kane* or Hitchcock’s *The Birds*.

“I didn’t know you were a movie buff,” she’d told him as he led her to the box office to purchase tickets. “I thought maybe you’d take me to the Hollywood Cineplex for some blockbuster.”

“I want to see this film,” he said.

That night it was a showing of *School Daze*. Roger explained that anytime they played a black movie he felt the need to buy a ticket and go, even if he didn’t want to see what was playing.

“You don’t like *School Daze*?”

“I do,” he said, then went to buy popcorn for them both.

Besides them, it was only another couple in the theater. They sat in the middle row towards the front, and throughout the film Mary couldn’t help but look down at them as they each leaned toward the other to offer their own commentary. At one point, they appeared to be in a heated discussion with their back and forth whispers.

“I wonder what they’re fighting about,” Roger leaned toward her and said.

Mary had seen parts of *School Daze* before on television but never the whole thing.

“Do you think you should have gone to a black college?” he asked Mary after the film was over. “Do you think you would have been better off?”

“I don’t know,” Mary said.

They’d gone for ice cream and were walking along one of the side streets away from the hordes of other college students. Mary stopped and leaned against the brick wall of a sushi restaurant. She took the plastic spoon from her cup and brought a scoop of the strawberry flavor to her lips.

“I’m not sure why I didn’t. I didn’t even apply,” she said.

“My parents wanted me to go but I didn’t listen.”

“Why?”

“I thought this school would be better.”

They continued on down the street. It was not lost to Mary that they were one of the few black students around because they weren’t many of them on the campus. Roger had told her the town did have a decent minority population but they rarely ventured to the downtown area near the college.

Mary thought of Roger’s answer now as she sat in the car. She should have clarified then what he meant, if he thought that Marymount was better because it wasn’t a historically black college, because implicit in his answer would be the understanding that anything white would be better, than anything close to white would be better, and in some ways implicit in his answer would be an understanding of why he was with her.

“I’m surprised he’s not with a white girl,” Camille had remarked when she’d gotten home from their date. She sat cross-legged on her dorm bed, her textbooks and class notes scattered around her on the mattress. “He looks like the type to think he’s better than his kind, but maybe you’re close enough.”

Mary ignored her comment because she knew she’d snagged a prize. She was dating a black man, one of the few on their campus, who wanted to be with her and not with anyone else.

“At least we haven’t lost him,” Camille mumbled before going back to her book.

He used to tell her he liked that she felt more authentic to him than other girls. He liked that she rarely wore makeup or that she didn’t relax or straighten her hair. Even her

clothes, which she was so insecure wearing in the midst of his friends, he said he admired in their simplicity.

Somewhere along the line, however, he had changed. His actions were subtle—purchasing clothes for her he thought she'd like, for instance. "You don't have to wear any of it and if you want I can take them back," he'd tell her each time, but she never told him no, taking the bags to his closet to hang alongside his belongings. On the evenings when they got ready to go out, he would suggest something he'd bought, and she'd relent, always deferring to what he thought best.

When did she become this person? She had lost whatever sense of self she had, but perhaps she never had it to begin with. Maybe that was what Roger had seen in her because what did he really see anyway? What about her did he really know?

"Not that we're on our way I almost don't want to go back. What do you say I just keep going?"

He smiled at his own joke. "We'll be gone soon enough anyway."

Roger would, at least. Since the past fall he'd been applying for graduate schools up north and was now waiting to hear back. She hadn't thought about what would happen between them after. She assumed with him leaving it would create an easy break in their relationship, but the way Roger talked it seemed he expected their relationship to continue.

"You'll be gone soon," Mary corrected. "I'll still be here."

"You could always come with me."

"What?"

Roger could see her surprise. “Wherever I go, you could transfer,” he began to explain. “Or you could take a year off. Hell, we both could. I mean, what if I went to New York or someplace? You could move in with me and we could just live there for a while and experience the city.”

“You want me to leave here? Is that what you’re suggesting?”

“You don’t have to, but it’s an option. This school is a mess anyway. Would it really be better if you stayed?”

“I don’t know.”

“It’s just an idea. You don’t have to do anything you don’t want to, but it could be good, no? Couldn’t it?”

Mary tried to imagine it. Her life at a different school starting over once again. She stopped herself from thinking about it further. Who had she become to even consider this a possibility? To uproot her life for someone she felt she barely knew? A man whose parents hated her? A man who she was starting to believe was only with her because of some deep-rooted self-hatred she was only beginning to see?

Roger interrupted her thoughts to say he needed to stop and get gas. “I forgot to do it before we left. Might as well also get some food too to tide us over until we get back.”

He turned off the next exit, drove down a side road that took them to the only gas station that seemed to be in the area.

“You want anything?” Roger asked.

“No, I’ll wait here,” she said.

Roger went inside, leaving Mary alone in the car. Blue Ridge mountains loomed in the rear view of her mirror. She closed her eyes and waited.

After a few minutes Roger came to the car, jumping inside and slamming the door. Mary eyes jolted open. Roger sat beside her, fuming.

“What happened? What’s wrong?” Mary asked.

“The people in there—”

“What?”

He told the story quickly, in spurts, stopping every few moments to control his composure. He was walking through the aisles when he accidentally bumped into a woman who was bent over looking at a box of discounted pastries. She’d dropped a couple packages of the vacuumed sealed Honey Buns and Roger, apologizing, offered to help. She recoiled at the offer, explaining curtly that she didn’t need help, and at that moment another man came to her aid, her boyfriend. He eyed them both before leaning down next to Roger. “You heard her. We don’t need your help, nigger,” he said, then stood back up, pulling the woman by her arm and telling her to finish her shopping.

“What about me is a nigger?” Roger asked Mary. “I did nothing to that man, but I didn’t have to do anything because he was going to see what he wanted to see.”

Roger sat in the car, refusing to turn on the engine. He waited, keeping his gaze on the entrance until a couple came out of the store and walked to their car.

“That’s them,” he said.

They looked to be the same age as them, which Mary wasn’t expecting. The way he’d told the story she thought they were older, and she thought maybe they were townies part of wherever they’d stopped to get gas, but they seemed to be in their early twenties at

the most. The guy had a mop-head full of dark brown curls that he pushed out of his eyes right before wrapping taking the girl's hand to pull her along. She was blonde with skin tanned darker than Mary's complexion. Both of them were in t-shirts and jeans. The girl pulled a pair of black sunglasses that were hanging from her jeans' pocket and slide them on to block out the sun.

To Mary, they looked to be any one of the hundreds of students they saw over the course of their day, and in truth they could have been. A fellow student in their class, the woman at the cafe who got her coffee, the tired grad assistant substituting for their professor's class. On their drive back to school a car had cut them off, and Roger, safe in his car, had honked his horn and cursed. Mary had gotten a glimpse of the man speeding past them as he disappeared on down the road. In the backseat was a young boy playing with a stuffed bear that he'd pressed to the window's glass. Even then, she thought, if given enough time, they could have been either of them.

Roger reached for the handle but stopped. He balled his fist, squeezing before letting go and shifting in his seat. He let out a sigh and in his own anguish, hit the front of the dash.

"We should go," Mary said softly.

Roger continued to wait, staring in the overhead mirror as the couple pulled out of the lot. They rolled the windows down and one of them threw out a coke can. It rattled against the ground as it rolled. The woman laughed as she let the man drive off, speeding once they got on the road.

What Mary wanted to tell him was that he believed he wasn't. He believed that if he dressed well enough, bought expensive shirts, wore the right brands, if he kept his hair

closely cropped, if she spoke without the slightest hint of slang, if he deferred to others, if he yes'm and no sirred his way through every interaction, if he worked hard enough, if he never appeared angry even when he was, if he just acted against every stereotype representative of his race, then maybe, maybe he wouldn't be seen as a nigger, but he was and so was she, because there would always be someone who saw them that way, no matter what they did.

How had he not realized this until now? Mary wondered. How had he not seen? To Mary, there were signs of this everywhere. Wasn't what happened to Jenny just another way of saying to them what they were? Disposable. Meant to be used and disregarded. Objects.

Deep down, she believed Roger must have known this already, which was why he hadn't gotten out of his car and why he decided against confronting them, choosing to let his anger simmer as he sat beside her. Who knows what fate he would have met had he got out and gone to them, yelling, cursing, becoming representative of their own fears and assumptions about the man he was. Or even if he'd simply asked them why, perhaps that may have been worse, to have asked the simple question he asked Mary now—*what about me makes me a nigger?*

###

"It's not the first time I've been called one," Roger told her later. He'd just pulled off the highway exit that would lead them to campus. The whole drive he'd been quiet and Mary, not wanting to make the situation worse, left him to his thoughts.

"I know," Mary said. Roger raised his eyebrows in her direction. "It's happened to all of us at some point," she further clarified.

“I keep thinking, maybe we’ve moved on. That people know better by now, but he said it and I swear it didn’t matter the time. It could have been 1960 or 1850. He was the boss, the master, and I was his boy. He turned to me and said it with no hint of self-awareness or care. When I looked into his eyes I saw that’s what he believed. This man I didn’t know believed that about me, believed he could say that to me, and didn’t care what I thought or felt about it.”

“We haven’t moved on.”

“Tell that to my parents.”

“We’re just living in another version. Another version of what’s come before. That’s all.”

Roger nodded but didn’t say anything more. They kept on down the highway. Soon the sun faded, afternoon turned to evening, and they were almost home.

By the time they reached Marymount Roger’s disposition had changed. He was smiling and jocular as he pulled up to the apartment, to the point where as he carried their bags inside Mary had to ask him if he was really all right. “We can talk about it more if you want,” she said.

Roger shrugged. He dropped the bags and went to the kitchen. He began opening cupboards as he looked for food to make for a late dinner. After settling on a box of pasta he went to the fridge, found a leftover jar of tomato sauce and twisted off the cap.

“There’s nothing more needed to be said about it,” he told her. “Are you hungry?”

Mary shook her head as he continued to boil a pot of water for the pasta. “Are you sure?” she prodded further. “You’re allowed to be angry, you know.”

“It’s fine. I don’t want to talk about it anymore.”

For a moment she wished he'd acted differently in the car—to have gone and confronted the couple, to have told them what he felt about them. She wanted them to feel what he'd told her he felt, what she'd once felt too when once, long ago, she'd been called the slur as well. She wanted some reaction and not this—forgetting, this letting go he began now to do.

He would forget about this and move on. Partly because it was who he was, but also, because his whole life it was what he'd been forced to do, what so many were forced to do, because there was still dinner to make. They'd be back to classes in the morning. Neither of them had gotten much done over the trip which meant tonight they'd have to stay up late catching on their reading. Tomorrow was another day in which their lives continued on, presenting new responsibilities, new reasons to remind each of them to let go of this one injustice. Roger could not dwell on it because life wouldn't let him, and so he opened the box of pasta, dumped it into the boiling water, and stood across from the stove, waiting for it to cook.

VII.

Tensions on the campus finally erupted. Every day felt like a terror. A sustained assault on Mary's psyche. In the morning she'd wake, believing the morning's light offered a fresh start, only to find that another incident had taken place on campus, except this one worse than the one before it.

A student dressed in a gorilla suit went to the campus quad and handed out bananas to all the black students he saw passing by.

Graffiti began popping up everywhere—on the walls of parking garages, in dorm bathrooms, even the walls of campus buildings where the

And it was not just on campus either. The William L. Sanders memorial statue situated downtown near the courthouse was vandalized. Someone poured a bucket of red paint over the statue and the adjoining sign, the blood representative of all the blood he shed as a colonel in the Confederate Army during the Civil War.

She could not go anywhere without hearing details of what happened. Whereas outside of class students resorted to hurtful actions, inside of class the focus was on talk, and talk was all anyone wanted to do. She took to arriving to class right at time, sliding into her seat at the professor began instruction, only to realize that many of them wanted to have what they called "open sessions" of "classroom forums" for students to air their concerns, but each time concerns turned to grievances. She noticed that in each of her classes, the black students sat silent in the back of the class, if they even showed up at all.

It was amazing the comments people made in her presence. She could be sitting behind a pair of students in a psychology class, or waiting in line at the cafeteria. Whether on campus or off, everywhere people freely gave their opinions on what

happened. There was no hesitancy from fear of being offensive and no sense of shame when it was. They talked as if Mary was not there to hear them. They talked as if she didn't exist.

When Mary watched the news, she noticed how each station focused on one story, one angle or piece shown without context of the larger issue. On one channel the center was of the vandalism of the statues. She mentioned how North Carolina has more monuments commemorating the Civil War than any other event. Across the bottom of the screen, the question of "Confederate Monuments: Symbol of Pride or Hate?" with a number asking for viewers to call in and comment with their opinions.

Another channel focused on the demonstrations on the quad, except they called them protests. "Protests are happening over recent racist incidents at private university, Marymount College," this reporter began. Mary watched as the camera shifted to one group who'd been there on the quad, showing them as they held signs high up in the air and shouted their familiar chants.

Once in a while she'd hear about Jenny, but she was a tie-on at the end of another conversation. Even when they talked about her, no one mentioned any of the other rapes of black students that had happened on campus and had gone underreported or their cases mishandled by the university. Jenny's story, and the others that had come before it, had complicated the story, and so they were forgotten in favor of a new one.

On an afternoon when Mary knew her dorm roommate Camille would have classes she went back to her old room. She opened the door and immediately crawled into the bed, wrapped the thin sheet over her body, and slept in her clothes.

The rest of the day passed by as she lay curled on the mattress. By the time she heard the door open it was too late, and she rubbed her eyes awake to see Camille standing before her.

“I haven’t seen you in forever.”

“I know.”

Camille went to what was once Mary’s desk and put her bag down. Since Mary had been away, Camille had taken to using her side of the room. The desk having been made into a vanity. It was cluttered with bottles of department store make-up, tubes of opened lipstick, powders and brushes strewn about all across the surface.

“You still with that guy?” Camille asked. She looked at her reflection in the mirror, giving a once over as she checked her lipstick before turning around.

“You could say that,” Mary said as she sat up from the bed.

“He was cute, and he’s got money. You made out there. It’s hard to find a black guy who’s not broke and asking you to pay for everything.”

“How have you been Camille? What with everything happening,” Mary let the sentence trail off.

“Doing okay, I guess,” Camille responded. “Someone spray-painted slurs on that one garage. Did you hear about that? I think it happened yesterday.”

“No,” Mary said, “but the slurs seem to be popping up everywhere. I can’t keep up with it.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t. We should just ignore it. It’s going to happen anyway. Spending too much energy focused on it isn’t going to change it.”

“That’s what I’ve been doing. It’s not working.”

“Well, that’s what I do,” she said. “Ignore it and move on. Classes are hard enough without all this other bullshit. The best thing to do is nothing and wait for it to be over.”

“But what if things get worse? Don’t you think that eventually there will come a time when you’ll have to decide, when you’ll have to take a stand, because then you’ll have no choice?”

Camille paused to think over Mary’s question. She walked over to the opposite bed and sat down. “Maybe then I would but we’re not there yet.”

“I’m tired of doing nothing,” Mary said, and Camille nodded, saying she understood.

“So are you back, or?” Camille suddenly asked. “Because I got someone coming over.”

“Oh, I’m going back to Roger’s. I just left one of my old books here I wanted and then decided on a quick nap which turned out to be not so quick. I’m heading back. I should probably call to let him know I’m coming.”

Mary took out her phone and saw several calls from Roger. She didn’t check the voicemails, didn’t need to in order to know he was probably wondering where she was. She dialed him back as Camille stood back up and went to the closet, searching for another outfit to change into.

“Where have you been?” Roger asked. “Did you forget we’d made plans to study together? I was there at the library looking for you and realized you blew me off.”

“I’m sorry. I forgot. With everything going on—I just forgot.”

She knew Roger would understand this, and he did. He asked her again where she was and she told him the truth, that she'd fallen asleep at her old dorm and was on her way home. Roger wanted to come by and pick her up but she told him it wasn't necessary. It was just a short walk anyway through campus.

"You know everything is going to be okay," Roger said. "You know that right?"

The surety of his statement struck her, but then, Roger was so certain of the future realities of his life. He could say something like that and believe that because there was no reason not to.

"How do you know?"

"Because it will."

Mary told him she had to go. She was going to make her way home as soon as she hung up the phone. Roger told her he'd stay up and wait for her despite her own protests otherwise.

She did not believe it would turn out okay. She had seen the ways it didn't. She knew the story of a different outcome, and every day since she felt as if she was waiting for the worst of a situation to show itself. Every morning, her body braced for what she knew could be possible.

"Well," she said to Camille after she'd hung up.

"I'll see you around."

"Sure."

She wasn't sure what she expected. They weren't friends, barely knew each other, but still Mary felt in that moment there should be something—some kind of

acknowledged solidarity as black women—but what would either of them say beyond what they had already?

Mary got up from the bed, slung her bag over her shoulder, and headed for the door. Camille sorted through her clothes, not bothering to look up to say goodbye. Mary said nothing as she closed the door, listening as it clicked softly into place behind her.

###

Despite what she told Roger, Mary still did not go home right away. There was a gas station near the campus' entrance, and Mary walked there instead to get a cup of coffee from their machine.

Inside, the clerk, a college-age kid with sandy blond hair and acne, eyed her while she was shopping. He looked bored and tired, as if he'd already been working for the past couple of hours but still had the rest of the night ahead of him.

She got her items and went to the register. The clerk sat propped on a stool, leaning over the counter to face her. She'd seen him push an GRE book to the side when she'd come up with her coffee. The book was still open, turned to the math portion. She glanced at the bubbled in circles and the scribbled equations he'd written in the margins.

"It's four eighty-five," he said.

Mary reached down in the depths of her pockets searching for money. While he waited, the clerk turned to an overhead television. Like everywhere it seemed, it was on the news. "I'm so sick of hearing about this shit," he muttered in reference to the conversation about the discord on the campus. "People need to just get over it."

"Get over it?" Mary reiterated, incredulous, but the clerk just stared blankly back at her.

He pointed to the illuminated numbers on the register. “You’re still short,” he said.

Mary found the dollar that was stuck in her jeans’ pocket and slapped it down on the counter. The clerk sighed as he picked it up and tucked it into the register.

“You’re just a townie-going-nowhere kid, you know that? Like all the rest of them here,” she said. “You shouldn’t even bother with that. It’s just going to be a waste of time.”

The clerk looked at her dumbfounded. Mary left before he could hand her back the remaining change.

The campus felt eerie and abandoned. As Mary walked down the sidewalk, the school buildings seemed to loom in the shadows. She quickened her pace. Coffee sloshed from her cup, spilling onto the ground below.

She was only a few blocks away from Roger’s apartment when she saw a group of kids huddled around the side of one of the buildings. They held something in the air. As she got closer she heard the hissing sound and knew what it was.

“Hey!” she yelled. “What the hell are you all doing?”

When they turned to face her she saw they were just kids. Middle-school age it looked like, maybe high school freshman, and they were all white. Dressed in wife-beaters and low-ride jeans that hung across their slim hips. Gold from their necklaces glinted amidst the darkness. To her, there was nothing threatening about this group of skinny adolescent boys staring her down. Perhaps she should have been afraid. Perhaps she should have left, turning away to run in the other direction, but the fact that they had appropriated what they hated was hilarious.

“Who the fuck are you?” one of them said. He held an air of fake bravado but even that to her seemed ridiculous. She started to laugh. “What’s so damn funny?” he said.

“Who the fuck are you?” she quickly yelled back, in a voice rising in anger. “Seriously, who the fuck do you kids think you are?” Her blatant confrontation startled them. One of them capped the paint can and hid it in his pocket. Another took a few steps back. Their reaction confirmed what she thought along. It didn’t matter that there were more of them. She was older, the authority. She was the threat.

“You little shits,” she yelled.

“Come on, let’s get out of here. This bitch is crazy.”

She kept yelling at them as they ran into the dark. She yelled until she was standing alone on an empty street corner.

One of the boys had dropped a paint can. She picked it up from the ground and glanced at the brick wall. She stared at the slurs and the half-drawn images. Her heart raced. She believed the thumping in her ears would never stop. The spray can was heavy in her hands as she picked it up. Staring at the wall she felt it all come out—all the rage she’d been keeping for so long, all the anger and hurt and fear. She pressed down at the nozzle, watched as the black paint slowly began to cover everything. She sprayed the wall, covering the red brick an inky hue. She sprayed until it dripped down, seeping into the lush grass beneath her feet. She kept spraying until there was nothing left and then she threw the can into the trash.

VIII.

“Amil is fucking crazy.”

Roger came storming into the apartment. He cursed the whole time as he slipped off his shoes and kicked them to the corner by the door. He threw his bag down next to the shoes.

Mary watched him as he walked past her to the bedroom to change clothes. Halfway into changing he came back out and stood in front of Mary who’d been reading on the couch. “So are you going to ask me or what?” he said.

She closed her book and looked up at him. He wore no shirt, only a pair of gray boxer briefs and black socks. “Are you going to put some clothes on first?”

“Fine,” he said, going back to pull on a t-shirt. From the other room he began yelling the story. “Amil has joined up with this group on campus—the 4AVs. Their staging a mass protest and she wants us all to participate.”

“Us? Me too?”

“Everyone,” Roger reiterated. “Or at least—I assume so. She said she wanted to get the group together, and you’re part of the group. Anyway, that’s not the point. The point is she wants us involved in this mess.”

“You wanted to be involved though. Remember? At her house you scolded me for not being involved enough.”

“That was different. Have you seen the news about these things? The last one got shut down before it could get too ugly. It’s not just about the campus anymore. The town’s gotten involved. They’re going to be bringing in the police in full-force. What if there are riots?”

“You’re afraid.”

“I’m not afraid. I don’t want to be arrested is all. My father doesn’t want me participating. He told me if he saw me anywhere on his television set he was going to basically disown me. I told Amil that and she said all I cared about was the money they gave me and that I was a traitor to my people. That’s what she said—‘you’re a traitor to your people.’ She has some nerve. She’s only doing this because she’s fucking Darvis. That’s how she was when we were together.”

“I thought you said you weren’t together?”

“What? Oh, you know what I mean.”

Mary let Roger’s lie slide because she knew the truth and it didn’t matter anymore if he told it to her or not. “I thought you cared about this issue,” she said. “At her party you made it seem like you did. You wanted to do something. That was the whole point. It was why you all wrote that statement, but the statement didn’t work and the situation has escalated from there, but that doesn’t mean—shouldn’t mean—your intent has changed.”

“It hasn’t. Something needs to be done.”

“You just don’t want to be the one to do it.”

“You don’t get it.”

“I *do* get it. I only thought you were better than this.”

“You’re so critical of me Mary—do you realize that? Maybe you don’t see it, but you are. Everything I do seems to not be enough for you. Who I am doesn’t seem to be enough.”

“I need to tell you something,” Mary said, and then she told him the story of Harris Thomas, summarizing it as best she could. She told him to finally say her error out

loud, to acknowledge it in the hope of becoming better. She hoped that it would convince Roger too that she had to become involved, but when she looked at Roger's face his horror briefly shifted to a blank expression.

"That's horrible," he said after she was finished.

"I'm tired of doing nothing," she said. "That's why I told you. I did nothing then and it was a mistake. We can't do nothing anymore."

Roger was quiet, thinking about her confession. "To be honest I probably would have done the same thing as you," he said.

This was not the answer she wanted to hear. She wanted him to tell her she'd been wrong, that she should have done more, that she shouldn't have left, that she should have found a voice and spoken up.

"Don't say that."

"Why? It's the truth," he said, then when Mary wouldn't go further, he continued on his own. "Well what happened to him? To the man? You didn't report it so what happened?"

"He was found on the side of the road."

"Not in the barn?"

"No. Someone moved him, probably to cover up what they did."

"So they never found whoever did it?"

"I don't think so."

"If you had told what you saw, what do you think would have happened? Do you think it'd be enough for the police to find who did it?"

"I'm not sure. I don't know."

“I see no point to it, if you ask me, beyond making yourself feel better about it. The barn is gone. The evidence is gone. At this point all it would do is incriminate you. Doesn’t seem worth it to me.”

“It just seems—”

“You made a mistake. You were quiet when you shouldn’t have been, but I’m not sure I blame you. We have to protect ourselves whenever and wherever we can.”

“I’m realizing now that that’s selfish. It can’t be just us. Don’t you see that? Don’t you understand.”

“You want to go? Go. Get arrested. Get hurt. I don’t care. Go,” he said. He walked over to the door and opened it, held an arm out in the air as he pointed outside.

“I knew it,” Roger said when Mary didn’t take his bait. “In the end you’re just like me. You know what will happen if you leave. You know it’s better not to go.”

He kissed her on the forehead before going back to the bedroom. He changed the subject, talked about the schools he was waiting to hear back from. Once again he brought up the idea of both of them leaving, including her in his vision of the future without ever asking for her consent.

Somehow, she’d found herself circling around the same pattern. She was practicing the same habits she had with Ben, and yet—she still sat on the couch saying nothing to Roger as he continued to make plans.

She should get up at go. She should find Amil. She should go to the quad and protest with the other students. She should do something, because the truth is she’d done nothing her whole life and she saw now where that led.

She got up from the sofa and was about to walk to the door to get her shoes, to go out the door and away, down toward the quad, toward the crowds, toward fate that would await her there, but at that moment Roger heard her movement and came to get her.

“Come on. Come on to bed,” he said, grabbing her hand, pulling her to the bedroom, and she relented, thinking tomorrow. She would wait until tomorrow.

They both went to bed but Mary could not fall asleep. Instead, she listened to Roger’s heavy breathing, hoping the rhythm of it would lull her, but her thoughts were elsewhere. She got up, went into the kitchen to make a cup of tea, and then sat back on the sofa. She turned on the television, muting it so she couldn’t hear the words, and stared at the flash of images on the screen.

It didn’t take long for her to understand what happened. It was a story repeated a hundred times before, the one Roger had warned about, and one she knew in her lifetime would see again.

On the television, riots had started.

She picked up her computer from the desk and began searching. Someone had posted a video. Others had posted photos. There were many of the arrests, with men gathered up in a line on the sidewalk, their wrists cuffed behind their backs. Mary stared at a single one—a man on his knees, wearing only jean shorts, his chest bare. His hands were handcuffed behind his back. A row of police officers stood nearby casually looking back from him. One of them smiled. The man did not know where to look. He bled from the chest and it dripped down, down on his jean shorts and down his legs and down onto the hard concrete. He wanted to rest, his body leaned closer to the ground, but each time he began to slip one of the officers shouted for him to stand up straight. They would

shoot him right in the head just to make it easier for them, Mary knew, to save them time and to keep his blood from staining the patrol car, and so he straightened up again while the blood flowed. He looked away from the officers, turning away, and it was in that moment the camera had caught his face. She felt, as she looked at the image, that she was seeing through the computer screen, through the lens of the camera, to him. She saw him.

She closed her laptop, glanced up at the television once more. The news focused on the moment when the protests erupted in violence. As she watched, she realized that she'd been wrong in her argument with Roger. Words did have power because she saw their effect on the screen, at the language used to tell the narrative. Several people were injured, dozens were arrested.

Mary got up from the couch and reached for the remote. She could watch no more, know no more, and so she turned the television off.

Had she continued watching though, she would have recognized a face in the crowd—a man near the front, holding up his hand, on the verge, waiting at any moment to strike.

IX.

The world forgot quickly after that. No matter the tragedy, if given enough time people will move on from the memory of it, letting their mind forget, to move on, to move forward in the trajectory of their lives. We are so willing to let go if given the chance. Even the body—a cut, an open wound, a gash deep with the exposed flesh bare and bleeding—will heal completely if given enough time. The pain, once so severe as to be debilitating, can someday be forgotten.

And that was what happened on their campus. It helped that protests were beginning on campuses all over the country. The news shifted their focus elsewhere. In Detroit, a fraternity got its black pledges together and during an initiation process, they burned an iron poker with the frats insignia design into the pledges' skin. The incident, reminiscent of the punishments during slavery, became the media's next focus and Marymount faded from the public conversation.

Roger wanted to move on. Like so many on the campus after the protests he wanted to forget any of it even happened. It took a few weeks, but eventually the news crews left, turning the gaze of their cameras to another campus, to another story. Conversations in the beginning and end of classes shifted to campus events—to basketball games, midterms, frat parties and sorority formals.

Once Mary turned her attention back to school she was surprised by how swiftly the semester moved. Her days held a pattern, a steady cycling of classes and the library to study, followed by microwaved meals she bought at one of the campus grocery stores she bought before coming home. She ate them standing at the kitchen counter, chewing but

not tasting, swallowing them down before Roger got home so that when he asked her what she wanted for dinner she could say she wasn't hungry, or that she already ate.

They were drifting, perhaps had already drifted apart, but still Mary stayed. She continued this habit she'd settled into with him. When he touched her she let her body go. When he asked her what she wanted she was agreeing with whatever he offered up, with whatever he himself had decided. It was easier to lose herself in such a way, and so she did it, and Roger, if he even noticed, never said anything.

Mary was struck by how fast everyone moved on. By school's end it was like none of it had happened. A collective forgetting seemed to have taken place. Every now and then though someone would bring it up. A teacher, or a student who'd recently transferred. They'd mention it but there was always a piece they'd get wrong—they'd say riots, for instance, and someone else would have to clarify that there weren't riots, not at first, that others had interfered for their own reasons.

Almost always, they forgot about Jenny.

Mary didn't know what happened to her. She last heard that she dropped out, decided to apply to some northeastern school, hoping that the change in landscape would be a fresh start. When Mary thought of her, she pictured her walking across a quad covered in fresh snow, her cheeks a blustery red from the cold. She was surrounded by friends, people who didn't know what once happened to her, would never ask her intimate questions that made her relive her trauma. When Mary thought of Jenny, she thought of her happy, her life having begun anew.

When people talked about it, Mary kept quiet. She knew not of what to say because she hadn't been involved. What voice did she have? What authority did she have

to speak on any of it? She'd never participated, never done anything, had been only a casual observer to everything that happened. She had not known any of them involved, had risked nothing and known no one who had been affected.

She wished she could say she had because it would validate the seizing feeling in her chest whenever she stepped outside. If she'd taken part, then maybe it would explain the longing feeling of terror she had being in public spaces, in seeing the glances of other students as she maneuvered through her day. She felt invisible, but really what she felt was the recognition of what she'd always been. The difference was she knew now.

"I got in to the Masters in Business Administration program at Boston University," he told her.

Roger wanted to celebrate.

"I'm not going," she said, and before Roger could ask her to clarify, she went on. "With you to Boston. I'm staying here and finishing my degree. I don't even know why you thought I'd say yes. Why I'd uproot my life for you in such a way."

"You're right. I'm sorry. I just thought—it seemed like a good idea at the time. Come on, let's celebrate though. This is good news."

Because he asked her to, she went along and celebrated with him. They ordered Thai food and Mary bought the most expensive bottle of champagne, telling Roger that this was her gift to him. They got drunk and filled their stomachs with spring rolls and noodles. They watched recorded movies they'd never had time to watch until now. Mary knew that when the evening was over she would finally end it with Roger. She would not leave him wondering, there would be no mystery to why she was breaking it off. She would look him in the eyes and tell him the truth, and then she would leave.

For now though, they sat close together on the couch. The stench of the take-out filled the air. Roger leaned over toward Mary, and put his head on her shoulder. He had already forgotten the story Mary told him. Perhaps he had forgotten it the moment after she'd told it, already moving on, meanwhile asking her to also do the same.

X.

After Mary broke it off with Roger she decided she needed to come home and so the next day packed a bag and paid for a rental car on her emergency credit card. She was mostly finished with the term, having written all the final papers necessary. It was just a matter of turning in the work before the semester ended, and she could do all that when she returned.

She told her parents to expect her for a few days. *Just a quick break before I have to get back*, she'd said, lying afterward by saying she'd gotten a part-time job for the summer and needed to be there. She told herself that once she got back she'd get to work finding something, as well as finding a cheap sublet to move into since she couldn't stay with Roger anymore.

It'd been almost a full year since Mary had been back. When Mary drove down the familiar road, she decided not to go straight home but to drive to the plant first. It was early afternoon when she pulled into the parking lot. Because of the time of day the plant was mostly full. All of the workers were already inside long into their shifts. In another hour or so they'd punch their time cards and holler out the front doors, breathing once again the fresh air and feeling the last remnants of the sun before it dipped into the horizon. Smelling of sweat and stench, their bodies tired, they would make their way to their cars and head for home.

Now though there was no one. She pulled into the lot and passed the empty cars, driving until she found a space toward the back next to wire gate that surrounded the property. Since Mary left, there'd been an additional roll of layoffs. There'd been talk of

leaving, her mother told her, reciting gossip she'd heard from the children whose parents had become unemployed.

"What are people doing?" Mary asked her mother after she told her the story.

"Nothing," she said. "There's no jobs. This is a dying community on the brink."

Lena told her that she'd heard some of them debate the possibilities of moving away to Raleigh or Winston-Salem, but with no guarantee of work there they decided to stay, choosing instead to commute an hour's drive across to the Virginia border and work at one of the factories there.

Even her parents had thought about leaving but for different reasons. Both of their jobs were steady, but they knew the powder keg that possibly awaited. They had work while others didn't. Their lives were secure while others weren't. The specter of what happened to Harris Thomas hung over their own lives.

"I see the looks. The resentment, and I'm afraid, but then I think maybe I'm overreacting. I begin to feel ashamed. It's a constant back and forth," Lena said. "And yet, our lives are here. Our history. We talk about it, but in the end how can we leave when all we've ever known is here?"

Now Mary got out of the car. She jingled the keys before tucking them inside her jeans pocket. She scanned the lot, trying to imagine where it must have happened, where Harris Thomas was taken, jammed into a stranger's car before being brought out to the middle of the woods to die. She circled around the lot, scanning to see what sparked, until remembering one article containing a photograph of the spot. She walked over to where she thought the picture had been taken.

What surprised her was that there was no marker anywhere. There should have been something, she thought, some marker letting others know what had happened here. It shouldn't be forgotten, and yet it was.

Mary kneeled toward the ground, reached her hand to touch the black tarmac, to feel the heat of it against her skin, but at that moment a man came walking out of the plant. Mary saw him—he wore a dark blue uniform and carried a plastic bag full of his belongings. She watched him and noticed a familiarity with his movements and his body language. His shoulders were hunched as he walked and his gaze remained fixed on the ground. It'd been a habit Ben did as well, used when the world's brightness burned instead of guided.

“Thomas,” Mary said.

The man looked up and their eyes met, and she realized then that the man wasn't Thomas. He wasn't the man she'd once seen pictures of. She didn't know who it was but it wasn't him, nor Ben, just another man leaving work who happened to look up and see her.

Mary got up from the ground. She walked to her car, turned on the engine, and drove away, refusing to meet the man's gaze again.

Driving away, she wondered what this place would look like in a few years' time. When the plant finally closed. When tobacco farming finally met its end. It would happen soon enough, she thought. The idea of the small-scale tobacco farmer was quickly becoming extinct. Tobacco companies were buying up the land and the individual farmer couldn't compete with the labor and output of these companies.

A few had switched to other crops, like sweet potatoes for instance, but most had quit altogether. Mary noticed it as she drove, passing miles of abandoned land where the golden green tobacco leaves once grew.

It took her coming back to notice these things. It took her coming home to see.

Mary slowed her car when she found the road she was looking for. One more stop before venturing home. She'd written down the address earlier, she remembered, and she reached in her pocket to pull out the scrap of paper. It was the right road, but she drove down it with hesitancy, driving slow, careful of any cars suddenly appearing behind her.

It took her twenty minutes driving down the road before he found the house. She'd pulled the car off to the side when she came upon it. It was a small, shotgun-style home in the back of the trees. A long gravel driveway led up to it. Even though she was a distance away she could see the dried paint on the siding, not bright red but a dull ruddy red, like crusted blood.

After a few minutes a black woman came out. She held a child balanced on her hip as she locked the door and walked to the car. Mary watched as she tucked the child in the passenger side. The woman was young, in her twenties, with her dark hair pulled tight in a bun. She wore black pants and a white collared shirt, a uniform, and Mary guessed she must be on her way to drop her child off before work. The woman got into the car. Mary sunk lower in his seat so as not to be noticed as she pulled out of the driveway.

Mary fought the urge to get out of the car and go to her, because what would she say? I know what happened to your husband and I am sorry. I am sorry for my part. She wanted to relieve herself of her guilt of having done nothing. She wanted to tell her she was ashamed for putting her faith in someone else. She should have put faith in herself.

Maybe if she'd done so the outcome would have been different. She did not know how to live with that possibility. She did not know how to move on from the guilt of what she'd done.

The woman drove past Mary's car, not even pausing to notice Mary or her car parked on the opposite side of the road from her house. She drove on, to work, to the next phase of her day, moving on, continuing through her life, because what else was there? What else was there ever for anyone to ever to do but continue on?

###

Mary saved Ben's house for the last day of her visit home. She waited until the end because she wasn't entirely sure if she wanted to see him, if she had the strength to face him. It would be easier to just get in her car and go back to Marymount and back to Roger, but she needed to see him though, needed a sense of closure to him and what they were to each other. She needed to forgive him but also herself, and to do any of that she needed to see him, at least one more time.

She was startled by how different the house was. This house was cared for. Her memory of the place was one of disrepair—the sprouting patches of weeds, the chipped paint on the shingles. When she opened the screen door she was expected the familiar creaking but this one was silent. She took a breath before knocking.

An older woman answered. She peered out at Mary through large wide-frame glasses. “Yes?”

“Hi,” Mary paused, not expecting this woman to have answered. “My family lives in the house next to yours, down that way,” she pointed back off in the distance.

“I see,” she said.

“I’m back from school and I was looking for—I was looking for the people who I thought lived here. The Groves?”

“He’s long gone,” the woman said. “The woman died and the bank took their house. I bought it when it’d gone into foreclosure.”

“You wouldn’t have any contact information for the family? A number? Or if you knew where they might have gone?”

“There was no family. Just a man,” she said.

“Do you have his number?”

“What’s all this about?”

“I just—” Mary was unsure of how to answer. All her explanations seemed inappropriate, and didn’t fully make sense even to her out loud.

“I just have to know what happened,” she finally said. “I knew the boy who lived here. We were friends and I lost touch.”

Her face softened and she opened the door wider. “All right. Come on in,” she said. “My name is Alice Underton, by the way. Well, come on. Let me see if I can find something.”

Mary barely recognized the house inside. The walls had been wallpapered, the carpet in the living room stripped to reveal the hardwood floors throughout. Alice led her through to the kitchen where she marveled at the new cabinetry and appliances.

“Oh wow,” Mary said. “The house—it’s all so different from what I remember.”

“Yeah, my husband Fred and I made a lot of changes.”

“It looks good,” Mary said. “Here, go ahead and sit down and I’ll be right back.”

She sat at the kitchen table while Alice went into another room, bringing back a small paper box full of papers. “I guess I should get this all organized,” she said, half smiling. “There’s never enough time for the little things, and then you forget and it piles up, as evidence here.”

Alice took each item from the box and set it on the table, spreading everything out before her. There were labeled folders of tax records, half-crumpled receipts and a stack of hand-written letters rubber-banded together.

“What are those?” Mary nodded in the direction of the letters.

“Oh, you know. Some things you can’t let go of.”

Alice didn’t elaborate and Mary didn’t ask. After she’d finished emptying the box she looked at all the items, unfolding all the strips of paper and notes. “I bought a couple of pieces of furniture from him then had it reupholstered. That sofa out there was his. At the time I’d asked him why he was selling everything and he told me about the house. I felt a little bad and gave him more than I should have, preemptive guilt because Fred and I were thinking of moving and always liked this place when we drove by it, so I knew when he told me they were losing it we’d try and buy it for ourselves. Anyway, he’d given me his number in case I wanted to buy anything else. I know I kept it. It’s in here somewhere. Help me look.”

It took a few minutes of Alice sorting through the contents of the box, her shifting gaze moving through each card and scrap. Mary was the first to find it though. The name Thomas Groves scrawled above the number.

She noticed Mary had stopped looking. “Did you find it? Is that it?”

The question jolted Mary and she stumbled out a yes, handing her the paper.

“Yes, Thomas Groves. This is it. Or at least—he had a brother, Ben. Do you have anything for Ben?”

“I told you there was just one man and that’s him. Thomas Groves.”

“Oh, I see. I’m just going to copy this down on something else and you can have the paper.”

Mary wrote it down quickly and then gave the sheet back to her.

“Well, there you go,” Alice said, taking the paper. She began collecting everything to put back in the box.

“Thank you so much for this.”

“So you were friends with him?” Then, when Mary blushed, she clarified. “You said you knew the man.”

“He was just someone, someone I knew. I left him without saying good-bye, and now I need to find him.”

“Why you’d do that? Leave?”

“He wasn’t the person I thought he was,” she said.

“Hmm.” Alice gathered the bundled the letters. “You see these?” she asked. “A man I loved once. He used to write me these long love letters, back when people did that sort of thing. I was twenty-five and hopeless over him, thought he was hopelessly in love with me back.”

Mary waited for her to finish the story. She imagined they broke it off, perhaps he cheated on her, or that their parents didn’t want them to be together and so she’d married someone else. Alice smiled fondly at the letters before tucking them in the box.

“Well?” Mary asked. “What happened?”

“I married him,” she said.

“Oh,” Mary said, confused. “It seemed for a minute that you were going to say something else.”

“It’s just because the person who wrote these letters,” Alice stopped, thinking about her answer. “I don’t know who that is. Now, I love Fred. I love my husband, but when I think about these and the person who wrote them, it seems like someone entirely different. If I were to show to him now he’d probably laugh at how childish he was, probably would mock some of what he’d written. I’m not saying it’s good or bad, only that—I’d forgotten how he used to be.”

Mary left the house and got back in her car. She sat there for a few minutes holding the scrap of paper in her hands, folding and unfolding it. She knew that she would have to call now or let it go. If she went back, she told herself, she wouldn’t carry this with her anymore.

She reached for the phone in her purse, turned on the car’s engine so the air conditioning would help slow her pulse. She dialed the numbers, slowly, with each one half-expecting herself to not continue, but she dialed and waited for someone to pick up on the other end.

“Hello?” a man’s voice answered.

“Yes, is this Thomas? Thomas Groves?”

“Yes it is,” he said.

She paused, waiting for him to ask who was calling, but he didn’t. She coughed, once, and continued.

“My name is Mary Holden. I got your number from Alice Underton, the woman who bought your house. I, my family, used to live near you, although we never met.”

Thomas kept silent and if it wasn't for his breathing on the phone she would have thought he'd hung up on her.

“I used to know your brother. Ben?”

“I remember you.”

“You do?” she asked, incredulous. “We never met.”

“Ben used to talk about you all the time,” he explained.

“I was wondering—I was wondering if you knew where he was? I'm trying to get in touch with him.”

He was quiet a long time after that and in the silence Mary began to regret calling. She imagined he was debating whether he should tell her where Ben was. If Ben talked about her more than likely he'd told his brother she'd left him without ever saying why. To Ben, the action was unforgivable, and the idea of coming back after all this time—she could see how that would look. “I just need to explain some things to him,” she continued. It's been a while, I know, but it's important.”

“Listen,” he said. “Ben is gone.”

“Gone where?”

“He died.”

“What?” she asked, but he didn't repeat it. Her mind reeled. She had so many questions but she couldn't ask any of them. She didn't know how.

“I'm sorry, I hate to tell you this over the phone.”

“When?” she forced out. “When did it happen?”

“Not long,” he said. After a moment he asked her for her address. “I have a few things of his I kept that I think you should have,” he said. “If you give me your address I can mail them out to you. I’ll do it first thing tomorrow.”

“No,” she said. “No, don’t mail them. Are you still in North Carolina? I could come by there. Would that be all right?”

“Yes, if you want, and I’m in North Carolina, yes, but not in that town anymore. It’s a couple hours drive from there so I don’t know if it’s—”

“That’s no problem,” she interrupted, her voice beginning to crack. She looked at the clock on the dash. In a few hours she was supposed to be on her way back to Roger. She pictured him waiting for her, the rest of their evening already planned.

“Where are you? Just tell me where it is and I’ll be on my way,” Mary said.

“It’s a small town by the coast, but I don’t think—” he explained.

“Just tell me,” she said, cutting him off.

“Beaufort,” he told her. “The town is called Beaufort.”

XI.

Thomas had asked to meet her at a place called Cleary's. It was a touristy restaurant named after the owner and situated right by the harbor. Mary sat in her car watching the waves crash against the shore. *This was a mistake*, she thought. She'd extended the period of her rental car, put the charge on her emergency credit card, the one she told herself she'd never use, and spent the rest of the afternoon driving.

Beaufort was a five-hour drive, a fact she didn't mention to Thomas on the phone, only telling him she wouldn't be able to meet until sometime late that afternoon. He seemed surprised by this, that she was so close, that she would be able to meet him so soon, and she imagined it was surprising. She'd never met Thomas, only knew of him through Ben. It had been so many years since she'd even thought of Ben, and now here she was a few hours away from seeing his brother. It was a stupid decision, impulsive and rash in all the ways she'd never before been, and yet deep down she knew she had to go.

In Goldsboro Mary stopped at a gas station to call Roger. She sat in the car holding the phone in her hands debating putting off calling for a little while longer. She hadn't talked to him since she'd left, since the night they'd broken up, and by now she was sure Roger had already packed up her things.

Mary dialed the number. Roger picked up on the first ring.

"Hey, you are sort of calling at a bad time," he said in a rush, not giving her time to speak. "A few of us are going out to dinner tonight. I think we're going to Salvatino's? Not sure. Tris is supposed to message me with the specifics."

"That sounds nice," Mary said, and it did. The life he wanted for the two of them sounded nice and easy, but as she sat in the car listening to him talk about his dinner

plans she wondered how long she would have been able to keep up, how long would she have able to avoid the feeling that with him she'd lost a piece of herself, that with him she would never even know who she was.

“Why are you calling Mary?”

“I don't know.”

“I've missed you,” Roger said after a while.

There was a question implicit in his acknowledgement. If she said it, if she was willing, they could get back together. All she had to do was say it.

“When I'm back I'll make sure to pick up the rest of my things.”

“You don't have to do that. I can drop them off at your dorm for you.”

“No, that's all right.”

“I think I'm staying here a little longer.”

“For how long?”

“A few more days. Maybe a week. I'm not sure yet.”

“What about your parents? Are your parents okay?”

“Yes, everything is fine, it's just—” Mary paused, thinking of an answer. “I shouldn't have called. I'm sorry. None of this is your concern.”

“It's really okay, Mar. We broke up. That doesn't make us strangers.”

“You're right.”

Mary listened to Roger as he sighed into the phone, causing static. She didn't respond, but as the seconds crept by she began to further regret calling, but she wasn't sure how to say goodbye.

“Well,” Roger said, his interruption a relief. “You do what you have to do.”

Roger hung up the phone and afterward Mary went into the gas station. She bought several packages of powdered donuts, two twenty-ounce bottles of Coke, and a bag of Cheetos. In the car with the windows down, a sense of freedom overwhelmed her. One after the other she crammed the donuts in her mouth, the white powder flaking off on her shirt. The Cheetos stained her fingers and she licked them clean. It'd been years since she'd had junk food like this. Roger never allowed it in the house, believing it to be food for the poor. When they'd first lived together, she used to secretly eat snack-sized bags of chips while he was gone at class, or on her way to the center she'd stop at a drugstore and buy a package of M&Ms, eating them quickly as she walked the next couple of blocks to the subway station. Roger never explicitly told her to stop eating the food, but he would make comments about it. He must have found the crumpled wrapped she'd hid in her purse, because to Mary his comments seemed all of a sudden, and increasingly cruel.

It was easier to stop eating these foods than to justify their existence. In the car though, as the saltiness of the cheese powder hit her tongue, she wished she'd never let Roger get the best of her. It was such a small thing, an inconsequential thing compared to everything else, but it was another regret of how much she'd changed.

During the drive Mary continued to splurge on mini indulgences. More bags of chips and soda, fast food hamburgers and fries. An hour into the drive and a half-eaten slushie later she had to pull over to vomit in the grass. She wiped her mouth, got back inside the car, and popped an aspirin for her stomach.

It wasn't until she'd gotten to Beaufort that she called Thomas again. "I'm here," she said, upon hearing his voice. "Do you have time to meet?"

“That was fast,” he said, giving a small laugh, then told her to give him an hour.

Mary didn’t know what to expect with Thomas. She’d never met him but at the same time she felt a familiarity, a connection to him despite the years. All those hours she’d spent with Ben in that little room he’d shared with Thomas. Mary remembered the look of his bed neatly made, the sheets sharply creased and tucked. Thomas did not have many belongings. A few pictures on his dresser—one of their mother Mary recognized, and another of a girl Mary couldn’t place. A worn map of the state sat folded next to a handful of loose change. A gold watch neatly displayed in its case, Ben said a graduation present, was also there.

That was it, all of what had made up his life. Ben said that’s how Thomas was, preferring to keep few attachments and fewer belongings. Mary now tried imagining such a man, she tried piecing together the person he would have become, but each time her mind came up blank.

Mary wanted to go out to the shore before she left here. It was the first time she’d ever seen the beach, and she wasn’t sure what occasion she’d have to come back and so made a mental note to experience it before made the trip back home.

Seagulls squawked as she got out of her car and walked up the pathway to Kip’s. Clouds overhead looked like rain, so much that as she walked she braced herself for the moment droplets would beat against her back, but to her relief it stayed dry.

Kip’s had a patio in front overlooking the water, but the entrance was gated up. As she walked up to the door she passed a group of men who were busy tethering the patio tables and chairs with chains.

Mary tried imagining what it looked like in season with the bright umbrellas opened to shield the sun. She tried picturing bikini-clad vacationers sipping long islands. Surf and turf platters. Oysters on the half shell. She imagined the smell of fried fish mingling with suntan lotion. Coronas with lime.

“A storm is coming,” one of the men called out to her.

“What?” Mary said. The man had stopped what he was doing to talk. He looked young, about the same age as her, with wavy brown hair he kept having to tuck behind his ears which the wind blew right out again. Like the others he wore a dark blue polo shirt tucked in khaki shorts.

“Hurricane Victor. They thought it was going to veer farther north but it looks like it might hit us pretty hard.”

“Oh,” Mary said. “I didn’t know. I’m supposed to be meeting someone inside.”

“Huh, well.” A flash of disappointment spread across his face. “You can go on in. You got a few hours yet. Just letting you know.”

“Thanks.” He seemed to want to talk to her longer, and she might have stayed but the chill of the air was getting to her so she nodded and opened the door to the restaurant.

An older couple sat at one of the red upholstered booths. They glanced up at her as she walked in, gave a disinterested look before turning their attention back to their meals. There was no hostess, only a bartender who told her to sit anywhere she felt like it and she’d help her in a minute.

“Who are you meeting?” she asked once Mary had sunken into one of the booths.

“I probably know him,” she said, then added, “or her.”

Normally she'd resist such an intrusion in her privacy, but Mary got the sense she would have kept talking to her regardless if she wanted it.

"Is it that obvious I don't belong?"

"Belong? No, it's just that you don't really look like a townie. You could have been a tourist but it's not tourist season, so I figure you're either lost in which case I can show you how to get back to the interstate, or you're meeting someone."

"Why don't I look like a townie?"

"I'm sorry?"

"You said I didn't look like a townie. I'm wondering what about me makes it noticeable."

"Well," he paused, leaning close to Mary. "I can count on my hands the number of people who come in here when it's not lunch or dinnertime. In fact, I could probably count on one hand, and that couple over there counts as two of them, and you're not one of the others, so you see—"

She straightened and smiled. "You must be from somewhere else if you're not from here."

Her name was Shelle, she said, named after seashells and not short for Michelle. It was cliché, she knew, but her parents had loved the beach. They loved it so much they'd bought out this restaurant even though it only made money a couple months out of the year.

"I hated it for a while. Went by my middle name—Marie. I didn't want to have anything to do with this place either, but I managed to find my way back, it seems."

"It happens," Mary said. "We share the same name. Mary—Marie."

“Yeah,” Shelle said, unimpressed. “So who you meeting? Like I said I probably know whoever it is. I’d be surprised if I actually didn’t.”

“His name is Thomas,” Mary told her. “Thomas Groves?”

“Well shit,” she laughed. “You’re meeting Thomas. I didn’t think that man ever left his house anymore.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

Shelle opened her mouth to answer but then the door opened. Mary knew before turning it was him, appearing before her as if summoned, and indeed maybe she had.

“Shelle, how are you?” Thomas said when he’d reached the booth.

“I should ask you that. I haven’t seen you in months at least.”

“Yeah, well,” Thomas shrugged. “I keep to myself.”

“No kidding.”

An uncomfortable silence followed. Mary felt as if she should leave for a minute, excuse herself to go to the bathroom while they hashed out whatever unfinished business that seemed to exist between them, but Thomas turned away from her and sat across Mary in the booth. “A Guinness, if it’s not too much trouble,” he said to Shelle without looking up.

Shelle stiffened. “Sure. That all?”

Thomas waited for Mary to answer. “Unsweetened tea? If that’s alright?”

“Nothing to eat?”

Thomas continued staring. His eyes wouldn’t look away.

“No, just the tea is fine.”

“Okay then.”

“Hi,” Thomas said when she finally met his gaze. “You must be Mary.”

“And you Thomas.”

Thomas met her eyes. Here he was, Ben’s brother. She’d only seen pictures of him and as she looked at him now she tried to place this image before her with the memory. At first glance Thomas didn’t look like his brother. If she’d seen him on the street she wouldn’t have thought back to Ben. His hair was longer, dark wavy strands past his ears. He hadn’t shaved in weeks and the beginnings of a beard had formed. He appeared settled into himself whereas Ben was always hesitant, always unsure. Looking at him now she realized she wouldn’t have known. It wasn’t until Thomas clasped his hands on top of the table that Mary was able to see the resemblance. His hands were the same—the thick callouses on the knuckles, the nails bitten to the quick, the rough, tanned skin. His hands gave away the signs of years of work only she could recognize.

It gave her a pang of nostalgia to remember. Who knew she would end up here, in this place, with the brother of a man she’d once loved? Who knew the slight mechanisms of the world, turning and twisting to bring this moment into being?

Mary coughed. “I’m sorry about Shelle. Not many people come around here so it’s exciting when she sees someone new. She can’t help being nosy.”

“It seemed like more than that,” Mary said. “Did you date her?”

Thomas laughed. “No, no. I think she likes me though.”

“That was obvious.”

Thomas leaned back in the booth, appearing to relax. He kept his eyes focused on her but sat silent. Mary could tell immediately that she would have to be the one to start, to lead the conversation where it needed to go, but sitting there with him she felt she

couldn't do it. She had driven all this way to know and now she wasn't sure she wanted to.

"We almost met, before I left for school. It seems forever ago now," Mary finally said.

"Really?"

"Ben wanted us to. We'd come back to the house to meet you but you weren't there. Ben was furious with you over it. He said you'd promised him you'd be there."

"I don't remember," Thomas said.

"Well," Mary said, waiting. She had said his name, that was enough, and she expected him to offer something in return.

"There was a man who died—was murdered. Do you remember?"

She had not expected to begin with this. It'd been years since she thought of him. The story Ben had told her, the reason she'd left without saying good-bye.

"Yes, I remember."

"His name was Harris Thomas," Mary said.

"I found him, you know."

"What?"

"In the woods. I found his body, was the one who called and reported it."

Thomas told her the story—how he used to go hunting in the early morning before work. He's heard the screams and gone running. "By the time I got there everyone was gone. I went into the barn and I saw—I saw what they'd done, and then I left to go find the police."

"We must have gotten there sometime after," Mary said.

“The police thought it was a joke at first. No one was going to come. I made the call and then went back after work and he was still there, so I kept making calls. When I went back again I saw that the body was gone, everything was cleared, and I assumed they were doing an investigation, but then I read about that accident. It was Ben actually, he’d found the article and left it on the table and I saw it and knew it was the same man.”

“Who do you think moved him? Do you think it was the police?”

“I’ve thought about that for a long time and I’m not sure. I don’t know. I’d like to think it wasn’t but—I don’t know. At least they eventually charged those guys though.”

“How’d they find out?”

“They’d talked about it at work, if you can believe it, and someone overheard. I don’t know who. It wasn’t me.”

Thomas told her that the site where Harris Thomas’s body was found had been completely cleared, there was not even a memorial left. “The wife kept trying to put one out there—you know she’d stick flowers and little homemade signs with his name and what happened—but every time she did someone else came right after and disposed of it, so she finally gave up. Now there’s nothing, no marker to remember, to bear witness. Not there or at the barn or at the plant where they took him. After that, I never told anyone else about finding him. No one seemed to care one way or the other and so it was just forgotten about, but I couldn’t though. I got nightmares for a long while after. They’re a reminder to me of what happened.”

Outside it had started to rain. The longer they sat the harder it came down.

Mary thought back to the night she’d left Ben, the night Ben had told her what he’d done. She wondered if Ben had told Thomas, if he knew.

“Ben and I found him. You weren’t the first,” Mary said quickly. “That’s why I left. We found him and Ben was supposed to report it but he was afraid. We should have gone together or I should have done it myself, but I thought he would, but he didn’t and I was so angry I couldn’t look at him after that. I left that night and never talked to him again.”

“I don’t think it would have mattered,” Thomas said. “Because I did and what changed?”

At that moment Shelle came back to their table. “You guys, we’re going to have to close up. That hurricane’s coming soon.”

“What hurricane?” Mary asked.

“I tried to tell you earlier,” Thomas said, before turning to Shelle. He nodded, asked for the bill which Shelle ripped off and placed on the table. Thomas didn’t glance at it, instead opened up his wallet and placed a ten-dollar bill on top.

“It seems as if you picked the wrong time to come,” he told her. “A hurricane is coming. A pretty bad one.”

“Do you think I’ll be okay making the drive back?”

Thomas yelled for Shelle to change one of the televisions to the weather. They both stared up at the screen. A large swirling mass was heading in their direction.

“You could leave now and make it, but you’d have to drive a couple hours out of the way to avoid a pretty nasty storm.”

If she left now, but Mary didn’t want to leave. They’d only scratched the surface. She hadn’t even asked about Ben. She had been trying to lead up to the conversation of

asking, but now it was over. She knew if she left here she'd never come back. She wasn't ready to completely let go.

"I just got here," Mary told Thomas. "I can't leave. Is there a hotel around here I could stay at?"

"Yeah," Thomas said. "I can take you, but if you want you can wait out the storm with me.

The place isn't much, but I've got a couch and you'll be safe until it's over."

###

Thomas lived on the top floor of a converted loft apartment. The owner, a retired woman who mostly kept to herself, lived below him. He said he did odd jobs for her on occasion. She had a son who was a doctor, made enough to pay her bills, but he was a tightwad and she hated asking for extra, so she rented the apartment for cheap so she could have money for personal items.

The space was small and mostly empty. The walls were wood-paneled. The carpet was coming out in some of the corners. A well-worn sofa sagged in the living room. Bookcases lined the walls. An oak table sat in the breakfast nook. In the kitchen an efficiency burner stove was next to a utility sink which, he said, was the reason he rented the place. That and its proximity to the water meant he could fish and clean with ease.

"The price too. Couldn't beat it really."

"How long have you been here?"

"A little over a year."

Mary wasn't sure why she'd said yes to Thomas's offer. She could convince herself it was the money. She'd spent too much already on the rental car and gas, and

then to add a hotel on top of the expense, but part of her knew the money wasn't the reason. When Mary looked at Thomas she saw echoes of his brother. The familiarity was slight, but it was there, and it was enough to make her want to stay.

And there was still so much more left to ask.

In the back of his apartment Mary saw his bed, unmade. In one section of the apartment Thomas had decorated the walls with postcards. He'd taped them all together in a massive collage. Mary went closer to look, her hand reaching up to touch the images.

"Have you been to all these places?"

"It became a hobby of mine, collecting them," he said. "I wanted a way to remember the past, a way that would be easy and wouldn't hurt too much."

"I understand," she said.

"I've got more of them. Do you want to see?"

She told him yes, and they sat on the sofa together while he showed her postcards he collected. He'd kept them in a small metal he'd brought out from the closet. He set it on the table in front of them both, pressed on the latches, and inside were hundreds of postcards from all sorts of places—museums, kitschy little diners, skylines of cities she'd only heard about. Thomas told her about each one, handing her the card and explaining when he'd gone, the people he met when he got there. He said that for a while he slept anywhere he could find a place. Often he slept in the woods.

"I never really had a destination in mind. I just knew I had to be somewhere, anywhere. When it started becoming too familiar I left and started over someplace else."

"What brought you back here?"

“I’m not sure. I’ve always liked the water, and in the end I couldn’t bring myself to be too far away from home.”

For money he lived partly off his inheritance and what he’d made selling the farm. He also worked odd jobs when he could, often for the woman downstairs who paid him for handyman repairs—replacing the roofing tiles, repainting the siding, clearing the gutters. He also made money ridding the beach from trash. Early mornings he’d be out there picking through the sand for beer bottles, crinkled bags of chips, used condoms.

“I thought it would bother me at first but it turns out it doesn’t. If I go early enough no one’s usually out there. It reminds me of the hunting I used to do, being out in the quiet. Being out there gives me a lot of time to think.”

She was quiet, trying to imagine him out there in the early morning.

She was afraid to ask about Ben. If she waited, she believed he’d offer up the story. She had so many questions, and yet she knew she had no right to ask. She was the one who’d left him, who never returned his phone calls. She was the one who disappeared, and because of that she had no right to know what path his life had taken afterward.

Yet it was the question that lingered between them. It was at first what made her stay far longer than she’d planned, hoping that eventually he’d tell her the truth. He did not owe it to her but she felt she couldn’t leave without it. Deep down she was relieved by the storm because it gave her reason to stay longer. Mary called and extended her rent-a-car for the rest of the week, just in case the storm took longer than expected, and Thomas had asked the owner if she could park it in her garage for safekeeping.

It stormed for three days. Three days they were locked together in his little home by the sea. He let her borrow an old t-shirt and sweat pants that she was reluctant to take until Thomas told her they were Ben's. Mary held up the shirt and saw the high school insignia faded on the front.

"I don't know why I've kept them. They don't even fit. Maybe they've just been waiting here for you."

Electricity flickered in and out. They'd be sitting at the kitchen table and suddenly the lights would go. In the dark there was only the low sound of his breathing to remind her she wasn't alone.

To pass the time they played games with a deck of cards. Poker, gin rummy, spades. They made bets with loose change, and each time Thomas always won.

"You really are your brother," Mary said, joking.

Instead of keeping the money Thomas pushed the pile of coins toward the center of the table and told her they'd start again. He wanted to keep playing until she won.

When they got bored with cards Thomas went and brought out a chess set with carved marbled pieces. She told him she didn't know how to play and he said he'd teach her. He held up each piece in the light and explained it to her what it was.

"I'm not going to remember any of this," she said.

"It's okay. We have time."

He was right. They spent the rest of the evening playing. Thomas was patient. Each decision held a careful, measured weight.

Mary had to admit his life held a quiet, easy simplicity she soon became jealous of. He was both separated from the world and yet so much a part of it. They could hear

the rain beating against the siding. His apartment held the briny smell of the ocean. She had been here a few days but already could see its appeal, already began imagining what it would be like to stay here forever.

Thomas didn't talk about Ben. Instead he told her about what his life was like on the farm. He talked about his father, some were familiar to her and she smiled at the memory of the first time she'd heard them from Ben. He talked about working at the factory. He told stories about people he'd met while living on the coast. The more he talked, the more she began to be reminded of Ben. His face animated in the same way—his eyebrows raising in excitement, the one dimple in his cheek. He made gestures with his hands as he spoke and this, too, reminded her of Ben.

But Thomas was not his brother, Mary knew, but it had been years since she'd even known Ben, and so she could not use that as the the reason for why she leaned over and kissed him. She had not known about Ben's death and so it couldn't have been grief that made her reach for Thomas. She was still with Roger so it couldn't have been loneliness that pulled her body to his, and up until that moment he had shown no indication of attraction, up until now it had not crossed him as a possibility, and yet he kissed her back. She heard the flutter in his chest, the wild, furious beating that mirrored her own.

Thomas was not shy. He did not harbor the insecurity of a man with inexperience. She tried not to compare his body to Ben's, but she could not help looking and remembering. He had the same broad shoulders and lean frame. Thomas was in shape, a holdover from all the years working on the fields and then the factory and then the miles of scouring the beach. A deep gash-like scar ran across his side, and her fingers traced

over the skin. She did not ask him where it came from and he didn't elaborate. She bristled at first when his calloused hands touched her, because here she was reminded.

His mouth tasted of tobacco, but instead of being repulsed she was reminded of the farm. All those years of picking the leaves. The smoke from the barn. She kissed him and was brought back to a world she'd left long ago.

And that was made her stop.

"I can't," she said then—correcting herself. "I'm not going to do this."

Thomas pulled away, surprised at the change of events, but he didn't move. He waited a few seconds to see if she would change her mind, and when she didn't he picked up his shirt from the floor and put it back on.

"I keep doing this," she said. "Losing myself in another person. I won't do it again."

"We can just sleep."

Mary agreed and they both crawled into the bed. It was drafty in the room but the heat of Thomas's body kept her warm. She fell asleep first. Usually, her sleep was sporadic. This time she slept through the night, a heady sleep, and when she woke in the morning with the first rays of sunlight she'd seen in days streaming against her skin, she realized she was alone. Mary got dressed quickly while wondering where Thomas could have gone.

Thomas was in the kitchen making breakfast. Two plates with scrambled eggs. A kettle filled with tea. Some black coffee for him. He stood at the counter scraping a piece of toast with a knife.

"I burned it," he said sheepishly, and in that moment she saw finally his insecurity. He

had not brought a girl home before, at least not like this, or if he had it had been some long time ago. He did not know how to do a morning-after. The idea of breakfast like this was new to him.

“It’s okay.”

“I wasn’t sure what you wanted,” he said. “I have cereal too. Some fruit. I have it here.”

“This is fine,” she said. She sat at the table, staring down at the effort he’d made. She poured herself a cup of tea, the steam rose to greet her as she brought the cup to her lips. It smelled like vanilla and spice.

“About last night,” Mary began. “I’m sorry. We shouldn’t have.”

“Why?”

“Because—I’m sort of with someone. Or I was. It’s over I think, but not officially.”

“What does that have to do with me?”

Mary blushed as she stumbled trying to think of an answer. Thomas saw her frustration and then stopped what he was doing and met her gaze. “Do you regret it?”

“No,” she said. “I don’t. Do you?”

“No,” he said. “That’s all that matters I think. At least to me.”

Thomas finished with the toast and sat at the table a plate with the darkened slices of bread. Next to it he placed a small jar of homemade apple butter.

“I haven’t had this yet,” he said, nodding towards the jar. “I suppose it’s good? Do you want some?”

She said yes, and he scooped a little on a piece of toast and handed it to her. It had been a while since she'd had homemade anything. She let the tangy sweetness linger before she licked her lips.

Thomas sat across from her, watching. He didn't appear to judge but was merely observing her. She imagined it was a habit he'd cultivated from being alone for so long.

"It's good," she said, breaking the quiet. "All of it is. You didn't have to go through this so much trouble."

"It wasn't trouble," Thomas said.

"Well, you still didn't have to."

Now that it was light she was able to get a better look around. Mary searched, hoping to find a picture of Ben, but Thomas kept no photos anywhere. Here was the same holdover habit from his childhood. Except for small signs she knew were specific to him—his fishing gear braced against the wall near the door, the postcards—his apartment could have been anyone's.

They ate in silence. It was unnerving, such quiet. She was used to rowdy campus kids, the sounds of traffic. Here there was only the occasional call of seagulls.

"Do you like living here? Being alone like this?" The question came out without thinking, and as soon as she said it she felt embarrassed by it, by the loneliness it implied.

"I've been alone most of my life," Thomas said. "I guess I'm used to it by now."

"I've felt that too," she said.

They finished eating. Afterwards, he poured a second cup of coffee and sipped it slowly, making no indication for her to leave. She got the impression he could sit there the rest of the day with her, neither of them saying a word, and he'd be content. She

didn't even need to be here, she realized. He was so used to living alone, to finding comfort in his solace.

Mary wondered why she stayed as long as she did, why she hadn't left during the night while he was sleeping, or when she'd woken to find him gone. The weather had cleared, the sky now a bright, clear blue. Thomas was not going to talk to her about Ben and there seemed no other reason left for her to stay, and yet stay is what she had to fight the urge to do. Both of them were dragging this out, whatever it was they were doing, and she knew now she'd have to be the one to end it, to finally leave.

Mary stood up to go, pulling down on the front of her shirt, Ben's shirt, adjusted herself before she looked at him and smiled.

"Thank you," she said, not knowing what else to say. "For breakfast, for everything. Really for taking the time."

"You're leaving?"

"Yes, I think," she paused. "I think I probably should."

Mary wanted him to stop her. The urge of this feeling was overwhelming, but she wanted him to say—no, stay with me a little longer, stay, stay, stay. She had no claim to these feelings, no reason beyond last night, and still she wanted him to turn to her and ask her to stay, and she was surprised when he said nothing, instead shook his head and left her to pack.

It wasn't until Mary was at the door, after she had gathered her belongings and changed her clothes, the whole while with Thomas sitting silently at the table, after she had finished and gone to the door, her hand touching the knob, when Thomas called out

to her. Mary turned around, and in his face she recognized something familiar—the pained look of a man struggling to reconcile a truth.

“Okay,” Thomas said, standing up from the table. “I guess I should tell you now. Tell you what happened to my brother. To Ben.”

PART THREE

I.

Ben stood on the quad situated in the middle of Marymount's campus and stared at the surrounding buildings. He admired the Gothic architecture, the looming spires stretched toward heaven. The grass was as thick and lush as carpet, and as Ben walked across the quad he passed a number of students stretched on it as if they were home. The more Ben looked the more students he saw hordes of them congregating everywhere. They huddled in similar groups and Ben could almost pick out each of them. The black students huddled far on the northeastern side. To the south the farm boys with their muddied boots and farmer tans. A group of misfits gathered toward on the eastern end closest to the street. A cloud of smoke hovered in the air around them and Ben guessed that they stood there because it was on the border of the campus. In case a campus cop paroled by wanting to fine them for smoking they'd not have far before they could claim they were on public property. It was like high school in this way, Ben thought. It amazed him that even in this new place, there was still the desire to always cling to the familiar.

Ten minutes before the hour the quad would bustle with new students heading toward their next classes. Very few walked directly across the grass, most followed the outlined walking paths surrounding the perimeter. Ben watched them all, moving so determinedly, with such purpose. They lugged their belongings, backpacks across their backs, books piled in their arms, teachers pulling suitcases full of their materials for the next classes.

Unlike them, Ben had no books, no backpack, and he was alone. It was just him strolling through amidst the crowds. No one appeared to notice but to him this distinction

made him believe that he stood out. An anomaly that didn't belong. He put his hands in pockets to keep them occupied and help him not appear nervous. Though when he looked he could see the same feeling on others faces—their insecurity of being alone. It was in how they carried themselves, in their gait, their stance. It was in how they seemed concerned of everyone except themselves. Ben walked and watched until he saw a bench and sat down.

“I shouldn't be here,” Ben said in a low voice, and yet, here he was. He'd gotten in his car and drove all night to get to this place, and now that he was here he realized what a mistake it was.

He thought if he came here and waited long enough he would find her, but beyond that he wasn't sure what he would do. What if he was actually to see her coming from one of these buildings? What then? If she turned in his direction and saw his face, would she even bother to come to him? Or would she turn in the other direction? And then, once it became apparent to Ben she was not interested in seeing him, would he continue to follow her?

He wasn't sure of the answers and even thinking about the questions made him uncomfortable, but he felt at least he had to tell her what happened, what he'd found out.

Ben reached in his pocket and took out Mary's crumpled letter, glancing over her scrawled script once more. The letter had been waiting on his bed when he'd gotten home. Thomas must have gotten the mail earlier before he'd gone to work. There was no return address, but almost immediately, he recognized the familiar slant to the sentences hastily written.

Ben,

*I'm sorry I left without saying goodbye, without any sort of explanation,
but I didn't know what to do.*

*Ben—I can't get past what you did. Maybe it's my fault too, and I'll have
to live with that, but it was also yours too. I thought I knew who you were but I'm
realizing now that I never did.*

By the time you read this I'll be gone.

Take care,

Mary

When Ben thought back on it, he wasn't sure how long it had taken him to notice Mary was gone. It'd been a week at least, maybe even two. The night before Mary had suggested that neither of them should try and contact the other for a while, and Ben had agreed. Was that the moment she'd decided to leave? They'd slept together in his bed, all the while he'd felt the warmth of her body next to his not realizing that would be the last time, and if she left the next morning, then that means it could have been at least two weeks with him not realizing she'd been gone.

Ben read the letter three times before balling it up in his fist, but then recognized his mistake and smoothed the creases of the paper back out. He folded, stuck it back in its envelope, and placed it in the bureau tucked underneath his clothes. For months Ben did nothing, hoping Mary would come around and write him back. Ben dreamed she'd show up at his window like before, knocking timidly until she saw him appear in front of the glass. Her mouth forming the words like all the times before—*open up open up open up*.

Ben would wake with the memory of the earthy smell of her, the smell of sweat, grass, and the subtle, and the fading scent of lilacs. It always took him a few moments to remember the truth of what happened, and the reason as to why filled him with a sense of shame.

He often imagined going to find her. The thought of it was what sustained him as his mother got sicker. Like her, he'd pack a bag and go, start over, become someone else with a different history, a different past where he wasn't poor, where his mother was dying and with a father he'd never known. Where he wasn't someone who'd left a body to rot in the woods, too afraid of the repercussions if he were to speak up. He wanted to be someone of value, to feel as if he was.

Of course, he did try to contact her. He called her but she never answered, too afraid to let her parents know who he was in case they ever heard them. Each time he called he let it go to voicemail and then hung up the phone, leaving another empty message for her to hear.

Eventually, he went to her house, made it so far as knocking on the door. A woman answered, tall and thin, wearing a cornflower blue blouse that matched her eyes. Her skin was as light as his, if not lighter, and Ben was surprised that this woman was Mary's mother.

"Yes?" she asked, her eyebrows raised at the boy before her.

"I'm—" Ben paused, coughed to clear his throat. "I'm looking for Mary Holden. Is she here?"

"She's gone, left for school early. They're doing some sort of early move-in thing for the new students."

“Oh, I see.”

“You knew her? Were you one of her friends?”

Ben wasn’t sure what to tell her, and so he made up an excuse about having borrowed a book of hers he wanted to give back.

“Do you have it? I can mail it to her if you like.”

“Oh, no ma’am,” Ben told her. “It looks like I forgot it anyways. Do you—would it be possible to get her address?”

Lena appeared to be thinking it over. “Who are you again? Can you tell me your name?”

“Patrick,” Ben said. “My name’s Patrick Miller.”

“Okay Patrick. I can give you her address.”

Lena told him she’d be right back, then went into the kitchen and wrote the address down on the back of an old grocery receipt and handed it to him.

Ben thanked her, took the address, and headed home. That day and every day after he wrote her letters, each one becoming longer than the last. They were letters full of questions over why she left, why she never told him about school, why she had so many secrets.

He never wrote about what happened that day. There were times when he started to. *I don’t know why I did what I did*, Ben always began. *I’m ashamed of it and I’m sorry*. The letters were never finished, each one ripped to shreds and thrown in the trash before another line was written.

For weeks Ben did nothing else, hoping Mary would come around and write him back. Ben dreamed she’d show up at his window like before, knocking timidly until she

saw him appear in front of the glass. Her mouth forming the words like all the times before—*open up open up open up*. Ben would wake with the memory of the earthy smell of her, the smell of sweat, grass, and the subtle, fading scent of lilacs.

Then his mother died. She'd slipped away during the night while they were asleep. Ben hadn't noticed when he glanced upon her in the morning before walking into the kitchen to find Thomas waiting for him.

"Sit down," he told Ben. He ignored his brother and went on about his morning routine. He went to the fridge and took out a plate of leftover ham. He took it and a package of eggs and set on the counter.

"Ben," Thomas said, and it was his tone that made Ben finally stop and look at his brother.

"What is it?"

"I said sit down."

Thomas said it quickly, his voice flat and emotionless. Their mother had passed away sometime last night. Thomas wasn't sure when. The coroner would be here soon. There were arrangements that needed to be made. Ben and Thomas needed to agree on some decisions. Burial or cremation? Should they even bother with a funeral? They were distant with most of the family that was alive, hadn't seen them in years, and Thomas wondered if they should just send them a notice and be done with it.

"Then there's the house," Thomas said.

"The house?"

"We're behind on the payments. The bank's going to take it if we don't do something soon."

“Maybe they should take it then,” Ben said. He left Thomas and went to his mother. Thomas had covered her face with the blanket. Ben stood over her body, took a breath, and reached down to lift the blanket, but once his fingers touched the fabric he froze, unable to look. He let go of the blanket, went back to the kitchen, grabbed a piece of ham from the plate and opened the back door.

“It was better you didn’t look anyway,” Thomas said. Ben nodded and left, shutting the door behind him.

Ben kept silent during the next several weeks as Thomas went about boxing up what items he felt should go into storage, what he wanted to sell, and what he ultimately decided should be thrown away. He spread word at his job about what he was selling and Ben watched one day as one of Thomas’s coworkers came with a truck and several friends to carry out their furniture. The men took boxes of spare dishes, appliances, and bedding. After an hour once they’d packed up, one of the men handed Thomas a thick wad of cash and shook his hand, smiling gratefully before getting into the truck and driving off. Ben did nothing as Thomas copied flyers to put throughout the town advertising a yard sale. He hadn’t objected as he filled up trash bags of their mother’s old clothes, separating what he felt he could sell between what he’d donate to charity.

All the while Ben kept his mouth shut. Thomas was the brother doing what Ben couldn’t, and part of Ben felt that he was owed this. After all, he’d been the one to take care of their mother, to deal face on with her death while Thomas kept at a distance. Now Ben was the one avoiding. It seemed fair to let Thomas take care of it all, and this kept Ben’s own guilt at bay. During that time the weather shifted quickly. The summer heat quelled as the season began its transition to fall.

Ben never heard anything about what happened with the man Ben and Mary had found in the woods. He'd tried not to think about it, had pushed the incident far back in his mind to give way to everything else he was dealing with, but one morning he'd come across an article in the paper with an image of the man's face.

"Thomas, did you know this guy?"

"What? Who?"

Ben passed the paper over to show him the article. It talked about the recent death of a man who'd been found on the side of Interstate 57, just outside of town. The article was a profile on the man's wife who believed her husband's death wasn't an accident. She was trying to get attention so that the police would look into the circumstances of his death.

Thomas glanced at the headline briefly. "What am I looking at here?"

"The name. Do you recognize it?"

"I'm not sure. Should I?"

"He worked at the plant."

Thomas squinted his gaze at Ben before picking the paper up and reading over it again. "Huh, you're right. It says he did."

"You don't remember seeing him at all?"

"Ben, I go there to work and do my job and get out. It's not like we're all sitting around playing get-to-know-you games. Most people stay to themselves or in groups of their own."

"I see."

"Why you asking about this man anyway?"

“It says she’s questioning how the man died. I don’t remember reading about any of this, that’s all. I was curious.”

“Huh, well—” Thomas paused, coughed, and began again. “I doubt you’ll find anything about it online. I got some old papers sitting in a bin outside. A few weeks’ worth. There might be something in there.”

“Thanks.”

Thomas folded the paper and handed it back to Ben. Thomas stood up and carried his mug of coffee to the sink, poured the remaining liquid, now cold, down the drain.

Ben left and got the bin, brought it back to the kitchen and dumped the contents on the floor.

“Hey, you going to clean the floor after making this mess?”

Ben ignored his brother and began searching through the newspapers. He picked each one up and slowly rifled through the pages. He wasn’t sure what he was looking for and began scanning for the name. He went through each one looking for the name, and when he was finished he placed the remains of the paper in a different pile on the floor.

“You never said why this was important,” Thomas said.

“It just is,” Ben said, shrugging. “Anyway, don’t you have work?”

“Speaking of work, you’re going to go down to the plant and talk to Mr. Williams right? About asking him for a job?”

“I will.”

“Today Ben.”

“I said I will.”

Thomas paused, and Ben knew he was debating with himself over whether to press him further, but he ultimately decided against it.

“Okay then,” he said.

Ben went through the papers twice. On his second run through he paid more attention the actual headlines. Thomas subscribed not only to *Herald* which was the paper for the county, but also to the *New York Times*. He often complained about the scope of the town’s paper, how it provided a limited grasp on the world. Thomas also subscribed to several magazines. On his day off he’d stack all the papers and sift through them with his morning coffee. He often cut out articles of interest, or stories he wanted to read for later. For this reason, sorting through the bin was a muddled affair. Ben had to separate what came from the *Herald* and what was something else. Some of the pages were coffee-stained and smelled like cigarettes.

Close to the end of his second run through he found what he was looking for. The article was brief. A man’s body had been found on the side of the road. An apparent hit and run, it said. His car was a few miles down, tucked on the shoulder. A tire had been blown, and the presumption was he’d had an accident while driving home after work. He got out of his car and while walking down the road in search for help someone came along with their car and hit him.

None of it made sense, but Ben took the page and folded it before placing it on the kitchen table. Hearing his brother’s anger in his head, he set about cleaning the floor, putting the papers back in the bin and placing it outside. He found a broom and swept for good measure. After he was finished he picked up the article and went to his bedroom.

He opened the drawer to place it inside and that's when he remembered Mary's letter. He took it out again. This time, instead of reading the letter he paid attention to the envelope. The postmark said it was mailed somewhere in Marymount.

There was a school there. A private college near the state border. It would take him all night to make the drive, he thought, but he could do it and be there by morning.

He tucked the letter and the article in his jeans pocket. Then he began to pack.

Now, Ben stood at the center of the quad wondering what to do. Last night as he'd driven through the darkness to get here he kept imagining this moment—stepping out onto the grass, his scanning the crowds of students until suddenly settling on her. It would not take him long to find her, he believed, and he would tell her he was sorry, that he'd made a mistake. He needed to tell her that, make her believe it, before he could admit it to anyone else. Somehow, he convinced himself it was the first step to atoning for what he'd done.

He continued looking for a few minutes longer until finally he went and sat down on one of the metal benches. This had all been a mistake. He didn't know where Mary could be. The campus was far larger than he was expecting, and Mary could be in a number of any of the surrounding buildings, if she was even here now.

Suddenly, hundreds of students swarmed the quad, laughing, chattering loudly, distracting him at every turn. He watched their animated faces, the way they clumped together in groups as soon as they left the buildings and ventured out into the sun. The semester had just started and most of them seemed to already know what factions they belonged to. They'd made friends with those like them, and everywhere Ben looked he saw groups of the same.

For a brief moment Ben thought he saw Mary and his heart seized in his throat, but just as quickly he realized no, that it was not her. It was no one he knew. No matter where he turned, where he looked, she was not there. Despite what he wanted to see, wanted to believe, she was gone.

II.

“Hey, you got a cigarette on you I can bum?”

“What?”

Ben looked up and saw a black student staring him down. He held a hand up to his face but still squinted from the light of the sun. He reached out his hand, already assuming, and waited for him to respond. “A cigarette. You got an extra?” he said.

He was short, slim, unassuming. His face expressionless but his eyes held steady in Ben’s direction. Ben noticed he wore a Pink Floyd t-shirt and jean cut-off shorts. “You like that band?” Ben said, nodding at his shirt.

“What? Oh, no this I got in a clearance bin somewhere. It’s kind of old. I don’t know what it’s supposed to be.”

“I see,” Ben said, a hint of disappointment lingering in his voice.

“You know who this band is?”

“Yeah, a good band. You should listen to an album sometime.”

“Right, right,” he said, nodding. “So, hey you got that cigarette?”

“No, I don’t. All out. Sorry,” Ben said as he held up his hands.

The kid blew out a raspberry, ran a hand across the back of his scalp. “Ah, it’s okay. Worth a shot. Can’t smoke on this campus anyway but I wanted one for later. Got classes all morning and I might not make it.”

“Which ones?”

“McClarsky’s in about ten minutes, then Moran’s Poli Sci right after at 11, but I think I can sneak in there late since it’s so large. Not like she’s going to notice. What about you?”

“What?” Ben asked.

“What classes you got?”

He assumed Ben was a student, that he belonged here like everyone else, was just like all the other students he’d seen walking about.

“I think we’re in the same class. McClarksy’s.” Ben said it without thinking, and immediately after he felt his heart speed up in fear this kid would know that he was lying. Of course he wasn’t in the same class or a student here. He knew that he didn’t belong here, it seemed so obvious to him, and Ben imagined that he recognized it too.

The kid’s expressed a brief element of surprise but then smiled. “No shit? Huh, I guess it’s not so surprising considering how many people are in there.”

He glanced quickly at his watch. “I better get going if I’m going to make it. Thanks anyway for the cigarette.”

He was about to walk off before Ben stopped him. “Hey, what’s your name?” he yelled.

“Oh man, I’m sorry. It’s Darvis. Darvis Conroy,” he turned around and said.

“I’m Ben.”

Ben held out his hand and instantly regretted it, thinking the gesture was too formal and afraid that Darvis would think he was being ridiculous, but he just smiled again and shook his hand back.

“You got a last name Ben?”

Ben thought a moment before answering. “Peters,” he said.

“Ben Peters? Cool.”

“Do you remember the building again? For Moran’s?”

Darvis laughed. "Room 218. Fordham Hall."

"Thanks. Sorry, it's just—it's been—"

"I know, believe me, I know," Darvis said, cutting him off. "I gotta get going though. So Ben Peters, I guess see you later?"

"Sure."

Ben gave a quick nod. Darvis pulled on the straps of his backpack before turning to leave. Ben watched him walk away. Darvis had believed him when he said he was a student here. He even believed him when he said he was in his class. Perhaps there was no difference between him and the others he saw. Perhaps, if he pretended well enough, he could fit in with all of them.

Here, on this campus and in this town, Ben believed that he could pretend for a while. Pretending would make him forget, at least temporarily, what all had happened. He didn't have to be Ben Groves anymore, but—Benjamin, Benjamin Peters. A simple change that would let him be both him and someone else. Benjamin Peters. Benjamin Peters could have parents who were still alive. He could be an only child with no brother to loom over and judge him. Benjamin Peters would be better, would hold no regrets. Benjamin Peters would have a backbone, and when he witnessed something wrong, he would stand against it. Benjamin Peters would be what Ben Groves was not.

And maybe deep down this was a way for Ben to prove to Mary what he could be, had she believed in him. Or maybe it was his way of trying to find her. There were too many students here, too many places she could be, and he had no idea where to look. It would take him weeks at least, unless he got lucky and if he were to even try, and that was assuming he'd found the right school after all when in fact he couldn't be sure.

Ben made a decision then and there that he would stay, at least for a little while. What led him to this? To change his name, to erase who he was? He convinced himself it was a fresh start, a new way of being without the vestiges of his past. It would be easy without that burden. It was certainly what Mary had wanted. If she could leave and forget, then why couldn't he?

He needed to be someone different, he thought. It was his only chance, and so Ben Groves became Benjamin Peters, and with his name he would begin again.

###

It turned out to be surprisingly easy to ingratiate himself in the campus. Ben learned that the school had a policy where anyone was allowed access to any of the classes, and in the larger courses the professor never even checked attendance. Ben found he could move freely in and out the classroom with barely even a look of acknowledgement.

Ben lived in his car the first week. He got to campus early so he could wash himself in one of the bathrooms. Although it seemed to Ben that no one would have noticed anyway had he not done anything. Still, he pulled out a collared blue shirt, slightly wrinkled from being stuck in his bag, and pulled it on. He left the restroom and walked out the building to find students sleeping on the nearby benches, their clothes stained with dirt. When the weather was hot students crowded in the twenty-four-hour student center, and at all hours a person could find some of them sleeping on the couches, bags of their belongings crowded around their bodies. Darvis had told Ben the university had a large homeless problem. Not only was there a shortage of undergrad housing for

the students but off-campus it was mostly expensive high-rise apartments that catered to the rich.

The first few times though Ben wasn't sure what his plan was beyond visiting the class. He sat in the back of the lecture hall of McClarsky's, afraid to make himself visible out of fear he'd be recognized by another student as an impostor, that someone would give him a look and realize that he wasn't a student in the class nor the university, but no one said anything. He watched as students crowded into the room, sleepy eyed with their hair greasy and ruffled, despite the morning being mostly over. To Ben, many appeared sloppily dressed, some still wearing their pajamas as she slid into their seats.

For this reason, Darvis stood out among them. Not only did he appear eager to be there, but he carried with him a confidence none of the other students seemed to have. That first day Ben had waved on impulse hoping to catch his attention. Darvis waved back when he saw, and climbed the steps to sit in the awaiting seat next to Ben.

Darvis's apartment was a one-bedroom of a fifth floor walk-up close to campus. Inside the furniture was bare bones. A metal frame futon in the living room Darvis said Ben could sleep on. On the floor were a couple of blankets with crumpled potato chip bags lying on top. Across from them a large television also sat on the floor.

"I know there's not much here but it's mine. I got most of this stuff for free."

"How?"

"When some of these students leave they just throw all their belongings away. They don't think think it's worth the cost of moving it to wherever it is they're going, so they either sell it cheap or pitch it in a nearby dumpster. Wait until the end of the year. You'll see. You'll be amazed at the kind of stuff people get rid of."

Ben sat down on the futon. It wasn't comfortable and Ben struggled to situate himself on it. After a minute he glanced back at Darvis who'd moved into the kitchen area.

"Everything in here I got for free too—the microwave, my coffee maker, these pots and pans." Darvis held one up so Ben could see. "I even pay for the place myself."

Darvis explained that part of his income came from a reimbursement of a university scholarship. He didn't live on campus in one of the remodeled dorms so he got money for off-campus housing. He'd found the cheapest thing he could that would let him live alone, and he lucked out with this place. For extra money he worked as a dishwasher at a buffet restaurant.

"I could probably get you a job there too if you wanted it."

"Really?"

"Sure. The pay's shit because they hire a bunch of illegals that don't care what they're getting as long as they're getting something, so as long as you don't care either he'll hire you. The good thing is they're pretty flexible with your hours as long as you're steady and he'll pay in cash too if you don't want to wait for a check."

"Why would you help me?" Ben asked.

Darvis was in the middle of making the of them lunch. Four slices of Wonderbread lay on the counter. He held a package of bologna in his hands. Darvis had paused for a second upon hearing the question but quickly continued back to what he was doing.

"What do you mean?" Darvis asked back. He opened the package and placed the slices of meat on the bread.

“You don’t know me,” Ben continued. “I could be anyone, and yet you’re helping. I just don’t understand why.”

“I need a reason? I can’t just do it because it’s the right thing to do?”

“No,” Ben said, then changed his mind. “Yes. Most people though do need a reason I think. So what’s yours?”

“I don’t know,” Darvis said. “I don’t have a reason. You need help and I got that spare. It’s not a problem. I guess I haven’t thought about it beyond that.”

“Well, thanks for this,” Ben said. “For everything. Like I said, it means a lot for you to do a favor for someone you barely know.”

“No problem.”

Darvis finished making the sandwiches and then came back into the living room and handing one to Ben. There wasn’t much on them, just meat and cheese, but Ben was grateful. He took a bite and then said thanks.

“What are you gonna do anyway? Take the television?” Darvis said. He took a seat next to Ben on the futon. He pointed at their reflections in the television screen, the two of them sitting side by side, and began to laugh. “Good luck getting that thing down five flights of stairs on your own. I feel like if you got this clunker out of here maybe you deserve to keep it.”

“Yeah,” Ben joined in Darvis’s laughter. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

III.

Ben had been living with Darvis for two weeks before he decided to call Thomas. He hadn't meant for it to that be long, but every morning it became easier to decide to wait a little longer, and before Ben knew it a week has passed, and then another one.

He did not know what he would say if he did call. He couldn't tell him why he left or where he'd gone, not anything close to the truth. In the note he'd left for Thomas, he said he wasn't going to work at the plant and had gone to look for a job someplace else. That he'd be back home once he found it and had made enough money. It seemed a simple enough answer. The closest to something Thomas would understand.

Thomas was always the one who took care of the family. With no father, he'd been the man of the house. Ben had just started high school when Thomas graduated and got hired on at the plant. That was also the year their mother got diagnosed with cancer. Thomas worked double shifts to provide the only income, but the moment Thomas was able to save a little money for his own there was always a repair to be made—the roof needing to be replaced, a crumbling foundation that had to be repaired, broken appliances, and new parts for the car. There were the groceries and the bills. Thomas seemed to learn quick though how to decide which he could pay and which he could let slide until the next month, telling Ben when he shouldn't answer the phone because it might be a bill collector, or warning him not to be surprised if they came home without electricity. “It might be off when you get home but it'll be taken care of within the day,” Thomas's voice on the answering machine would say. “All the food should be fine but maybe go ahead and cook the fish.”

Thomas learned how to budget, buying only the necessities—whole milk that could be stretched thin with water, bulk discounted meat that he packed in their freezer, canned vegetables he had to make sure to rinse under water to drain them of the salt.

Soon the medical bills came, and Thomas found he couldn't keep up. No matter how many hours he put in it wasn't enough to surmount the debt they were accumulating. Eventually, he let it go, took the bills and stacked them on their living room table and forgot about. He paid what he could but only that, convincing himself that the rest would sort itself out.

The one thing Thomas made sure to always pay for was Bree. It was almost half his paycheck to pay her own, the cut a deep one in their dwindling income, but it was either pay for Bree or have their mother dying in the hospital where the cost for her death would have been double. Even then Ben saw that Thomas's choice was one driven by economics as much as love.

But Ben had been there. Before Bree, was Ben who took care of her. He had not worked, but nights he would often go and crawl in the bed beside her because she did not want to sleep alone. He closed his eyes as she wrapped her arms around him, and it was like he was a child again, a child who needed his mother, but this time she was the one who needed him.

He had not bought the food but he cooked the meals. He knew his mother's medications and when she needed to take them. He told her stories when she got tired of the only voices being the ones that came from their television. Unlike Thomas, he was there. His actions had to carry some sort of meaning, Ben thought. Maybe not the same as Thomas's, but it should mean something.

Had Ben been the one older, would he have stepped up in the same way as Thomas had once they'd learned about their mother? Ben couldn't be sure. They had the same blood in their veins but Ben was not his brother, and so if the obligation had come to him instead he didn't know what he would have done.

But, maybe a part of him did know. He would have failed, because Ben was not Thomas. He was not made the same as his brother, and in the end he would have failed both of them.

This was the real reason as to why it took him so long to call. Once again, Thomas took care of the hard parts—losing the house, going through the remainder of their belongings and deciding what needed to be saved. He had made the decisions about their mother's burial. Ben had offered nothing then and could offer nothing now. It was selfish, he knew, but knowing didn't stop him from changing.

It was Darvis that made Ben reconsider. They were on their lunch breaks at work. During the day when it was slow the manager didn't care if they ate their meals in the front of the house, as long as they sat near the back toward the doors leading to the kitchen. They were nearly finished. Stacks of plates with the remnants of their meals sat on the table's edge. Darvis was finishing his last plate. With a piece of cornbread in one hand and his fork in the other he scooped up the remaining collards and stuffed them in his mouth. He took a sip from his glass of water when his cell rang.

"What is it?" Darvis asked. Ben watched his expression change, a glimmer of darkness evident on his face before he said he'd call whoever was on the phone later. He hung up and immediately his eyes brightened again.

"My brother," Darvis said. "Or one of them rather."

“How many do you have?”

“Eight.”

“Eight?” Ben asked in a tone that made Darvis look up. “Sorry, I just—eight’s a lot.”

“Yeah, no kidding. There was no privacy in the house I grew up in with all of us on top of each other.”

“What’s wrong? For a moment you seemed worried.”

“I’m fine. They like to worry me with dumb shit, sometimes for fun because they know I’ll always answer.”

Darvis explained that since they were all separated across the state with some of them in different colleges and the younger ones still at home, they all made a promise that if one called the other they’d always pick up.

“So I always pick up if I can, especially if it’s one of my younger brothers back home. They seem to be having a harder time with over half of us gone.” Darvis tucked the phone back inside his pocket. He finished the food on his plate and set it aside with the others. “What about you? Any brothers or sisters?”

“Just one, a brother. I haven’t talked to him since I’ve been here.”

“Why?”

Ben hesitated as he tried to think of an answer. “He wants a path for my life I don’t want.”

“And what path is that?”

Ben explained about the plant and how Thomas has pestered him to apply for a job there.

“Even though they’ve been cutting back. No one there’s going to have jobs for much longer,” he said.

“Sounds like you made the right decision then.”

“Yeah.”

“Still,” Darvis said. “You still should call him. He’s your brother. Family’s all we got in this world.”

Darvis’s break ended first. He carried both his and Ben’s plates to the kitchen to be washed and then went to finish his shift. Ben sat for a few minutes longer thinking about what Darvis had said. He didn’t want to call Thomas, but Darvis was right. Thomas was all Ben had, and he should at least know that Ben was all right.

“What’s wrong with you?” Thomas said when he heard Ben’s voice. “Have you even been checking your phone? I’ve been calling every day, sometimes two, three times a day in between my shifts. Where are you?”

“I told you in the note. I’m looking for a job.”

“You had a job. All you had to do was go in and take it.”

“I wanted to get a job on my own, but not just a job—a life.”

“Well,” Thomas said. “So you don’t plan on coming back then?”

“I guess not.”

“I guess that’s good since I’ve been going through our stuff and selling what I can and what I can’t throwing it away. They’re going to take the house so we’re not going to get anything from that.”

“I don’t care about any of that,” Ben said.

“Right,” Thomas said. “Like you’ve never cared about any of the hard stuff.”

Ben had to hold his rising anger in. “Okay, nice talking to you Thomas. I guess I better go.”

“Wait, no Ben, hold on,” Thomas said, interrupting Ben from ending the call. “Listen, I went through the attic. Mom had kept a lot of junk up there. Some of it was stuff from our childhood—boxes of old drawings, toys, things like that, but there was a couple of boxes of her stuff too.”

“Like what?”

“Clothes mostly. A few books.”

“Thomas, why are you telling me this?”

“Ben, I found something,” he said, cutting to the chase. “It has to do with our father.”

“We don’t have a father.”

“Ben—”

“We don’t have a father,” Ben repeated, surprised at the steadiness in his voice. “You were always the one that said it. We don’t have a father. Whatever you found, it doesn’t matter. I don’t want to know.”

“But Ben, this is different.”

“I said I don’t want to know.”

“Fine,” Thomas said. “I still need an address to send this money.”

Ben was quiet, and Thomas, recognizing the reason for Ben’s hesitancy, let out an exasperated sigh. “Ben I don’t care where you are. You’re old enough to do what you want, but this is your share of the inheritance and I need to send to you so I can at least move on,” Thomas said.

“So tell me someplace I can send it.”

“What about a Western Union?”

“Fine. What city.”

Ben gave him the name of a town a half hour’s drive away. He felt a little ridiculous doing it, but for some reason, the distance made it easier in his mind to keep of his illusion.

Thomas didn’t seem to care the name of the town after Ben told him. He explained that the money would be there later the next afternoon.

“One last thing. What do you want me to do with your belongings?”

“What?”

“All your stuff. Is there anything in particular you want me to hold on and keep?”

Ben told him he’d have to think about it and then he hung up the phone. The next day he went to pick up the money. It was close to two thousand dollars. His inheritance. It wasn’t much and wouldn’t last long, but it was enough to get him started. Ben took the money and then drove to the post office. Not wanting to call and hear Thomas’s voice again, Ben had written him a letter. A small note written on one of Darvis’s scrap pieces of paper. An old homework assignment was printed on the front of it. Ben took the paper, flipped it, and wrote a message to Thomas, explaining how he wanted nothing of his to be saved. *Sell everything you can*, he’d written, telling Thomas to sell it all.

IV.

Ben never knew his father. He knew next to nothing about him beyond the fact that once he existed. Their mother explained that he left when Thomas and Ben were children, close to still being babies. It was shortly after the birth of Ben when he packed a few items of clothing into a suitcase and left them all.

“Why did he leave?” Ben asked her then.

“I don’t know. Who knows why?” she responded.

“Was it because of us?”

“No, it wasn’t because of you or Thomas.”

“How do you know?”

She was quiet, her lips pursed tight. “I just know,” she said.

“Of course it was because of us,” Thomas told Ben later as they were lying in their beds. “If I wasn’t because of us then what was it?”

“Mom said she didn’t know.”

“He didn’t want us. She just didn’t want to tell us that that was the reason.”

“But Thomas—”

“Maybe he didn’t want you,” Thomas snapped. “She said he left after you were born, not me.”

“Why would you say something like that?”

Ben could hear him turning around in his bed. The sheets rustling against his skin.

“I’m sorry,” he said quietly. “I didn’t mean it.”

“Why would you say it though?”

“I don’t know. You just ask too many questions Ben. Sometimes things are just the way they are and there’s no use in asking a bunch of questions about it.”

Thomas settled back into the pillows, seeming to believe that the conversation between them was over, but Ben continued to stay awake. After a few minutes he whispered Thomas’s name again. Thomas ignored him the first few times, so Ben said his name louder, until Thomas had no choice but to answer.

“What is it now?”

“Do you remember him?” Ben asked. “Anything about our father?”

Thomas turned back around and sat up in the bed. In the dark, Ben could only see the shape of Thomas’s body as he leaned against the headboard thinking about Ben’s question. “Sometimes I think I do, but—”

“What?”

“I realize I’m remembering someone else,” he said. “Then I try and forget about it.”

“But haven’t you wanted to know what happened?”

“What’s the point? Knowing or not knowing isn’t going to change that, and anyway maybe it’s better not knowing what happened. At least this way the answer could be whatever you want it to be.”

Thomas told Ben to get some sleep. He leaned back down onto the mattress and this time pulled one of the pillows over his ears to block him from hearing anymore of Ben’s questions. Ben left him alone, but that night he couldn’t sleep, his thoughts keeping him awake until the sun’s light signaled morning.

The answer could be whatever you want it to be, Thomas had said, and Ben took his advice. He began to invent stories to explain away his father's absence. He made up deaths elaborate and exotic. His father was a zookeeper and had gotten eaten alive by a tiger, or swallowed whole by a whale like Jonah in the Bible. His father was an undercover spy gone on an extensive mission in the Ukraine.

His father was in the witness protection program. Ben imagined his father alone on a farm somewhere similar to their own but perhaps instead on the grassy plains of Nebraska or the corn fields of Iowa.

Sometimes in his imaginings his father was alive but just gone. A truck driver on the last leg of a drive, soon making his way home, for instance. A traveling salesman who needs one more sell. A pilot flying a plane internationally—over the alps in Switzerland or the sandy beaches of Turkey.

As the years passed and Ben got older, he stopped making up stories. He eventually came to the same conclusion as Thomas. It didn't matter what happened to their father, why he left, or where he was now. The point was their father was gone and he wasn't coming back.

Still, there was a longing. A longing for truth, an answer for what he never knew. Ben thought he'd closed it out, but he found he needed to know about his father, and if Thomas had discovered something important enough that he felt the urge to tell Ben, then he had to know what it was. His whole life he felt as if he didn't know because how could he? Ghosts were the echoes of the people we once were, and Ben's father wasn't even that. He was nothing. To his family it was as if he'd never existed.

The thing Ben wondered was what of his actions belonged to the man he didn't know? His shyness, trepidation, and his fear. More importantly, if he knew who his father was, about the man he'd been, would it have changed Ben in some way? On a Monday afternoon when Ben knew Thomas would be getting off from his shift, Ben called his brother. "What have you found?" he asked when he heard Thomas's voice.

"Letters," Thomas answered. "There's a bunch of letters and a couple of photographs."

Thomas wouldn't tell him anything else, said it was better instead if he just mailed it. "I'll make copies of the letters but I think you should have some of these photos," Thomas said, "but this time I need your address. Wherever you're living Ben."

"Okay," Ben said, relenting, and he gave him Darvis's address.

"I'll mail it today," Thomas said, and he hung up the phone.

The envelope came two days later. Ben had let Darvis know it was coming so he'd be on the lookout. Darvis checked the mail that morning before he left for class, saw the envelope addressed to Ben, and came back upstairs to place it on the table beside the futon where Ben slept. He woke and saw it, ripping the letter open immediately.

Ben saw the photographs first. There were two of them, both taken with one of those polaroid style cameras that were fading from popularity. In the first one Ben recognized his mother immediately. She looked young, a few years older than Ben's age now. She stood next to another man in front of a one-story house, painted white with black shutters. The man's arm was around her waist. Both of them smiled toward whoever took the photo.

Ben didn't recognize the house. Since it wasn't their own it might have belonged to whoever took the photo. Or it belonged to the man in the photo who he also didn't recognize.

The second photo was only of the man. Ben held this one closer, focused hard on the man's face. Even though the man was black, a skin a honey golden color, there was a familiarity in his features—in the shape of his eyes, the furrow of his brow, in the side-smile he gave to the camera. He couldn't be sure, but he looked at the photo and saw something that reminded him of himself.

He set both photographs on the table and began to read the letter. He was careful in unfolding the paper. There were a few tears along the edges and Ben did not want to rip them further.

It was a love letter from a man named Allen Wright written to Ben's mother. They'd had some sort of fight and Allen left. He wanted to come back and be a family, or at least see his children. He was written to ask for permission if it would be okay if he came. He said he would be in the area. All she had to do was come, bring the children with her. At the very least, he wanted to see them once more and if she wanted it he would leave for good.

There was nothing else.

"Thomas, what is this?" Ben blurted out the question. He'd called Thomas immediately after opening the letter.

"It's what I told you I found in the attic," he responded. Thomas sounded tired this time, as if he too had been toiling over answers to the questions these pieces brought forth.

“You said letters though, that there were more. What’s in the others?”

“They don’t mention much, and they mostly circle around the same thing—that he wanted to come back but our mother wouldn’t let him. He asked questions about his kids. He wanted her to write back. I’m not sure what happened between them. My guess is she broke it off but I don’t know why.”

Thomas didn’t seem to want to bring up the larger issue, the one hedging in the back of Ben’s mind, so finally he said it. “Thomas, the man in the photo is black. Are you trying to tell me that this man is our father?”

“I know he is,” Thomas said.

“Thomas—”

“Did you read the letter? Did you look at the dates?”

“Yes.”

“It’s him, Ben.”

“But why would she keep this from us?”

“I don’t know.”

“What are we supposed to do? Find him? Is there an address?”

“No, all that there was I copied and sent to you.”

“We need to find him.”

“How?”

“I don’t know, but we can’t just ignore this. What if he’s out there?”

“I think he’s gone Ben.”

“What makes you think that?”

“I just know,” Thomas said.

“I gotta go.”

“Ben, are you really not coming back?”

“No, Thomas. I can’t.”

“Well, then you need to know I’m leaving too. I’ve done everything that’s necessary. The bank’s given me a month before I have to leave. I gave my notice yesterday at work. If you’re going to leave I’m leaving too. Nothing’s holding me here. The only thing would have been you, and you’re gone.”

“Where are you going?”

“I don’t know yet. I just know I can’t stay here either. I bought one of those pay as you go phones for emergencies. If you need anything you can call it. Here, let me give you the number.”

“No, that’s all right.”

“Ben don’t be ridiculous. You got a pen and some paper? Write this down.”

He listened to his brother and wrote down the number he gave him. “All right, I got it,” he said.

“Read it back to me.”

Ben did. Thomas, now sounding satisfied, went back to talking about his plans. “I was thinking of maybe going down to the coast. Living by the water. I don’t know what I’ll do down there though.”

“Sounds nice.”

“Yeah,” Thomas said, his voice carrying a wistfulness Ben hadn’t heard before.

“Ben, it’s really him,” he said, changing the subject. You may not want to believe it but he’s our father. I don’t know why mom never told us. I don’t know what the story was,

but at least one secret is out in the open, and at least we know now. There's something to be said for that."

V.

Darvis was in class for another hour. Ben decided that would find him later and tell him about the letter. Until then though he had some time to kill. He left the apartment and took a walk, not sure of where he was going. He went to the quad, the place he'd first saw when he came to this campus. Even then, he'd noticed how fractured the community felt. As he walked along the grass he glanced at each of the couples he saw holding hands and noticed how many of the pairs were the same—white and white, black and black, Asian and Asian. Ben paid attention to all of the groups he saw, where each of them sat and with whom. They too were also the same, and he wondered what had happened to make it be this way. The semester had barely started and all of these students were here, away from family and friends and everything they knew, and yet they came here and had splintered off into the familiar, but then maybe that was why they did it. Sameness was familiarity and it could provide a comfort.

He thought back to the day he'd met Darvis. How he'd come up to Ben to talk and how later invited him to stay simply because he had needed a place, all the while not caring that he was white. In all of their conversations he'd never even brought it up. It seemed strange to Ben now that he hadn't, especially because everywhere he looked it appeared to him that it should matter.

But it turned out Ben wasn't white after all. Maybe Darvis had known all this time, looking at him and seeing what he himself could not. He could look at his face and know deep down the blood that ran through him was also black blood, same as his, and that they were the same.

When it was time for Darvis's class to end, he began walking to the building. Known as Rolpers, it was a large white brick structure with several benches situated in the front of it. Ben sat down at one and waited. The students stumbled out, crowding each other as they pushed the doors open and ventured out into the sunlight.

"Darvis!" Ben yelled when he saw him. Darvis heard his name and turned in Ben's direction immediately. He smiled.

"A+ baby," he said. "First exam and best in the class."

Darvis slammed the paper down hard on the bench so that Ben could see. Ben picked it up, noting the grade marked in pen before handing it back to him. "We should celebrate," he said.

"No shit we should celebrate, but both you and I are broke until pay day so what can we do with no money?"

"I have enough we could spring for some pizza, if you want it."

Darvis agreed. They decided to go to Progino's, a pizza place that catered to the undergraduates at the university. The restaurant had kitschy Italian decor. The wood-paneled walls were even cluttered with cheap frames filled with copies of Italian celebrities. They walked in and Ben noticed all of the photographs. Darvis, taking note, pointed to one.

"You two look alike," he said. He began marking the facial similarities until Ben was able to recognize it for himself.

They went to the front register. The man working the register was older, Ben thought maybe he was the owner. There were two other men in the back kitchen area, both of them rolling out balls of floured dough.

The owner didn't glance up as Darvis rattled off their order. He told them the price and Ben handed him the money.

Since the restaurant was empty Darvis took a table in the center. As they waited for their pizza Darvis's attention turned back to the photographs.

"Have you seen *Do the Right Thing?*" he asked.

"No."

"Whenever I come in here I'm reminded of a scene in it. This character goes into this Italian shop in this predominantly black area in a New York borough. Inside there's all these pictures of famous Italian Americans and the guy asks the owner why there aren't any black people on the wall, you know, since the only people who ever come in there are black. The owner basically tells him to fuck off and that he can do whatever he wants since it's his restaurant anyway."

"Huh," Ben said. "I'll have to watch it sometime."

They ate their pizza and Ben talked about his classes. So far he was pulling A's in all of them except for one where participation was a large focus of their overall grade.

"You should be doing well then. In classes you're always speaking up."

"Yeah."

Darvis looked toward the cashier and saw their pizza was ready. He shot up to get it and came back, placed the box on the table. "I got it to-go for leftovers," he said, taking out a slice and stuffing close to half in his mouth. He took out another piece and set it before Ben.

"So," Ben said, pushing further on Darvis had slumped back in the booth.

"What's the problem?"

Darvis stopped eating. He took a napkin and wiped his mouth. “We were reading this story in class. James Baldwin, which white people love to bring in. It’s like—he’s the one, you know? Out of all the black writers there are he’s the one they seem to remember and latch on to. So we’re talking about this story, *Going to Meet the Man*. Have you read it?”

“No.”

“It’s about a lynching. Well, that’s the main event of it. It’s written in the perspective of a white cop who remembers as a kid when his parents took him to a lynching.”

“I imagine that went well in class.”

“Yeah, it went as well as you would think,” Darvis said. He coughed, glanced around the room a moment before picking back up with the story. “We weren’t talking about the lynching though, it was this other part in the beginning. The cop is talking about this other memory of this interaction with this black kid. The cop had gone to this woman’s house looking for her and sees this kid and they have this exchange. No one in the class understood what was happening. That the kid was mocking the officer. No one got it and Ms. Kempft got frustrated, I guess. I don’t know what her thinking was, but when everyone got quiet and she couldn’t take it anymore she turned to me and called out my name. “So,” she said. “Darvis what do you think? Can you tell us what’s happening here?”

Darvis said that everyone shifted in their seats to face him. “He wasn’t sure what he thought,” he said, which wasn’t the truth. He knew, but he didn’t want to have to answer, to explain, especially not when the entire class seemed to be expecting him to

offer a point of view different than theirs. That was the point of her calling him out, because she assumed he would, and that assumption kept him quiet.

She stood there in the front of the class, hands on her hips, hoping to wait him out, but Darvis kept quiet. He slunk back in his seat and in response she shook her head and returned her attention to the class. “Okay, well, I just want to remind you all that participation is thirty percent of your grade, and each day you get points for speaking, and are deducted points for not.”

“It’s little things like that that bother me,” Darvis told him after he’d relayed the story. “The compilation of them happening over and over again. I know it shouldn’t matter. It’s dumb compared to everything else, but it bothers me. Now in class it’s all I think about. Everything I say is tainted with this understanding that I’m offering a black perspective on things and not just my own. I want it to be my own. Why can’t it be my own?”

“I don’t know.”

“I shouldn’t have said anything.”

“No, it’s all right. I’m glad you told me, but I think—maybe you just have to let it go somehow. If you want the grade you’re going to have to speak.”

“It’s not that easy.”

No, it’s not, but what else are you going to do?”

“Of course you can say that. You don’t know what it’s like.”

Ben could tell Darvis hadn’t meant the comment as an insult, but that’s what it was. He couldn’t know because he was white.

“Whatever. I’m tired of talking about this. Let’s talk about something else.”

“Okay. Hey, thanks for getting my brother’s letter for me this morning,” Ben said.

“Oh, yeah, I forgot about that. Glad you got it.”

Darvis didn’t ask what was in it but Ben continued anyway. “Thomas said he was stuff he found about my family, about my father, but I looked at and I don’t know.”

“Well, what was it?”

Ben reached down in his pocket and handed him the photos and the letter. Darvis stared at both them both before deciding to read the letter first. Afterward, he looked back at the photos.

“This your mother?”

“Yes.”

“She’s pretty,” he said, pausing. “I’m sorry about—you know.”

“Thanks.”

Darvis focused on the photo while Ben waited. He watched Darvis’s eyes shift from the image of the woman to that of the man. “Who’s the guy?” he asked, finally looking up.

“My brother thinks that’s my father.”

Darvis glanced at the image again before returning Ben’s gaze. “*This* is your dad?”

“Apparently.”

“You’re black?”

“Yeah, seems that way.”

“And you’re just learning this now?”

“Yeah.

“Well damn,” he said. “You’re like those people on those reality shows. You know what I’m talking about? Where some KKK member or whatever comes on and the host let’s them spout all their racism for the first segment and then they do a DNA test and it turns out—surprise! You’re really part African and you’re not the pure white power blood you thought you were.

“Except I’m not a member of the Klan.”

“Right, except for that part.”

“Not everyone from the rural south is part of the Klan.”

“Right, I know. I’m just saying—I mean, it’s a joke.”

“Also, this isn’t a show. It’s real. It’s my life.”

“Right,” Darvis repeated. As he said it he slowly realized his mistake. “Oh, I’m sorry,” he said. “It’s just—wow.”

“Who is this guy? What am I supposed to do with this? A letter and some photos? My mother went my whole life keeping this a secret. I thought I knew her. She was my mother, but she hid this from me and I don’t know why.”

“I don’t know man. I can’t answer any of that for you. Sometimes people just surprise you with who they really are. Even people you think you’ve always known.”

At that moment a group into the restaurant. It was evident they’d just come from the string of bars near the restaurant and were coming in to looking for food to help sober up before they ventured home. They were loud and unwieldy as they stumbled over each other to slide into a nearby booth.

“We should go soon,” Darvis said.

“Why? They’re not closing for at least another hour.”

“It’s still getting late though.”

“Hey you,” he said, pointing to Darvis. “Hey, I know you.”

“Come on, grab the leftover pizza. Let’s go.”

Darvis got up from the table quickly. Ben sat for a few seconds longer, not understanding the reason for the hurry. Noticing Ben’s hesitancy, he picked up the pizza boxes himself and motioned for Ben to go.

“Where are you going?”

Darvis ignored him but he blocked his way from leaving. Ben was behind him and he backed up a few steps. Darvis tried to as well but the guy reached and put his hand on his shoulder. “Hold on now,” he said, and Darvis stopped.

“What is it?”

“Where do I know you from?”

“Nowhere.”

“That’s not true,” he slurred. Darvis kept quiet. Around him the two others he’d come into the restaurant with began to gather. The two girls they were with hadn’t bothered to stand. They continued sitting in their booth but with their eyes focused on Ben and Darvis.

“This is going to bother me. Where do I know you from? Come on, tell me.”

“We don’t know each other. Not really.”

“There it is!” he shouted. “You just admitted it. We’ve met before. Where was it? Tell me where it was.”

“I said nowhere.”

The leader was at least a foot taller than Darvis. He stood

“We’re just going to go,” Ben interrupted.

“Was anyone talking to you?”

“We’re going,” Ben told them all. He took a couple more steps back and Darvis followed.

Ben moved slowly. With each step he took he was afraid it might provoke them to do whatever it seemed like they were intent on doing. Ben took another step and he could see their hands raising in the air, their bodies clenched from the tension waiting to erupt. He tried to calm his heart, to slow his breathing, to steady himself for what was coming.

Ben got the first punch, right in the jaw. He tumbled back, reeling from the force of it. Darvis saw Ben fall and went to him, helping him to steady himself, before he went back to the group. He was about to swing when the owner quickly appeared and got between all of them.

“Out!” he yelled, gesturing to Darvis and Ben. “Both of you out.”

“I was the one who got hit,” Ben responded.

“Out,” he repeated. “Or I call the police.”

“Let’s just go Ben,” Darvis said.

Ben didn’t want to go but he saw he had no choice. The leader of the group smirked at them as Ben relented. He reached down for the pizza boxes he’d dropped from the commotion. One of the boxes had opened and the pizza had fallen out. The dark red sauce had smeared around all the floor, tainting it like blood.

“Just leave it,” Darvis told Ben as he grabbed one of the boxes. Ben nodded and set it back.

They left the restaurant and stood out in front of its entrance. Most of the other places to get food were closed now. In each direction Ben looked he saw darkened windows and empty buildings.

“What were you doing in there?” Darvis asked, directing his anger toward Ben.
“What was all that?”

“What are you talking about?” Ben responded, perplexed.

“I could have handled it. You didn’t need to step in like that.”

“I didn’t think that’s what I was doing.”

“Well that’s what it felt like.”

“I’m the one that got hit,” Ben said. Now that they were outside in the cold he could feel the swollen sting of pain in his jaw. His fingers rubbed over the skin, feeling where he’d taken the hit.

“I didn’t ask for you to help me,” Darvis said. “I didn’t need your help.”

“Where’s this coming from?” Ben asked but Darvis ignored him. He didn’t understand why he was so insistent about it. They’d been outnumbered. Had the fight continued Ben was sure not only would they have lost but would have ended up in the ER, and what had Darvis wanted anyway? For him to do nothing? To stand there and watch as a group of white boys beat him up?

“Darvis, did you know those guys?”

“No.”

“It sure seemed like they knew you though. Are you sure?”

“I told you I said no.”

“Okay,” Ben said, not wanting to push it further. “What do you want to do now?”

“We should probably just go home.”

VI.

Ben was surprised when the next morning Darvis suggested to him they go to the library to find out more about his father.

“I thought—” Ben stopped, rubbed his eyes. Darvis was already dressed and ready to go.

“You thought what?”

“That you wouldn’t want to help me after last night,” Ben said.

“You thought wrong. Now get up and put some pants on. The library opens at noon on Saturdays and I don’t have a shift until tonight. We’ve got the whole day to try and figure this out.”

“I can do it. You don’t have to help me,” Ben said, his comment echoing Darvis’s own sentiments the night before.

“I want to,” Darvis said. “The truth is, I’m kind of curious too. As long as you don’t feel it’s an intrusion.”

“Well let’s go then!” Darvis yelled.

Ben got up from the futon and found a fresh pair of jeans from his suitcase.

On the way, Darvis mentioned they could also try going to the state archives.

“You could look through census records. Maybe find his birth certificate. Other addresses. It could help paint a better picture and fill in some holes.”

“It’s all a hole. All I have is a name.”

“That may be enough to get you started.”

Darvis explained that the state archives were over an hour's drive. "You'd have to do it another day if you wanted to go. I can tell you how to get there and what to try and look for if you do it."

"You could come too."

"I could," Darvis said. "If you wanted."

They got to the library. Ben deferred to Ben, following him as he made his way through the various sections of the building. He followed him up a several staircases and then down a hall to a small room full of computers. He immediately settled into one of the seats. "Are you going to sit too or what?" he asked Ben when he continued standing next to him.

Ben sat in the nearby seat. He took out Thomas's envelope, held it in his hands. His fingers ran over the printed script. In all these years Thomas had never perfected his handwriting. As a child he'd been forced to write with his right hand despite the awareness of his left hand being the dominant one. In the evenings when he had to do his homework, he defied his teachers and continued writing with his left. Eventually, with their continuous scoldings he learned to use his other hand, but his cursive, even now, looked as if it was written by a child.

This, somehow, was amusing to Ben now. Thomas had always been the adult. The strong one. The sensible one. The one who knew how to handle hard decisions, who made the hard decisions. Thomas gave up a dream of college and got a job at the plant. Thomas worked so their family wouldn't starve. Thomas was the father neither of them had.

When Ben looked at Thomas's writing, though, he saw the boy he once was—defiant but also vulnerable and, in a way, like him.

"What was his name?" Darvis asked. "Tell it to me again."

Ben unfolded the paper and handed it to him. His eyes scanned the letter Thomas had given him.

"Wright, it says." "Allen Wright."

"Okay," Darvis said, typing in the name. He waited a few seconds as the computer pulled up all the matches with the name, and Darvis scrolled down through them. He took a long time reading through, ignoring Ben as he sat in silence. The room was empty except for the two of them. It was quiet enough that Ben felt he could hear his own breathing if he listened close.

"Find anything?" he finally asked.

"Nothing yet."

Darvis was quiet as he read. Occasionally, he'd make a few more clicks over a piece of information he found and Ben would perk up as he waited for Darvis to explain what he saw, but each time Darvis just sighed and went back to reading.

Then, something did catch his attention. He quickly glanced at Ben before turning back to the screen.

"What? What is it?" Ben asked.

"What was his name again?"

"Allen Wright," Ben said, his heart racing. "What did you find? What does it say?"

Ben pushed his chair next to Darvis, then he leaned toward the computer screen to see what Darvis had been reading.

It was an article about a man who'd disappeared. His wife had reported him missing and the police found his body in a park.

"This man went missing," Ben said.

"Yeah, that's what it says."

"That can't be him. I don't believe it. Why would my mother have lied all these years if this was the reason?"

"Maybe she never wanted you to know. I'm not sure I'd want to know."

"You would," Ben said, sitting back in his seat. "You'd want to know."

"What do you want to do?"

"I don't know."

"There's more here," Darvis said.

Darvis read it quickly, sensing Ben's growing discomfort with the news. There was another family. In the article, there was no mention of Ben's mother or of him and Thomas. The article mentioned a girlfriend. She'd been pregnant at the time.

"He had an affair with my mother. That's it. That's why she never told."

"You don't know that Ben. There are other possibilities."

"Yeah, but neither of them are good ones."

Darvis couldn't respond to this. They both continued staring at the article's headline. There was a blurry photo of the park where he was found and the image of it brought back to Ben the memory of the past summer. He closed his eyes in an attempt to get away from the image, but even with his eyes closed he was able to remember.

“I have another brother out there.”

“It seems like you might. Hell, we could even be brothers. The dates match up.”

Ben glanced and Darvis interrupted his thought. “We’re not though. Don’t even go there.”

“Right,” Ben said.

“Maybe it isn’t him,” Darvis said. “The name is not that unique.”

“The same name in the same area. It has to be.”

“Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“They called it a suicide,” Ben reached out and pointed to a spot on the screen.

“Look, see? A suicide, which doesn’t make any sense. How does someone slit their own throat? And why would he go out in the middle of nowhere to do it?”

“I don’t know,” Darvis said. “Well, I do know. It’s the same story that’s always been. This shit man, it’s been going on for so long. Black people disappearing. Black people dying. I don’t know about you but I’m tired of it, and yet it keeps happening because no one cares. We’re all complicit when you think about it because we all let this continue to happen.”

Ben felt his stomach churning. He had to stand. “I need to find a bathroom,” he told Darvis, getting up and walking quickly out of the room. He found the nearest bathroom and went into the stall, stood over the toilet, and waited. He braced himself for his body’s reaction, but nothing happened. He continued waiting, but eventually the feeling passed and he left the stall and went to the sink.

He ran the tap, gathered a small pool of cold water in his hands, and brought it to his face. He did it once more. Droplets of the water fell down his neck and soaked his shirt. He did it again.

When he was finished he reached for a paper towel and dried his face. Between the water and the rough surface of the paper towel patches of his skin had turned a ruddy color from irritation. Ben looked closer at his reflection. He did not know the person he saw staring back at him.

But, perhaps he'd never known, and that was the problem. Perhaps it was now as he looked back at himself in the mirror, when he finally began to see who he really was.

VII.

“So I guess you’re a black man now,” Darvis finally said as they walked the way home. “A black man who doesn’t look black. A black man who’s white.”

It was a good twenty-minute walk from the library back to Darvis’s apartment, but Ben had decided to take a longer way which led them out of campus and through one of the poorer sections of the town. Darvis didn’t say anything as he followed Ben, letting him take through the neighborhood. Small, single family homes lines the streets, but they were shoddy, many of them appearing to fall into disrepair. As they walked, Ben noticed that the grass became littered with trash and not fragments of glass from broken bottles.

It was until they got to this neighborhood when Darvis decided to speak up and break the silence between them.

“I don’t feel black,” Ben said.

He hadn’t meant anything by the statement, but Darvis stiffed immediately.

“What is ‘feeling black’ supposed to mean?” Darvis asked.

“I don’t know,” Ben said, trying to downplay the statement. “I don’t know what I’m saying.”

“Yes you do, and it’s that kind of thinking that let’s racism continue.”

“You’re taking this too seriously. I’m not racist.”

“You’re being defensive.”

“So are you,” Ben said, annoyed that Darvis was turning this into another conversation about how there was another thing Ben didn’t understand. “You’re being the same as me. You’re just as defensive.”

“Okay, okay,” Darvis said. “But I hear a comment like that and I hear that you think black people are just so different from white people—that they act different, speak different, are different, but we’re just the same as you. I mean, look at me—I’m not that different than you Ben. I wasn’t before and I’m not now.”

“You,” Ben repeated. “You said ‘you.’”

“Yeah? So?”

“‘We’re just the same as you.’ Meaning me and other white people, but I’m not white.”

“Close enough,” Darvis scoffed.

“You’re doing the exact same thing you accused me of doing. Don’t you see that? I’m not all of white people. I don’t represent a group just like you don’t either.”

Ben wanted Darvis to acknowledge the truth in what he said but he only nodded, appearing to agree. Considering the day they’d had, and the night before, Ben didn’t want to further another argument and decided Darvis’s response would have to be enough.

“I’m apparently not white anyways remember.”

Darvis stopped walking when he heard that and turned to face him. He gave a hard look at Ben’s face. He leaned close enough that Ben could feel his breath on his skin. He smelled the dried sweat on his clothes. Ben kept still as Darvis’s eyes met his own. “Look at you,” he said. “You know, I can see it now. If I look close enough. The black in you.”

“You can?” Ben asked, incredulous.

“Yeah, I mean. Now that I know I can. I wasn’t looking before even though I should have known. I should have been able to see it.”

“Quit fucking with me.”

“I’m not man. I’m telling you I see it now. Your hair, the curl of it now that it’s growing out some. Your skin tans well and the only reason for that is because of the melanin you got. Your facial features though, they’re all European ones—your shape of your nose, for instance, but if you look hard enough you can see.”

“Really?”

“No, you were right. I was fucking with you,” Darvis quickly said, giving a loud howl of a laugh. He laughed so hard he almost buckled over from the joke. “I can’t tell. You look just as white as any of the other white boys I see walking around here. Blonde, brunette, tanned or not, it’s all white to me. How am I supposed to tell that shit?”

“I don’t know,” Ben said, annoyed. He began to pick up his pace along the sidewalk, leaving Darvis behind. Darvis gave a quick job to catch up.

“Oh come on I was just playing,” he said. “Look, race is complicated. Why do you think the one-drop rule existed in the first place? So people that looked like you wouldn’t pass, because think about it—if there are people like you running around, what’s the difference then between someone like you and another person who *is* white? There isn’t, but they wanted to say there was so they created the one-drop rule. You got one drop of black in you, then you’re black. So you’re black my friend, even though you look white to me.”

Maybe the reason Ben felt he didn’t belong was because he didn’t know where exactly he was supposed to be. He was a white man but he wasn’t. He was black and yet he wasn’t. He was both and neither.

If there was anything Ben had learned it was that there existed very different worlds for people depending on how they appeared to others. Even though both of them were poor, life was not the same for Darvis as it was Ben and would not be the same based on the simple fact of their skin. This, Ben knew.

What Ben didn't know was which world he belonged to. Where does a man go who has lived his life white only to discover that he wasn't? It should not matter, but it did. This, also, Ben knew.

As the two of them walked, Ben thought about what Darvis said. His mind went to Mary, over a story she'd told him once about a great uncle who'd left the family and moved north. He sent only one letter shortly afterward, letting them all know he opened his own business, a cleaner's somewhere in New York. He told them he wouldn't write again and the envelope didn't have a return address.

"I knew a girl once who had someone in her family pass for white," Ben said, thinking of Mary's story.

"Yeah? I think it happened a lot, or at least more than we think. Those light enough would leave their family and just disappear. Back then it wasn't like you could contact them again, because if people found out it was all for nothing. You had to basically start over—new name, new identity, a whole new life story. I'm not sure I could do it. I don't know. What about you? If you had the chance for a better life and all you had to do was pretend to be someone else, wouldn't you do it?"

It was exactly what Ben was doing now, he realized. He was passing, although not for a better life, but he was passing out of a rejection of his other one. He had cast off

a part of his life's story in the hope of changing his future and the man he would become. It was the same, and yet it wasn't.

Ben wanted to tell Darvis then, tell him everything—that he wasn't who he'd said he was, that he wasn't a student, that he had a brother he'd left and a mother who'd died. He wanted to tell him the reason he'd come here, about Mary, but he realized that if he told Darvis all of that then he'd also have to tell him about the man they'd found in the barn, the man they'd left, a man who it seemed had fallen victim to the same fate as Ben's own father, and he felt so much shame over what he'd done that when he looked at Darvis he couldn't do it. He couldn't say any of it and so he kept silent, hoping Darvis would say something else.

"It's all a construct, these types of distinctions," Darvis said. "It makes me tired to think of the things we do over it though."

"Yeah, I understand."

"No, you don't," Darvis snapped. It was the first time he heard an angry edge in his voice and it took Ben aback. Darvis must have recognized the expression on Ben's face in response, so he continued. "You've lived your entire life as a white man. You have privileges that come with your whiteness you couldn't understand because you haven't had to experience anything different. So don't come at me and say you understand what it's like because you don't."

"You're right Darvis. I'm sorry."

Darvis's face seemed to soften. "Tell me about the girl."

"What girl?"

“You said earlier you knew a girl with someone who passed. Who was it? Did you date her?”

“Yeah,” Ben said. “I guess we dated, if you could call it that.”

“There’s a story there,” Darvis said, more of a statement and not a question. “Was she white or black?”

“Black, but light.”

“Like you?” Darvis said, chuckling at his comment.

“No, not like me.”

“High yellow?”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“Nevermind,” Darvis said. So what happened? Where’s this girl now?”

“She broke up with me and left. Went to college somewhere.”

“Oh, sorry. I shouldn’t have asked.”

“It’s all right.”

“What was her name?” Darvis asked. Ben opened his mouth to tell him but he couldn’t get the words out. Speaking her name felt like an admittance to something he wasn’t prepared for, and Darvis, sensing Ben’s hesitancy, shrugged and quickly apologized. “Okay you don’t have to tell me. I’m sure you just want to forget her, and me bringing it up isn’t going to let you do that.”

“It’s not like you talk about girls either.” Ben said, switching the focus back to Darvis.

“What’s up with that?”

“There was a girl—”

“And what? She broke up with you too?”

“You could say that,” he said, and this time he was the one to quicken his pace.

On the way back to the apartment, they passed an empty basketball lot. The lot was a mix of gravel and dead grass. A basketball hoop made of metal was in the far right of the lot. From Ben’s vantage point it looked slightly bent. While the lot looked abandoned, Darvis spotted a basketball that had been left behind.

“You play?” Darvis asked, nodding toward the space.

“I don’t know.”

“What you mean ‘you don’t know?’ Haven’t you ever played before?”

“Once, I think, but it was a long time ago,” Ben said, remembering a time Thomas tried to teach him. He’d tied a bunch of wire hangers together around one of their trees in the yard in order to make the hoop. Together they’d play on the weekends after they finished chores, but when Thomas got old enough to go to high school he stopped playing with Ben, and Ben never found the desire to play alone, and one day Ben came home and saw that the metal had turned brown from rust, and he found some wire cutters and took the hoop down.

Darvis stared blankly at Ben, expecting him to explain further, but Ben only shrugged. Without any other response, Darvis ran into the lot, grabbed the ball that had been left behind, and began bouncing it again the pavement.

“We if someone comes?” Ben yelled. “Whoever left that ball might be coming back to get it.”

“Well then we’ll leave,” Darvis yelled back. He continued bouncing the ball a few more times before throwing the ball in the direction of the net. Ben watched the ball fall through the hoop and Darvis run after it as it rolled along the ground.

“Come on, don’t be a shit,” he called out to Ben, repeating it until Ben had entered the lot and stood a few feet away from him.

“I guess we’re going to find out if you can play,” Darvis said. “You and me, first one to get to ten. Let’s go.”

Over the next hour they played. With each score Darvis stopped to explain to Ben what he’d done wrong, and with each score Ben got better, until towards the tail end of the hour, when Darvis was close to finishing the game for good, Ben managed to block his last shot and steal the ball. He ran as fast he could to the opposite side of the court, stopped, and in one fluid motion reached his hands in the air and threw the ball. It happened faster than Ben could have ever imagined—the flick of his wrists, his fingertips releasing their grip, the ball suddenly soaring until it reached the rim of the net. Sweat stung his eyelids but he was afraid to blink out of fear of missing it. For a few brief seconds as Ben watched he thought he missed the shot, thought for sure the ball would turn in the other direction, but it didn’t, instead falling through the net.

“Score!” Ben yelled, turning to face Darvis. “Score!”

“How about that. Maybe you do have some black in you after all,” Darvis said, smiling.

VIII.

A few days later news broke that two men—Kip Treece and Brian Moore were beaten unconscious by a group of unidentified assailants. Kip had been walking to his car from the library. He'd stayed there until closing in an attempt to catch up on a lot of the course work he'd missed. Even though he was alone he was unconcerned as he leisurely made his way to the parking garage on the north side of campus. He hadn't noticed the men following him into the lot. Large headphones covered his ears, a rap song blaring, and the bass meant he couldn't hear when they started calling out his name, but when the song ended he heard them. "What is it?" he yelled back, and when he faced them and saw how many there were and the looks on their faces, he didn't try to run, so secure he was in the end of his own safety in this world. Even after the first punch knocked him back, causing him to stagger, and he still didn't believe it. The second aimed at his rib cage, and another and another. He fell to the ground, and as they kicked and punched until Kip could move no more.

The group found Brian sitting on the front porch of the first floor of the triple-decker him and several of his friends had rented out. He'd been playing beer pong with three of them, and when the group came up to the house, saying how they only wanted Brian and not the others, they took that opportunity and ran, leaving him behind. Brian suffered a ruptured lung. Kip had several broken ribs. Their faces were bruised past the point of recognition, but they were both alive. When the police came for questioning, neither Brian nor Kip could give much in terms of description, but they both knew that all of the men had been black.

Ben heard about what happened but hadn't put the pieces together until he saw an article in the campus newspaper. He recognized their faces—they'd been the boys Darvis and Ben had run into that night when they'd gone out for pizza.

"Did you see this?" Ben asked Darvis when he got back to the apartment. He showed him the article.

"It's all anyone's talking about."

"Why didn't you tell me that you knew what they did?"

"I don't know," Darvis said. He folded the paper and placed it on one of the boxes. "Anyway, what would it have changed? Would you have done anything that night had I told you who they were?"

"Did you know them?"

"No. I told you that."

"But he knew you. That night he said he recognized you."

"Okay, you want to know the story? I'll tell you. The girl—Jenny. I knew her. We were in the same class. Me, Jenny, and Kip. Kip never noticed me, not me or Jenny, at least not that I knew. He never talked to us. We didn't exist to him. Anyway, I had a crush on Jenny and I finally got a nerve to ask her out and she said yes. We were supposed to go out but then I got stuck at work and had to cancel. I called her and left a message, explaining how I had to cancel, and she'd decided to go out anyway."

"So what you're saying is you think you could have stopped it," Ben said. "Is that it? If you'd been there?"

"I don't know. Maybe, but the point is I wasn't. I didn't show. She was waiting for me and I didn't show."

“And you think what happened is your fault.”

“Wouldn’t you think so? At least partly. I tried to visit at the hospital but she wouldn’t see me. I haven’t talked to her since. I don’t know where she is now.”

If Ben thought the campus was fractured before, it became tenfold once everyone learned of what happened with Brian and Kip. Wherever Ben went he saw how students had splintered off into their groups. No one talked to the other, were afraid to associate with the other, out of their own sense of fear of the other. The quad became a gathering spot for group demonstrations. The Justice For Jenny group maintained their spot on the field, but now they were joined by at least twenty others. They wore beige, skintight clothing so that from a distance they appeared naked. Each held signs with sayings like “I Am Not Your Property” boldly scrawled with marker. Ben saw them and noticed how the Justice For Jenny students were all white.

Ben understood a few days later. On the opposite side of the quad a crowd of African American students had formed. They dressed in all black, from head to do, and they called themselves the 4AV’s, an acronym for Advocates Against African American Violence. Throughout the day they gathered together and at a specific time one of them, the leader, would call out to those passing by—“Isaiah Walters was shot at this time on August Nineteenth,” and they would all clap, representing the number of bullets police shot. Then they would fall, each and every one of them dropping their bodies hard against the group, a collective falling, and they would stay there for several minutes, silent and still, while students around them continued on to class.

Other minority groups soon followed, each of them with their own agendas, demonstrating to the public the ways in which they too had been harassed, violated, abused within both the university system and outside of it.

“What’s happening?” Darvis asked Ben one afternoon as they walked through it all. “How did we even get here?”

The largest group though consisted of students advocating for Kip and Treece. Students that typically separated themselves from each had joined together for this cause. “Violence shouldn’t beget violence,” they would shout. *What If He Is Innocent?* Ben saw on one sign. *An Assault On One Is An Assault On All* another read.

Every day it felt there was another demonstration, some other point that needed to be made. A black student, wanting to protest the Confederate flag, came onto the campus with mini grill and burned it in front of everyone, but all his protest did was embolden others, and soon enough Ben witnessed their own group forming on the quad. Confederate flags patches were stitched on their clothes. They wore them and they waved their flags through the air, shouting at those who passed them by about their right to free speech.

“Hey, you!” one of them called. He said it again and Ben realized he was trying to get their attention.

“Don’t,” Darvis said, but Ben looked to see who it was.

“What are you doing with him?”

“What are you talking about?”

“You’re picking the wrong side,” he said. “Don’t you know that?”

Darvis tried ignoring it all at first. He avoided the quad altogether, preferring to add an extra twenty minutes of walking rather than cutting through the commotion that took place there each day, and whenever the two of them walked somewhere together, he suggested they take a different route, a longer one but one that avoided any buildings he knew where slurs remained.

When, inevitably, they saw them anyway, Darvis always shrugged, telling Ben that he shouldn't be bothered with actions such as this. "Who cares about a bunch of spray-painted words?" he would say, making light of the situation. There were more serious matters, he told him, pointing to the police's actions on campus, for instance, or the hidden but continued assault on black women that went underreported at the school. Even the lack of minority representation on campus was of more concern than the scrawlings of angry students. For him, attention should be spent on these issues and not what he felt were smaller ones, but Ben could see the connections. A painted slur today could be a much larger action tomorrow. What was written could be said, and what could be said was most likely felt, and that was the problem, as far as Ben saw it.

With every incident Darvis began to pull further away from Ben. Lurking within him was an anger simmering to the surface, the culmination of frustrations over situations he couldn't control. This change in Darvis was not quick. It happened slow enough that Ben wasn't sure at first he could even pinpoint the moment he was different. Part of it was because it wasn't just one provoking action but many—it was his professor who'd singled him out in class, or those group of boys who'd picked a fight with them at Progino's. Darvis had explained this then but he hadn't understood, but now though he was beginning to see. Ben felt it too within himself. Every day he attempted to quell it,

like a pill being choked down his throat, and every day life presented him with a reminder that forced it back up again, and these reminders were everywhere—on the television he could hear commentary about the assault, on the internet he could read comments from strangers offering their opinions over what happened. He left the apartment and wherever he went he heard the same conversations condemning the attackers but not the rapists for what they did. He walked through the campus, passed by one of the dorms, and saw the slurs spray-painted on the building. The first time maintenance had come and removed them within the day, but with the second and third times they got slower, and now it'd been a week and they still remained. See how you are different, it told Ben each time. See how you don't belong. See how we don't want you here.

One morning they passed their Cultural Heritage Building. Bananas had been thrown all across the lawn.

They both stopped. Ben opened his mouth to speak but let out a low gasp instead. "I'm sorry," he said, feeling the need to apologize even though he'd done nothing wrong. "We'll report this and they'll find out who did it."

"Someone probably has," Darvis said.

Up and down the sidewalks students walked to class. A few paused to look at the scene with hints of confusion on their faces, but most of them continued on. Time ticked by, they would be late if they did not hurry, if they gave more than a brief moment of attention to what they saw before them.

"I just keep trying and trying," Darvis began. "To fit into here, into this system. I keep trying to be whatever the hell it is they're wanting me to be and none of it works."

Look at all this. What the fuck am I supposed to do? How long am I supposed to take this? We do nothing and things keep getting worse. You see it, too. Look around. What's better? What's getting better? Because where I'm standing nothing seems to be getting better, and yet you're telling me I'm supposed to continue just taking it? After all this just ignore it, move on, smile and nod and yes'm no sir until I'm done and out of here? I can't do it, Ben. I can't. I'm done."

In that moment Ben saw how the culmination of these experiences could chip away at a person's psyche. Chip, chip, chip. Bananas on the Heritage Building Lawn. Chip, chip, chip. *Run, nigger, run* painted on the walls of campus buildings, a threat to the black students not to come near. Chip, chip, chip.

Darvis walked to the center of the lawn, reached down, and picked up one of the bananas in the grass. Its yellow skin remained unblemished with blackened marks. Tenderly, he peeled away this skin, broke a piece off, and plopped it into his mouth.

"We should go," Ben said.

Darvis ignored him. His fingers broke off another piece and chewed it slowly. He stood in the center of the lawn, a black man amidst a lawn of bananas, as students passed him by, watching but not seeing, as he defied their glances.

It was only when he'd finished eating that he walked back to Ben. He balled the remaining peel in his hand. "Let's go," he said before leaving. He walked on in the direction of their class. On the way, he tossed the clump of peel on the ground with the others.

IX.

It became difficult for Ben to go anywhere or see anyone. Because he looked white and could pass, he was afraid of what others would say in his presence unaware of who he was. More than anything, he feared what he would do, if when it came down to it, he would do nothing.

He could not join the black students because he didn't look black and he felt he wouldn't be accepted. Why would they? He tried to convince himself otherwise by saying Darvis had, but every day Darvis appeared more distant as he further committed to the campus politics. If Darvis met him now Ben wasn't sure if he'd have acted the same way—if he would have brought him into his home or even befriended him.

So Ben couldn't join the white students either because he wasn't white. Among the groups, he did not know where he belonged, and so he chose to be alone. He spent most of his time in the library. He learned the times when the crowds lulled and that's when he went, searching through the microfilm machines that told of the past, searching for any semblance of a name that would lead him to his father.

He found nothing else about his father beyond the article Darvis helped him to get. While he sat in the library, he occasionally would pull the folded paper out and flatten the creases out against the table. He read over each of the details, looking once again to see if there was something he missed.

His father was gone, Ben knew. He knew this attempt at searching would always prove futile, but the urge to know was stronger than he could have realized. Deep down,

it was a serach of who Ben was. He'd always thought his father a coward for leaving them, but what if the truth was something different? Ben, also, had left. In so many ways he'd left, and he had to know how much of this impulse came not from him but, perhaps, from blood.

Our actions are not dictated by the past, but they are haunted by them. For this reason Ben could not stop looking, and when he didn't look he read from the list of books Darvis had created for him. He finally read Fanon's *Black Skins, White Masks*, and was struck by the chapter when Fanon relates being called a Negro by the child. He told the story of the feeling of recognizing that he was different, his acknowledgement that he'd be seen as something lesser, and that this would forever shape his life.

Ben sat at the computer and stared at the screen. He was hesitant to type the name but took a breath and did it anyway. *Golden Glory Murder* was the first search to come up. He read about Harris Thomas and felt ashamed. He glanced around the room, hoping others hadn't noticed as his skin flushed hot, but the other students he saw were head-first in their respective books.

He'd left home to get away, believing if he came here he could change, become a better version of himself, but was still the same as he always.

Wherever he looked there was another story—of someone being shot, their body left in the street, or someone being raped or beaten. He read about how in Michigan a man had shot a father and his two young children. So many stories. It didn't matter the time or place. He could have picked any date to type in and there was a story. There was always a story. So many repeating the same tragedy and then forgotten. What had happened to his father, to Ben, even what had happened on the campus, was nothing new.

It had happened a hundred, thousands, of times before, and it would happen again somewhere else.

Ben learned about campus protests. What was happening here was happening on other campuses. He read article after article, seeing the patterns—the same grievances, the same misunderstandings and fears, as well as the same outcomes—they always ended in violence, and then they were forgotten.

He left the library and walked through the quad. He saw the 4AV's doing another demonstration. They all stood silent around a table, each of them holding large signs that read *Don't Forget Jenny*.

This time, instead of picking up his pace and avoiding meeting their faces, Ben went up to the table and took a leaflet. It listed information about the rapes that had happened that had gone uncharged. A statistic reported that eleven percent of women on the campus had been sexually assaulted at some point during their time at the college.

A black woman saw Ben reading the pamphlet and came up to him. “A bigger problem than you realized, isn't it?”

“Yeah, it is.”

“One in ten women here have been assaulted,” she said, repeating the statistic Ben just read.

“And the school is doing nothing about it.”

“It's just one of the problems here. That's one of the things I've been trying to get others to realize. It's all connected. The school exploits all of us, not just women and minorities, but the poor too. We're all fucked. That's why it's important to try and start thinking about ways we can change the system.”

“Do you have meetings?”

The girl was quiet. She stared at Ben, appearing to measure him up and down.

“Are people like me allowed to come to them?” Ben asked.

She smiled and Ben smiled back at her “Yes, we have meetings,” she said. “You want to come to one?”

“Why are you inviting this white boy? He’s not going to come.”

Ben saw the guy who made the comment. A light-skinned African American with hazel eyes. “White boy?” Ben asked. “You look like you’ve got some white in you too.”

“I’m mixed, if you must know.”

“So am I.”

“Whaaaaaat,” the guy responded, drawing the word out in astonishment. Ben kept his gaze on him and didn’t change the expression on his face. The guy laughed once he realized Ben was serious. “Okay then.”

“Why should it matter anyway? If I’m white or black? Why are you making it matter?”

“I’m not. Was just surprised as all that a white person would even come up here. Sorry man.”

“White or not I wouldn’t have asked if I wasn’t going to come,” Ben told them both. He straightened his posture and met both of their stares. “When are the meetings?”

“We have one tomorrow night.”

“All right,” he said, taking a flyer. “I’m going to bring a friend too, if that’s okay. I’ll see you all then.”

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“Nothing’s going to come from that,” Darvis said when Ben told him about the 4AVs meeting. “I’ve been trying to tell you. You’ve seen the stuff happening on campus. How can you think some sort of meeting is going to change anything?”

“It’s worth a shot though, isn’t it? Besides, it’s not like you have any other ideas.”

“All right, fine,” Darvis said, shrugging. “We’ll go but I’m telling you now nothing is going to come from it.”

The following Thursday evening they walked together to one of the meeting rooms in the student center. The crowd was larger than Ben expected. As it got closer to time the space began to fill up. Soon they ran out of chairs and people coming in stood side by side against the back wall or sat on the carpeted floor. The 4AVs were all there, Ben easily identified them because they wore black t-shirts to distinguish themselves, but there were other groups. Students of all colors filled the space, sitting crammed together as they waited for the meeting to begin.

“This is such waste of time,” Darvis said.

“Come on, it’s starting,” Ben said, pointing to the front of the room.

Ben recognized the girl from the other day. Blocky-sized red glasses sat on the bridge of her nose. Her hair was in a high bun at the top of her head. She wore a plain black t-shirt like all the other 4AVs and dark jeans. She walked up to the podium and grabbed the mic, fiddled with it to make sure it was on, and in the brief seconds before she began to speak Ben could see her nervousness. It was in the way she hesitated before bringing the mic to her mouth. She scanned the crowd and Ben wondered if she saw him. He thought to raise his hand to wave but at the last minute decided against it.

“I know her,” Darvis said, slumping in his seat but holding his gaze toward her direction.

“What? You do?” Ben asked.

“Hello, hello, hello,” the woman said, interrupting before Darvis could answer. She tapped the mic. “My name is “Amil. I’m one of the representatives of the 4AVs and also I helped to coordinate this event today.”

The meeting began with an overview of the issues the campus was facing. Amil rattled off statistics, many Ben remembered from the pamphlet. She talked about the assaults that had gone reported but also the recent rise in hate speech graffiti on the campus that the school was refusing to take care of. She talked about the hostility among the members of the town toward the school. Part of it had to do with taxes—Marymount didn’t pay property taxes to help boost the economy. That, coupled with the school’s large endowment, made townspeople angry. They viewed the school as a symbol of a kind of elitism that didn’t belong in their community. Here was this rich school full of rich kids in a place where people were struggling to survive.”

“That’s how this all started,” someone interrupted. “That group of black kids who made things worse for the rest of us. They had to resort to violence and now we’re all suffering for it.”

“Why did they even do it? Does anyone know?” another voice in the back called.

“They were angry. Hell, I’m angry and I don’t know what to do about it.”

“Anger is just a manifestation of pain,” someone else said. “What we’re all feeling is pain.”

“I’m angry too and you don’t see me going to beat up every white person who’s done something terrible.”

“What they did wasn’t just ‘something terrible,’” a woman yelled. “You all seem to be forgetting that those white boys raped that girl. It was in retaliation to that.”

“That doesn’t make it right,” another said.

“I’m not saying it does.”

“I’ve been here three years and none of what’s happening now is new. None of it. Ya’ll remember that story of that other girl who got beat up? She wasn’t even in college, but she worked as a cashier at that barbecue place, the one that got closed down. Do you remember her? What happened to her?”

“What story? What are you talking about?”

“None of you remember?”

“I do,” Darvis interrupted. The crowd shifted in their seats as they focused their gaze on him. Ben saw his small frame tense up at the sudden attention but the expression on his face remained steady. “I knew her. She moved with her parents a few weeks after that happened.”

“Yeah, see? That girl was beat to a pulp and for what? I think they never gave a reason. It was just *because*. Just because is enough to make all this happen over and over, and then we forget and move on and then it happens again and we get upset all over again.”

“No one cared then.”

“No one cares *now*,” he said.

“I think we can try,” Ben told the crowd. “More are listening now. You all are here at least. We can work together.”

“Of course you would say that.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“All right, calm down,” Darvis interrupted, but it was too late. The crescendo of the room’s frustrations reached a fever pitch. From row to row, people had branched off into arguments over what they felt should be done.

“Okay, so what if we staged a protest march? We could get the black community involved. After all what’s happening to us is happening to them too. It can be the starting point, at least for now.”

“A protest?” another asked.

“To bring awareness.”

“Awareness of what?”

“Of our lives. That we’re here and we deserve more than what’s happening. That we’re not going to take being assaulted. We’re not going to take being ignored. That we need to unite together to fight the injustices we face.”

“We could call it the United Together March.”

“Okay,” Amil said, nodding toward the crowd. “United Together we’ll be.”

“But awareness isn’t the issue. People are aware they just don’t care.”

“Well we’ll make them care,” he said. “We go door to door to members in the town handing out flyers, listening to their stories, making them pay attention. Besides, what’s the alternative? I don’t hear any of you offering suggestions.”

With that, it seemed decided. The rest of the meeting became devoted to logistics—planning the date of the march, who would design the flyers, who would go where to notify the locals. They wanted to designate groups of people to go to the communities. Someone looked up the town map on a computer and displayed it on an overhead screen for the audience to see. A sign-up sheet was created for each of the areas outside of the campus. Amil assigned people to different groups designated a leader within them to split up the groups so they could cover each of the streets without overlapping.

Over the next hour the 4AVs planned. Darvis watched as Amil took control of the situation, until finally, once the crowds subsided, he saw his chance to go up to her.

Ben watched from afar as the two of them talked. It didn't take long before Darvis brought her over to introduce her to Ben.

"You look familiar," she said.

"You two know each other?" Darvis asked, surprised.

"She's the one I met at the demonstration on the quad."

"Ah, I see," Darvis said, nodding.

"How do you feel about all this?" Amil asked Ben, motioning toward the rest of those planning for the march.

"It could be good."

"You really believe that?"

"You don't?"

“See!” Darvis yelled, slapping one hand against his knee. “She understands. We’re just circling around, not actually making progress. This march—this march is a bad idea. It’s not going to work.”

“What will work then?”

They both looked at each other. “They’ll never understand unless we resort to their same methods.”

“What does that even mean, Darvis?”

“I knew the girl that got mentioned during the meeting. Her name was Shanice and she got beaten up one night while walking home after work. That night, that night we were at the pizza parlor. The guy—he was the one. He was the one who did it. Shanice and I were friends. She told me what happened and I went and found him. I knew who he was because he was in one of my classes, but he never noticed me. I figured out where he lived and waited, thinking I’d go there and let him have it, but when I got there and saw him I couldn’t do it. He looked right at me and I opened my mouth to speak and I couldn’t say anything. I did nothing. Shanice never filed charges. She left, and he’s still here doing who knows what to others. So you see? I should have done something then and I didn’t. If I had—”

Darvis stopped. He didn’t need to finish because both of them knew what he would say.

“But that wouldn’t have worked either. You should understand that.”

“Who are you to tell me that? You don’t know about any of it. How could you ever know?”

“I’m on your side here,” Ben said. “How long are you going to make me prove it to you?”

“All right. I’m sorry. Maybe a part of me is jealous. You don’t have to go through this if you don’t want to. You could pretend and live your life. Your skin color means you have options that I don’t have. I’m jealous of that.”

“I can’t help the way I look any more than you.”

“No, you can’t,” Darvis said.

X.

The plan was the go to door-to-door. Members of the 4AVs split off into groups to cover the different sections of the town with the intent of talking with the community about the discord between members of the town and those affiliated with Marymount. It was to be a segueway to discussing some of the more immediate issues—what happened with Jenny, the retaliating assault on Kip and Brian, the campus demonstrations that had begun to make the nightly news. All these events were connected, not just to each other but to other past events. The goal of the door-to-doors was to make the community see that their issues and problems did not exist in a vacuum. They were connected to the school and vice-versa, and in order to solve them, they all had to work together.

At least, that was what the 4AVs told Ben to say. He thought of it as he stood outside yet another closed door. All day he'd gone alone knocking, having most of the doors slammed in his face once he told whoever answered that he wanted to talk about the problems of the community, and that was of those who even answered. House after house he went to find either that no one home or they didn't want to answer. Sometimes he could see a figure hiding behind the curtain of a window, their faces slightly obscured. At one house, he raised a hand and waved and saw a black child wave back before disappearing into another room.

He should have asked Darvis to come with him, but after their fight the night of the meeting they'd stopped talking. Ben was rarely in the apartment, choosing instead to stay at the library or wander the quad during the times when it was quiet. He'd even started sleeping in his car again. He listened to the radio as he pushed the seat back and fell asleep. It was always just long enough as to not wear out his car's battery, then he'd

restart the engine and fall back again. He did this until he felt it was late enough to go back to apartment and find Darvis fast asleep in his own bedroom, the door closed and locked shut.

If he had asked Darvis, he would have countered with asking Ben if the reason was because he was black. Ben would have told him no, maybe even once again reminding him that he was black too, but now as he stood at this house with the sun beating down he believed that it would have helped if Darvis had come. Ben did not look like them and was not them, at least in their eyes, so they shut their doors or ignored his knocks. Even if someone were to offer him inside, he wasn't sure anymore if he could convince them of anything. If what they saw was a white boy, would they even listen? Who was he to try and reach them?

Ben went up the steps to the house. It was a small, single-family home like the others. A small flower garden was all to the side of the yard. Ben walked onto the porch and knocked a few times, thinking this was all he'd do before leaving, finally giving up and going home.

An elderly black woman, short-statured, with a graying mop of hair answered the door. "Who are you?" she asked bluntly.

"My name is—Ben Peters. I'm here to talk to you about issues relating to the community. Have you heard about the demonstrations at the campus?"

"Those protests? They're getting out of control if you ask me. Anyway, that has to do with the school and nothing to do with me."

Ben swallowed, took a moment and shifted gears. "It does though."

The woman squinted her eyes at Ben. She opened the door a little wider and Ben could see inside. He glanced quickly at the television playing a soap opera. He saw the worn furniture and on the coffee table an ashtray with a still burning cigarette, the ash beginning to cloud the room.

“Shit, hold on,” she said. Her attention shifted to the ashtray. She put out the cigarette and then reached for her pack, lit another. “Okay, well, might as well come in. If you’re coming to steal something I don’t have much and if you’re coming to kill me I guess I’ve lived long enough.”

Ben hesitated but decided to come inside anyway. The woman motioned to the couch and Ben sat, watching as she blew smoke into the air. Ben suppressed a cough, not wanting to appear rude, and when she sat down he began again.

“We’re having a march later this week,” Ben said. “Me and a group of others are in this school group called the 4AVs.”

“Four what?” she asked abruptly.

“The 4AV’s. It stands for—well, nevermind. We’re just a group of minorities on campus and we’re going round trying to get the word out about this march, making sure that all the community knows about it too.”

Ben handed her a flyer. She stared down at the brightly colored paper. “We are united march,” she read aloud before placing the flyer on the cushion next to her. “None of this concerns me,” she said.

“It’s not just blacks from the school getting assaulted,” Ben said. “From the town too. Your neighbors. People on this block even. Did you know that—”

“I don’t know my neighbors,” she interrupted before Ben could list off the statistics he’d memorized. “I’ve got no idea who my neighbors are. It’s just me in this house here. My husband died about five years ago. Except for the people I see at church and on Wednesday evenings my weekly book club I’ve got no one else to care about, so who am I marching for?”

“You shouldn’t need a personal reason to do what’s right.”

Ben regretted what he said the moment it came out of his mouth. She sat quiet staring back at Ben, waiting for him to apologize, but Ben kept silent, because even though he regretted saying the words out loud he’d still meant what he said. They both held each other’s gaze, neither one of them wanting to look away out of showing some sign of weakness.

“Besides, look at me,” she finally said. “Do I look like I could be marching anywhere?”

She laughed, and Ben, feeling a slight reprieve from the tension, laughed too. “So I take it you’ve been doing this all day. Going around telling people about this—this united march.”

“Yes, I have. You were one of my last stops.”

“And how has it been going?”

Ben took too long to answer and the woman laughed again. “I figured as much she said. “Especially from some white do-gooder kid.”

“I’m not—I’m not white.”

“What? Really?” She leaned close to give him a once over. “How about that. I had a boyfriend that looked like you. He passed though, but not in the typical way.”

“I don’t know what that means.”

“We got older and he realized he liked white life better. White women. White friends. He liked country music, if you could believe that. He liked the world being white brought him, but this wasn’t back in the old days where you could just leave your old life behind. There’s a paper trail now, some way of always checking for the truth, so he never for real passed, just sort of pretended. People assumed he was white and he never corrected them. He looked like them and it was always enough.”

“I see.”

“No matter, it’s how people see you, and around here they’re going to see a white kid coming to their door, and there’s no way anyone is going to listen, but even if that weren’t the case. You’d still have a hard time. This place—I’ve lived here my whole life and I could have told you to save yourself the trouble. You know, King came down here once, long ago, back when he was starting all his marches. He wanted to come and do a speech, but the all the leaders here ran him back out. Said they didn’t want him causing trouble. They didn’t want riots like the ones they’d seen on the news, down there in Montgomery or Birmingham. ‘We’re a peaceful place,’ they told him, and if he was going to try and rile everyone up then he needed to leave. He never gave a speech here and he never came back. People in this town—they know their place, both black and white, rich and poor. They know the social hierarchy of things. Always have. They also know that a protest isn’t going to change anything. Or a march, or whatever you want to call it. All it does is cause more trouble than it’s worth.”

“Not everyone feels that way,” Ben said.

“Maybe. Maybe that’s true, but enough of them do.”

“Well, thank you for listening anyway.”

Ben got up from the couch. The woman continued sitting. She told him he could walk himself out before turning to the television.

XI.

The air felt electric. There was an urgency to everyone's actions, as if any moment they'd be stopped from what they were doing. It did not take long before the chanting began. Many held signs, proudly displaying them in front of bodies as if they were armor and not pieces of cardboard. Everyone clustered together. Someone had brought a boombox. A woman moved to beat of the music as they marched, hips swaying as she danced. Others gathered to dance with her, each of them gyrating to their own rhythm.

Hundreds had come. The crowd was far larger than Ben expected, and the swell of it caused his own heart to seize in his chest. There were so many, and not just students too. Somehow, the 4AVs had convinced the town's community to join them. They all held signs of their own marking other injustices—their own daughters who'd been assaulted or boys who'd been arrested and given punitive sentences. Ben saw signs detailing microaggressions students witnessed in classrooms and in their jobs. He read about more statistics, read about all the ways in which they'd been made to feel small, insignificant, as if who they were never mattered.

Ben heard someone complain that their message was getting lost, but did it matter that they all had different reasons for being there? They were joined by the simple fact that they've had enough. They were here, they'd come together, and when Ben looked out and saw them all he felt, he truly believed in that moment, that it could be the start.

The plan was that they'd all marched down through the main street that ran through the campus, walking toward the front entrance of the grounds where it met with the beginning of downtown. They were to go there and block the street during a peak

rush hour time as faculty and students were trying to leave their last classes and head for home. In addition, they'd block the intersecting road, hitting the 9-5 office workers as well.

When they got there, they created a barricade on the street. They stood side by side waiting, their bodies linked together, they own blockade against the cars.

“What’s with the military gear?” Ben asked. “We’re not at war.”

“We’re not?” Darvis asked, a sarcastic edge to his voice.

Darvis turned ahead to face the front of the crowd and they continued marching until the front of the crowd was just a few feet away. The two groups were at an impasse. The police were not going to let them go further and none of the group appeared to want to back away.

“What do we do?”

No one answered Ben’s question.

One of the policemen got on a speakerphone and yelled to the crowd to disperse.

“We’re not backing out!” came a voice in the back of the crowd. “We’re not going anywhere until we get justice!”

The officer repeated his request but no one moved. Soon everyone was yelling, some of them cursed at the police, contorted expressions of pain and resented emblazoned on their faces as they hurled their insults. The police stood in the line they created with their bodies, unphased and seemingly stoic in their silence, but safe in the protection of their armor.

“Darvis,” Ben said. “What are we going to do?”

“Do what you feel,” Darvis said, and then he left him to go to the front of the line.

“Last warning,” a voice, loud and booming, called out to the crowd. “It’s time now for you all to go home.”

A shrieking cry came first, a cry in anticipation for what would come. Then there was the bang. Ben would forever remember the sound. Deafening, defeating. Ben did not see the clatter of the glittering can as it rolled across the pavement, but he heard the response and the response were screams. Suddenly, he was kneeling on the ground in pain, both hands clasped tightly to his ears trying to stop or lessen it, but it wouldn’t stop. A furious burning filled the airways in his nose and throat, moving into his lungs. He winced in pain, hoping it would pass, but the longer he waited the more it hurt. It was all Ben could do to just stay there on the ground, his body still, coughing, choking through the burn, his cheeks hot and wet with tears, while he waited for it to end.

Around him, others fell. If they weren’t running they were falling, their bodies slamming onto the pavement, onto the grass, as they in vain rubbed the gas away from their eyes.

“Man, fuck you!” a teenage boy yelled. He stood defiant against the cops. A black bandanna pulled tightly across his face. Only his eyes were exposed and they were focused in the direction of the cops. He raised a hand pointed to the first he saw. “Fuck all of ya’ll for this.”

###

“Come on Ben,” he heard Darvis say when it was over. He took hold of Ben’s shirt and pulled so hard that the fabric ripped off his arm. Darvis motioned for him to run and together they ran in the dark, running down the street along with hundreds of others

who were running towards them and away from them, hundreds pushing up and against each other, all of them running but there was nowhere to go.

Someone pushed him and Ben fell again. When he got up he realized that he'd lost Darvis. Ben stopped, stood frozen on the street amidst the crowds. He was not sure which way to go, and in his panic he couldn't bring himself to go anywhere. For a moment he closed his eyes.

Back and forth, scanning the crowd, he looked for Darvis's familiar frame. He stood in the center of the street while everyone ran past him.

There was Darvis. He'd fallen. His hand was in the air, but to the cop the hand in the air was a threat, a signal that he could do what he wanted and what he wanted was to slam Darvis's body against the ground, he wanted to make sure he would never be defiant again. He wanted to break him because he was close to that point, and when someone is broken they will do anything in the face of injustice, they will do anything to fight back, and he knew he would not win. Hands on holsters as he'd tell him to stop, guns in the air as they tell him to calm down, but it is already too late, the pendulum already swung, there is nothing but anger now, nothing but the white-hot anger of the culmination of years' worth of pain, and so the boy would not stop, would not go down. He would not once again fall as victim.

Darvis shouted louder, gave one final curse as the cop raised his baton in the air. Ben ran. He ran in the direction of the cop. In that moment there was no other impulse but to run to him, and he did. He ran in front of Darvis, stood in front of the cop, raised his own arm in defense. He closed his eyes, waited for him to do whatever it was he was meant to do—strike or shoot—but the cop did neither. When he opened them again he

saw the cop staring. Confused by this sudden turn of events he'd frozen where he stood, and even though the moment was not long it was enough time for Darvis to stand.

"Come on," Darvis yelled, pulling Ben with him to go, but Ben remained.

The cop did not move. His focus remained on Ben, to see if he would follow his friend or stay. "Go on," Ben told Darvis. "I'll catch up."

"Are you crazy?"

Ben didn't answer, and Darvis, seeming not to want to chance it, ran. It was just Ben and the cop. Ben could not see his face because of the gear. The cop stood close, so close that their faces were almost touching. "I see you," he said, raising a gloved hand to Ben's face. "I see you now."

Just then, there was another loud bang. Ben ducked in response to the commotion. When he looked again, the cop was gone, having disappeared among the crowd.

XII.

Ben couldn't hear anything except the pulse of his heart. The officer wouldn't stop looking at him, and it was the first time in Ben's life where he felt both seen and unseen. The officer looked into his eyes and didn't pull away, and an unexplained intimacy between them formed in that moment, but in the next the officer had reached and pulled the bandana from Ben's head, exposing his face to everyone.

"I know you now," the officer said. He held the fabric in his hand before letting it fall.

The crowd swelled. Bodies and breath. Ben closed his eyes and waited for what was coming. He closed his eyes because in the end he was afraid to face it. Yet fear did not keep him from running. Despite his fear, he'd stayed with Darvis, fought with Darvis, and despite this outcome he held his head up high. He closed his eyes but opened them again. He would meet the officer's gaze. He would not be ashamed. He would be better, and so he held his breath while the smoke filled the sky and somewhere the first shots blasted through the night.

Everyone began to run. It was instinct. At the sound of the shot everyone's body knew what it wanted to do and what it wanted was to run. Ben had no choice but to follow, lest be trampled to death.

And just as quickly Ben heard Davis yelling in the background, telling him they had to leave, and Ben turned his back to the officer and he was running, the whole time wondering why he did not shoot him, it would have been so easy to shoot him, and yet he didn't. He let him run. *I know you* rang in his head with each footfall. The words

followed him as he made his way back to the group, and he knew it would follow him through the long night and all the nights of his life thereafter.

“Come on!” Darvis yelled, and Ben ran after his friend. They ran together down the streets, running until they’d finally made it to the car. “Get in hurry up we have to go!”

Ben took one last look back in the direction from where they came. He half-expected to see the officer, but when he turned to look he found no one there. The officer had disappeared among the crowd of men and women. He was gone.

They got in the car and drove. In a few minutes they were away from the commotion, from the protests and police, and the more distance Darvis put between them the faster he went.

“Did you see him? I mean did you see? I can’t believe you did that!” Darvis couldn’t stop hollering. They were speeding along one of the back roads now, the crowd of protestors long behind them. It was dark, so dark it was hard to see anything in front of them on the road. They’d passed the town where streetlights were common. When Ben looked out the window all he saw were the endless shadows of trees.

“He saw my face,” Ben said, thinking back to his confrontation with the officer.

“What?”

“That cop saw my face,” Ben repeated. “He knows what I look like.”

“So what? What’s he going to do about it? Besides, you think he’d remember you anyway?”

“I don’t know,” Ben said, thinking of the cop’s words. I know you now. The officer had looked into his eyes, into who he thought Ben was, and it had terrified him.

It'd been worth it though. He wanted to feel that rush again, the feel of his blood pumping through his veins as he stood face to face with the police. He wanted to feel the vibrations of the chants in his vocal cords, the sounds getting louder with each incantation, and when he saw the sparklers go in the air, when he felt the first of the burning from the gas, he wanted still to stay, to fight, because despite the pain he as long as he stayed he wasn't invisible, as long as he stayed he felt alive. He felt free.

If he were to admit this to Darvis he would tell him he felt it because for him there wasn't as much risk. He could feel the rush because it still seemed like mostly play for him, but it hadn't felt like that then. When they were together he'd felt the danger. The cop's anger toward him was palpable, and in those next few moments had he stayed there was no telling what he would have done.

"Don't worry about it," one of the boys in the back said. "They're not concerned with someone like you."

"Hey, don't you know he's one of us?" Darvis yelled.

"What? What are you talking about?"

"He's black. Black like us. Black like you and me."

"He's not black."

"His dad is, and don't you know the one-drop rule means he's just as black as us."

"Yeah, well, but look at him. He looks white. That's enough. They won't see him in the same way as they do us. His whiteness will save you. Always in the end."

"That's not true," Ben interrupted.

"You don't think so? After everything, you still don't think so?"

“He still risked himself,” Darvis said. “When it came down to it, he still risked. That’s got to account for something.”

Ben leaned back against the seat. Darvis didn’t push him further, laughed before turning his attention back to the road. The other boys whooped and hollered as the car tailed down the road in the dark. Ben smelled smoke and realized someone had lit a joint and was passing it around. The smell of the smoke burned his throat and he suppressed a cough.

“Nah,” Darvis said when offered, then told them only a few more hits and they had to put out. “I don’t want that shit stinking up my car.”

Davis drove through the night, going up and down the road, weaving in and out of the median with no care to what was coming. Ben kept his eyes on the road for him, hoping to catch what he wasn’t paying attention to.

“Darvis, whoa, we need to slow down,” Ben said. Darvis laughed and pressed his foot down harder on the acceleration.

“Calm down, don’t worry. I know these ghost roads like the back of my hand. Roll the window down and cool your mind.”

Ben did what Darvis said. The wind cooled the sweat from his skin so all he felt was the salty dried crust of it left when he rubbed his hand against his forehead.

“I still can’t believe we did that. I can’t believe it happened. We did something tonight.”

“Tonight, yes, but there’s always tomorrow. Today only matters now, there’s still all the days after. Did you think this was the end? Let me tell you there’s no end, least one I can see.”

“So it’s the beginning?”

“It’s always the beginning,” he said, “It doesn’t matter what happens, or how long it goes, nor the time we started or the time it took. Don’t you see? Don’t you get it? It will always be the beginning and never the end.”

Always the beginning and never the end. Ben understood now. That was always the story. Fighting the same fights, the same struggles, facing the same disappointments. One could look at history and see. The pattern was there, circling back again and again. Always the beginning. Always.

“How do you feel man?” Darvis asked, his voice cutting through their melancholic silence. “Do you feel good? I feel really good.”

“Yeah,” Ben said, smiling. “I feel good.”

“We got anything eat in here?” Ben asked and Darvis gestured towards the backseat of the car. One of the other boys threw to him a half-eaten box of Cracker Jacks. Ben’s mouth salivated at the taste of the caramel. He held the box up to his mouth and poured some of the clusterfuls in. In a few minutes he’d finished the box and thrown it on the floor.

“Don’t keep that trash in my car. Throw it out.”

“Where?”

“Here, give me the box.”

Darvis reached out his hand and Caleb gave him the empty box. Darvis chucked it out into the night.

“Where we going to go now?” someone in the backseat asked.

“I don’t know. I’m just driving. Where should we go? Where you all want to go?”

The others in the back were quiet. They alternated the joint between them while blowing smoke out the window. “Man, who cares, long as we don’t go back home,” one of them said.

“Let’s just drive,” Ben said.

“Yeah.” Darvis nodded. “We got the night. Why not?”

The car sped up and the scenery around them blurred.

“How does it feel? To finally stand up? To not be afraid?”

“It feels good,” Ben said.

“You finally did it.”

“Let me tell you, it doesn’t get much better than this, am I right? It don’t and that’s the truth. You know where we’re going to go? We’re going to *fly*.”

Faster they went down the dips and bends. Darvis laughing. Music blaring on the radio with Ben nodding his head to the beat, letting the wind whip against his face as he laughed with the rest of them. They drove and drove until night became morning, until the high from their actions became a blissful lull. Ben felt happy, so happy that he stopped thinking about the protest or the cop or what he said or how he felt with any of it. He was so happy that he was late to react to Darvis swerving the car, and swerving, turning, the car brakes screeching. So late to react to any of it that it wasn’t until right before the car collided with the tree that Ben was still thinking, “yeah, man, you know it doesn’t get better. It doesn’t get much better than this.”

EPILOGUE

Hundreds of miles away Mary Holden sat on the beach.

Thomas told her about the car accident. His death an echo of what the reports said happened to Harris Thomas, how they found his body in his ditch. With Ben, the car he was in had veered off the road and crashed into a tree. No one survived.

“He was going by Ben Peters while he was down there. Darvis’s family had flew in and were packing up their son’s belongings when they discovered Ben’s suitcase with the letters I sent him. That was how they even found me. If it weren’t for them he might have died being a complete John Doe. Who knows if I’d ever had found out.”

After Thomas had told her the story she said she needed to take a walk. Thomas stood with her, wanting to join her wherever she was going, but Mary said she needed to be alone. Thomas nodded, said she could take as long as she wanted but in a little over an hour he’d begin his work collecting trash along the beach. “If that’s where you’re going and if you stay out there long enough maybe I’ll find you again,” he said.

Thomas gave her the spare key and said to take as long as she needed.

Mary remembered the crash. She remembered it because Amil was dating Darvis and he’d been the driver. Roger mentioned it to her a few weeks before she finally broke it off with him.

If Ben died in the same crash that meant they must have known each other, were friends even. It meant that after all this time he’d been within a hair’s breath of her, somewhere just on the periphery, looking for her, but never finding her.

How close had either of them come to finding the other? And what would have happened had she seen his face? How much of their fates would have been the same?

Mary watched as the waves receded, admired their relentless to always come back. Ben was gone. He'd been gone for a long time, and she'd never known. She wondered if he ever found out about what happened with Harris Thomas. Surely, he must have learned, or did he live with the guilt of his inaction until his death?

She glanced down at her watch but the battery had died, the time frozen on an hour long past. She unhooked the watch from her wrist and threw it in her purse.

She had no idea how long she'd stayed out there.

It wasn't until Thomas came out looking for her that she realized how long she'd been gone. When she saw him she knew it was time for her to go, to drive back to school or home, but she didn't want to go to either.

"You look like your brother you know," she told Thomas. The breeze from the ocean blew against her skin. Mary brushed the strands away from her face as she looked up at him.

"Yeah?"

"Yeah," she repeated.

Thomas crouched down on the sand beside her. He stared out at the water, watching with her as the crest of the water foamed and disappeared. The waves repeated the cycle, lapping on the beach, each time slowly reaching further to where they were.

"I used to run," she said. She glanced at Thomas to see his reaction but he continued looking at the water. She could tell though he was still listening. "Not for school or anything. It was more like a hobby, and I was fast too."

"How fast?"

Mary raised her eyebrows. "Fast."

“Pick a spot then.”

“What?”

“Pick a spot and I’ll time you. I want to see how fast you claim yourself to be.”

“Okay.”

Mary stood up and circled around in the sand. She saw the ocean in one direction, the structure of Thomas’s house in the other. Everywhere else there was just miles of beach.

“What about that?” Mary pointed west, towards the fading sun.

“I don’t see anything.”

“Those docks. Do you see them? Way off in the distance?”

“Okay, yeah.” Thomas said, squinting as his eyes focused on the docks ahead.

“That’s too far though.”

“No it isn’t.”

Mary brushed the sand off her clothes. She stretched her legs briefly before getting into her stance. “Get ready,” she said.

“Hold on.”

Thomas took out his phone to use as a timer. He said he’s count backwards from five. Mary braced herself as Thomas called out the numbers, and when she heard him shout for her to go she bolted.

The terrain was different than she was used to. The sand forced more work from her legs to keep moving, but she continued on toward the docks ahead, with each step moving faster. As she ran, she fell into the familiar rhythm she’d long forgotten, listened once again to the steady beat of her heart.

“Mary, you did it!” Thomas yelled, but still she kept running. This was what she knew, perhaps the only thing she knew—that she needed to keep going, one foot in front of the other, and in that moment she was not running from but to, and she didn’t want to stop.

“Mary!”

Thomas’s voice was far away and becoming farther still.

Mary had passed the docks and looked for another marker to focus on, something to hold her gaze as she kept running, but everywhere she looked there was nothing, only Thomas’s figure behind her yelling for her to come back. She did not want to turn back, but to instead propel her body forward, to something better, and so she kept going. There was only the sun as it began to set, and so that became her goal as she ran toward the horizon.

When the evening came she’d have to stop, when darkness finally cloaked over her and she could no longer see where she was. Who knew how long she could last until then, if her body could even make it that long, but she ran anyway, wanting to see, at least, how far she would be able to go.

AND IT BEGINS LIKE THIS

In the Name of the Fathers

In Caswell County, NC, if you were to drive down U.S. Route 158, you'd come to the intersection between U.S. Route 150. Turn right on 150 and a little ways on you'll see a placard for Bedford Brown:

Bedford Brown, U.S. Senator, 1829-30, State Legislator,

Opponent of Secession, 1860.

This is "Rose Hill." His Home.

The placard is easy to miss if you're not looking for it. It's not often one pays attention to these signs of history, and in the summer when the wind sways it can be partially obscured by the trees.

Past the placard, if you keep going you'll eventually find Brown's plantation home, known colloquially as the Bedford Brown House. In 1973 it was listed in the National Register of Historic Places, but it's a private residence now so there are no tours. Without context the house looks unremarkable. A picture of it shows that it is two floors, Colonial style, the exterior painted white with dark green shutters. Thick bushes frame the front. If you're there in the summer, the smell of wild roses fills the air.

Near this plantation, hidden among the looming cedar trees, is a small unpaved road, a path really, once known to my family as Siddle Road, and it is here at this crossing where the origins of my family history begins.

Let's start with what I know.

My grandfather's name was Marvin Siddle. He was the second youngest of twelve children. One of Marvin's older brothers, William, bore the same name of his father—William Lovelace Siddle, listed also as Wells on the 1920 census. This is confusing until I remember how notoriously inaccurate census records were. "What's your husband's name?" I imagine the census taker asking, his throat scratchy from thirst, as he stood on the front stoop of yet another farm. "I can't hear you. Say it again? Well?"

So Well L. Siddle, nicknamed sometimes Billie to his family, formally called William (named after his father), who is listed as mulatto on this census.

This is what I know.

I also know that there is an earlier 1880 census for a William Siddle, also married, but this one—this one listed as white.

"We should have been Browns" my godmother tells me. She is also my mother's cousin. They grew up on neighboring farms and worked the tobacco fields together. Despite this parallel, once the evening came my godmother would venture home to schoolwork whereas my mother continued working the fields far late into the night. There's guilt in her voice when we talk of the past and I've often wondered how much of their upbringing factored into what their lives would become. It's a question I sense she's thought about as well but I dare not ever ask.

"The census may say Siddle," she explains, "but it should have been Brown, had the mother named the children after her slave name, but she didn't. They have the surname of another man, a white one."

The woman my godmother is talking about is Leanna Brown, my great-great-grandmother. Leanna Brown, nicknamed by her children as Granny Brown, once a slave of the Bedford Browns.

The folklore in my family has always been that Leanna “had ‘em up” or took William Siddle, the father of her children, to court to make sure they carried his name. This would have been during the height of Reconstruction, before Jim Crow took its fierce hold of the South.

“I never believed my father when he told me the story. I always thought he made it up, but I’ve learned through research that during that time plenty of women did the something similar. So while I didn’t believe him before I believe him now,” she said.

It took my mother's death to make me question the pieces of her life and the person I knew. I've begun to reexamine what could have been possible as explanation for the way she was.

Tell me though, how does one begin to find the truth in the past? Who do you turn to when most of the people who could have known are gone?

If a given name can be a marker of a cultural identity, my name is marked as black. I knew this as a child. I told myself what I hated was the pause of uncertainty on the first day of class when a teacher did roll. “Laa—” they'd begin, the uncertainty in their voice. “Just tell me what it is,” finally saying as they sighed with resignation.

I hated also the misspellings that inevitably happened. The sheer unwillingness to learn, instead writing their own versions of a signifier of my identity.

These were the reasons I used as justification when I asked my mother if I could have my name changed. Deep down, my mother had always resented my name as well. Perhaps it was because my father might have mistakenly told her the story of why he picked it (*"I knew a girl with that name and I thought she was the hottest thing I ever saw!"*). Or it could be because of the simple fact that my father gave it to me. At the time they were in the midst of a divorce and she could have used this as a tactic of revenge. I suspect though that her reasons were the same ones I'd finally admit to myself that I also had. She hated the names associations—that I am black, that before anyone knew me they would know my name and what it signified.

My father, for obvious reasons, will not agree to the decision to change my name. "Why don't you want your name?" he will say over and over to a crying child on the phone. "Why don't you want to be who you are?"

What I am interested in are the ways in which a series of circumstances and actions can contribute to the people we become.

"Be glad you're not dark," I remember my mother telling me as a child. "Be glad you have light skin and good hair that doesn't kink up too much. People will like you more. Not too much, because you're still black, but more."

I will think of my mother's words often throughout my life. They will help to explain the reasons for why as a child I will scrub my skin raw, ashamed even then of my blackness. I'll think of them when like with my name, I'll seek to change other parts of myself. My hair will grow out long. I'll wear blue contact lenses. The combination of

these making acquaintances and friends question. “What are you?” they'll ask, reaching out for the briefest of seconds to touch my hair.

And I'll lie when people ask me my race. They'll always ask and I'll tell them I am mixed. I'll say whatever I think I can get away with. I'll let them guess first and nod when they say Puerto Rican, or Dominican. Somehow these choices will seem better to me. Anything will better than saying the truth.

“Which one of your parents is white?” they'll assume, and this will be where I always falter, wondering which one of my parents to erase.

My mother grew up on a farm in a place called Ruffin, North Carolina. Ruffin is less than thirteen miles away from the Locust Hill Township in Caswell County. In Locust Hill, specifically an area called Rose Hill, is where the original Siddle farm was located.

The story here is that there were two plantations. The first belonging to the Bedford Browns and nearby, down a path, led to a smaller plantation of a white family named Siddles. A man named Will Siddle had a relationship with Leanna Brown, a slave or servant of the Bedford Browns.

Their relationship produced three children, one being my great-grandfather William, sometimes called Billie, Siddle. When Billie is older he'll get enough money together to buy land and build that house in Ruffin. That house will be the one my grandfather will grow up in and eventually my mother will too.

I've tried, many times, to fully render in my mind the image of that house. It was white, two floors, with a black roof. No indoor plumbing with the house, at least not

while my mother is growing up, and she'll tell me about her late night ventures in the dark to the outhouse. She'll talk about her fear of snakes reaching up from the hole. The smell.

Open the front door and you're in the living room. Adjacent to this and separated by two large French doors is the kitchen. In my mind, I'll convince myself I remember these doors but really what I'm remembering is the telling of the doors to me throughout the years. A hallway leads to a staircase where if one were to walk up they'd be taken to one of the three bedrooms. Downstairs are where the other two bedrooms are—my mother's, of which she shared with her brother, and her parents' bedroom. Further down the hallway is the kitchen where there's another door leading out back.

None of this is of particular interest except for one detail—a door is affixed to the entryway leading upstairs. This door will be locked. No one except for Mayo, my great-uncle, who lives with the rest of the family, will ever be allowed to up there.

Let me rephrase that—it is not “no one except for my great-uncle will be allowed up there” but rather my great-uncle will not be allowed in the rest of the house. The locked door, I'm told, is not to prevent the rest of the family from interacting with him, but to prevent him from the rest of the family.

“Mayo?” On the phone, my grandmother pauses to think. I'd been looking through census records when I stopped at this name, not recognizing it. “Oh yeah. We called him Pigaboy—pigger sometimes. It was always that. Not Mayo.”

“Pigger?” I ask, not going further. My grandmother does not like to talk about the family of the husband she was once married to. It's been decades since his death, but my

grandmother still flinches when I ask about him or his relatives. There is the sense she was not treated well by them. Even though she'll never tell me, my father will relay stories of how she was beaten by her husband and how his brothers and sisters disregarded her because her skin was not light like theirs."

Most of them were light-skinned, some bordering on even looking white. If you saw a picture you'd think they were Italian maybe, or Jewish, and they could have passed if they wanted.

It bears mentioning that like my grandmother, Mayo was darker too.

"Yeah, because he ate like a pig," my grandmother says. "He ate his food like a dark little pig, you know Pigger. Pigaboy."

"You know what Pigger sounds an awful lot like," I say to her, thinking of all this.

"Yes, well," my grandmother responds. She swallows hard on the phone. "I realize this now."

Mayo, born 1920, and sometimes called Pigaboy or Pigger by his family.

As I've mentioned, Mayo will live upstairs. The downstairs door that's able to access the rest of the house will be locked from him. His only route of access will be to the door out back. His meals will be placed on the back porch where he'll either eat them or carry them back upstairs.

There are reasons for all this. Mayo eats like a pig so his nickname will be Pigaboy, shortened to Pigger. My family will say he's unstable, explaining that there were been incidents but never explicitly telling me what they were. To keep the rest of the

family safe, especially the children, the doors had to be locked. Mayo couldn't be with everyone else, he had to be separated. He had to eat his food out back. It was all they knew what to do. It was the only way.

Mayo's death record shows that he died on January 17, 1973 at the age of fifty-two. What it doesn't show is that he died upstairs in his bedroom and that it will be days before the rest of the family notices.

“Down in Yanceyville Billie went as white,” Vanessa tells me. “That’s what I’ve always heard, and remember it was eight miles to Yanceyville from Caswell and this was horse and buggies time, you actually had to travel to get there. So why would the people there think that this man was white? Under what circumstances would they imagine that to be the case? The only reason I can think of is because he went there to see his father, and if he’s with his father out in public that means his father must have claimed him—not only claiming but helping him, and in light of all that it fits in to the paradigm that the relationship his father had with him was consensual.”

There is a slight pause. Before I’m able to respond she continues again.

“Also, in the consensual relationships I’ve read about, the child bears the name of the father.”

In *The Fluidity of Race: “Passing” in the United States, 1880-1940*, Emily and Nix and Nancy Qian estimate that “using the full population of historical Censuses from 1880-1940, we document that over 19% of black males ‘passed’ for white at some point during their lifetime.”

Billie Siddle, my great-grandfather, will periodically pass for white. I'll hear versions of this from my mother as well, but she'll explain he left to pass and work the coal mines in Virginia, making enough money to come back and buy the land and build his own farm the family will live on decades later.

If Billie could pass, and if in fact there were circumstances when he did, then what made him decide not to?

Maybe the answer to this question is behind the reason he'll have issues with skin color the rest of his life. He'll pass them on to his children, each of them harboring the same prejudices, and they'll pass them on to their children—to my mother and eventually to me.

Billie Siddle will die on November 11, 1923 at the age of 48. The cause of death being chronic nephritis, a disease caused by infections, most commonly caused by autoimmune disorders that affect the organs, like Lupus, a disease my mother will come to suffer from.

On the death certificate, in the space for the question of the name of the father, there is listed only a question mark.

In the story of Cain and Abel from the book of Genesis, Eve bares two sons—Cain, a tiller of the earth, and Abel, a shepherd. When they both offer sacrifices to God, Abel's is respected more, much to the jealousy of Cain. Acting out of his own anger, he takes Abel into a field and kills him, and when God asks him where Abel is, he answers, "Am I not my brother's keeper?"

After God finds out the truth about Abel's murder, he curses Cain for what he's done. Cain pleads with God, explaining that this punishment is too much for him to bear. If he is a fugitive and a vagabond, then anyone who happens to find him will kill him. Hearing this, God tells him that whoever slays him will have vengeance taken upon them sevenfold. "And the Lord set a mark upon Cain, lest any finding him should kill him."

Theologians have interpreted this mark in many different ways. Some believe it to be a symbol of God's promise of protection. Others have suggested that the mark was a distinguishing characteristic God gave so that people would see and not harm him. In the 18th century it was taught that the Cain's mark was black skin and that his descendants were black and still under the "the curse of Cain."

There is no clear consensus as to which of these definitions is being referred to regarding Cain's mark.

In the famous Clark doll experiments conducted in the 1940's, husband and wife team Kenneth and Mamie Clark gave a child two different dolls, identical except for their skin color and hair. One doll was white with yellow hair and the other doll was brown with black hair. Then, the child was asked questions like "Which is the pretty doll?" "Which is the bad doll?"

Of course, you know this story already, even what the answers were, that their findings showed the internalized racism present among the children, the majority of which showed a preference for the white doll.

In 2006, Kiri Davis recreated the experiment for her documentary *A Girl Like Me*. Davis found that, nearly seventy years later, nothing much had changed. Girls still picked the white doll. The pretty doll. The good doll.

I do not need to wonder which doll I would have picked had I been asked. Growing up, I never had black dolls. The choice for me was never even a possibility.

Seeking information on the mixed or african american siddle family. Possible starting with a Billie Siddle. -Kim

A message posted on a genealogy forum. The date January 15, 2002.

I'm able to send to a response to the original poster. *Hi Kim, I believe I am someone you're looking for. Please write me back.*

No one will answer.

Unlike with Billie, there is next to nothing on Leanna Brown. She was married but I'm unsure of the dates. If she was a slave then it's possible her marriage would not have been recorded.

In search of answers I decide to look through the cohabitation records for the county. If I'm able to document when she was married then perhaps it will offer a piece to the question of the nature of her relationship with William Siddle. It could potentially offer clues to the other children had.

Cohabitation records were created to legitimize marriages and children born to those in slavery. In these records, the information can include names of the individuals, ages, places where they were born, the names of their last known slave holders, and

approximate year of marriage or cohabitation. These records can often be found in local courthouses, state archives, and libraries.

I check the website of the North Carolina State Archives and it says that cohabitation records are known to have survived for the following counties, but Caswell County is not included in this list.

Once, in graduate school I fell in love with a white boy who was unaware of my feelings. One night we were in a Starbucks talking. The cashier had begun her closing up ritual but we continued to stay.

I showed him an article about a celebrity who'd recently made some racist comments regarding his own dating preferences. I mentioned it off-the-cuff even though there was more to be said—a larger conversation about racial bias and prejudices in dating preferences, for one thing, or the effects of European beauty standards on women of color, or even the current problems in interracial dating. There was more to be interrogated between us but the minutes were quickly ticking by and soon we were the only customers left.

“That’s some bullshit,” he responded. “Who does this guy think he is?”

His anger, far worse than mine, made me believe he was trying to tell me something more, but then I remembered this was all a surprise to him. He had no idea what it was like to experience these attitudes day in and out. He was a conventionally attractive male with parents who would have given him the world. His anger came from a place where injustice was never a reality.

In the end, nothing ever happened between us. He fell in love with someone else. Her skin the color of cream.

On her Facebook profile page I find a photo of the two of them. Many times there will be moments when my thoughts will get the best of me and I'll go back to that photo and wonder if the reason nothing ever happened between us was because I did not look the way he was wanting.

Before the death of my mother I was not a person who talked about race. I was a person who actively avoided it throughout most of my life. It was easy when you were the only black person in a room, when for years you were the only black person you know. You find ways to adapt to the world around you, joining in with all the appropriate cultural signifiers, and because my skin was light enough I thought somehow I would be enough, that I'd be accepted beyond the Other that I am.

My desire to fit these pieces I have in a certain way is strong, undeniable, but I find myself asking what to make of them. How does one begin to compile these bits of fact, these stories and anecdotes, together into a way of understanding?

I struggle to turn them into a narrative that makes sense, so all I can do is offer them in the hope that somewhere one can find the truth.

According to population projections by the U.S. Census Bureau, by the year 2044 whites will become the minority. There will be a growth of new minorities, from Asians,

Hispanics, and those identifying as multiracial. This last group—multiracials—will more than triple in number, growing to close to 220 percent.

The same day I read this in the news I find an article about the rise of ethnic plastic surgeries cropping up in the U.S. Rhinoplasties to sharpen the flat shape of an ethnic-looking nose, for example, or “facial contouring” procedures in which the bones of the jaw are cut to make the appearance a v-shape.

“I think we’re kind of losing ethnic niches. I don’t think there’s going to be a black race or a white race or an Asian race,” Dr. Michael Jones, a plastic surgeon, is quoted saying in the article. “Essentially, in 200 years, we’re going to have one race.”

On my teaching evaluations my students say I discuss race too much. They are angry because in talking about American literature, I force them to read Charles W. Chesnutt, the first African American fiction writer. We read the slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs and Frederick Douglass. We read W.E.B. Dubois and Booker T. Washington. I bring in recordings of the Harlem Renaissance poets and let them hear the music and rhythm in Langston Hughes’s “The Negro Speaks of Rivers.” They listen to the songs of Negro spirituals. I bring in Toni Morrison and Amiri Baraka, and I make them read James Baldwin's “Going to Meet the Man,” a story that makes my hands shake every time I read it. That day, I spend an hour in front of my mostly white class talking about the Klan. I show them pictures of lynchings, one after the other after the other. I tell them of the brutal, ugly history of our country so that they can try to understand the world Baldwin has come from but they never understand.

The day I teach Baldwin everyone is bracing to hear the decision about Michael Brown and so the first thing I do is take a piece of chalk and begin writing. On the board I write the names I've collected of the black men and women throughout history who've been murdered—whether lynched or shot by police. One by one I write their names, filling the board with my scrawled script.

I leave it up during the remainder of the class, and towards the end, when I feel my own energy draining, I tell him that it's important to remember. "There is a pattern," I say, repeating the theory my godmother once told me. She believes that in looking at history, in seeing the moments of racial progress for African-Americans there has always been a steep backlash in response. It happened after the Civil War with the creation of the KKK, it happened after Reconstruction with the rise of the Jim Crow era in the South, and it happened after the Civil Rights Movement with the KKK's reemergence.

"Recognize it and maybe you can change it, because the problem is we keep forgetting."

Then I erase the board, slowly, hoping with this action the point hits home, but they are already packing their bags and out the door.

"I used to see Leanna as a victim," my godmother tells me. "She was in the sense that she was a black woman and didn't have any power, but the more I delve into the past, the more I've come to fully understand how much people don't fit into the boxes history wants us to put them in."

I've wanted to believe that the basis of their relationship was love, that Leanna Brown took the name for her children because she wanted a piece of this man to hold

onto, to be carried down among the generations. It is a story that goes down better than what history is known to provide—that her children were the product of rape.

I'm not sure how much I believe in generational curses, if the sins of the fathers shall be passed on to the children and then to their children's children.

Yet the patterns in my family are certainly there, repeating among generation to generation, and so for me the name carries with it a mark, a stain. It is more than the mark of my race, with that name are years of self-hatred, of anger, of wrongs done I can barely fathom and will never fully understand.

So how then can a name that carries so much pain with it have come from love?

Of course though, my students are unaware about race. To them I am just a black teacher talking about race when they don't want to talk about race. They are unaware of the history that has come to define my existence.

"Don't you understand?" I want to explain as I try to tell them my story—this story. *"Do you even understand how long it's taken me to get here? To get to this point of even the simple acknowledgement of who I am?"*

I'm in a bar sitting alone. A man comes up and sits down next to me. "Grading, I see," he interrupts, nodding toward my stack of papers, and for a moment I am willing to go along, to be distracted.

"Yes."

“I want to ask—” and here it comes. I know the question before he even finishes, but he is looking at me and whatever expression on my face makes him stop. Instead, he tries a different tactic and softly mutters Spanish.

“What?”

“Oh,” he says, realizing his mistake, but the question is there and he still must know the answer. “I thought you were maybe one of my Dominican sisters? I’ve been hoping to find some of my people here in this town.”

“I’m sorry,” I say, then pick up another paper.

“So you’re not?” he continues, not taking the hint. “I mean, *you’re* not?”

“I’m black.”

“Really?” He draws the word out so it sounds more like an accusation than a question.

“Yes.”

This is the part where I’m supposed to offer up evidence. I’m supposed to explain how both of my parents were light-skinned, or mention how I have my mother’s curls. I’ll explain how I have great aunts and uncles who passed, and the colorism issues most of us face, but by then I’ll have gone on too long. I’ll have said too much. What will be wanted is an explanation, not an indictment or a history lesson on racial constructions.

This time though I say nothing. I reach for my wallet and take out a twenty, placing it on the counter. I grab my stack of papers and stand, leaving the bar and the man with just my simple answer, my affirmation—yes.

This time it is enough.

I spend my time now going through the Civil Action Court Records of North Carolina. They are searchable online. In this collection, spanning from 1709 to 1970, are records consisting of civil disputes pertaining to land ownership, unpaid debts, slave manumissions, divorces, and the legitimization of children born out of wedlock.

Somewhere buried in these pages of pages of documents I feel as if I'll find my answer, or, at least the start of it. If ever there was a place to look this is it—the answer to the name and how it came to be in my family.

Because I do not have a specific date to go by there are thousands of pages I must search. There are so many names. Some of the documents are faded and it's difficult to see. My eyes squint trying to make out the cursive.

There is a chance I will go through all these and find nothing. Perhaps there was never anything to find.

Yet, I am here. At night when the world has quieted, I sit at my desk, coffee in hand. Each scan takes a few seconds to load and I wait and sip. Names flash across my screen—names of strangers, of brothers and sisters bonded together, of mothers and daughters, of fathers and sons, names of the searching, names of the lost, names waiting for someone who will one day find and claim them.

Before You Throw Her Body Down

In the bar's bathroom I stand in front of the mirror and rub my lips together, pressing hard, smearing the color I've just applied. The color is a blueish red, a date-night color, from a tube of lipstick I've bought but never worn.

Tonight, I am here to meet a man. Some of his friends and some of my friends who know each other have suggested we meet. Partly, I suspect, because we are both black, and we are both single, and for them that is enough of a reason for why we should be together.

He is out there somewhere now, possibly already at the bar, possibly already searching among the other patrons for who I might be. Or he is standing outside waiting in the cold, the puffs of his breath dissipating as he looks up and down the streets watching to see who else comes to the door. He is out there and I am in this bathroom fooling with a color, and as I look at my reflection it is the only color I see.

Another woman comes inside and the disruption makes me blush. Quickly, I take a tissue from my bag, wet it, and wipe the lipstick off, the smear on the tissue a reminder. I wipe until there is nothing but the blank canvas of my mouth and then I leave to find the man I'm supposed to meet.

There is a story I must tell you and it begins like this—once, a woman once had a relationship with a man. Her name was a Leanna Brown and she was a slave to the Bedford Brown and his family. Bedford Brown was Senator of North Carolina during the 1830's. Next to Brown's plantation lived a man by the name of William Siddle. The two

of them, Leanna and William, sometimes called Willie, had a relationship that resulted in at least two, possibly three children, and one of those children was my great grandfather.

When I look at history, at the ways in which black women's bodies have been treated and are continually treated, it is easy for me to look on this past and believe she was raped—that her children and their children and ultimately my own reason for existence, is because of this. It is easier to simplify their history, to make black and white a situation I don't understand, but there is a fact that keeps me questioning, one I come back to time and time again. At least two of the children, born during Reconstruction, took his surname.

This fact leads me to believe that there is perhaps a different story than the one I've originally believed.

“Even still,” my godmother says on the phone. I have called her again, as I periodically do when I need to ask another question about our past, or when in my scattered research stumble across another detail, another piece. In her profession, she often deals with history and in my family is the only one I know left who can offer any clues or advice. “Even still, she was a woman and she was black. How much power could she have had, really?”

We are the only two black people in this bar. Typically, this is something I try not to pay attention to. In college I was the only black female in all of my classes and during my Masters I was the only black person until the last class before I graduated. In my doctorate program, I am one of five other black students—two I rarely ever see on campus, me, and two new students, one of which is the man I am now meeting. With

him though I am made aware. Experience has taught me that when you are the anomaly in your life's surroundings you teach yourself to ignore it. With him though, I begin questioning the side glances of the others around us as we settle into our seats. The smirk of the bartender after I try to get his attention—or was it just my imagination? There is a heightened awareness to every interaction, and yet still I fear of misjudging the situation. When the bartender fails to bring back my tequila, when after taking my card he goes to make several other drinks from the people sitting near me, I remind myself that my annoyance is an overreaction, and even if it was justified, I should hold my tongue. Every action, every moment is an opportunity to prove that I am something more than the possible assumptions and beliefs of my race, and so I am patient and I smile and eventually my drink does come.

The prevalent “darky” icon, popular in 19th century post-Civil War comic strips, ads, cartoons, books and toys, was depicted with skin the color of ink, had bright white teeth, wide open eyes, and deep red lips. The darky was nostalgic for the old South, before war had destroyed his plantation home.

Blackface minstrelsy used the image of the “happy-go-lucky darky” in their caricatured portrayals of African-Americans. Blackface helped propagate other stereotypes that have been long-lasting in our culture—the buck, the Uncle Tom, the Zip Coon, the pickaninny, and for women, the tragic mulatta, the mammy, and the wench/jezebel.

In blackface minstrelsy, the jezebel was promiscuous and immoral. She was a temptress, a counter depiction to the pure, modest, and self-controlled white woman. “Black women are jezebels,” was the excuse slaveowners gave when they raped them.

The jezebel archetype far precedes its 19th century application to black women. In the Bible, Jezebel was the wife of King Ahab of Israel. She was a Phoenician who worshipped different gods other than Yahweh. She used her influence on her husband to spread idol worship of her gods Baal and Asherah in Israel. Jezebel was murdered by the general Jehu, who after overtaking their land and the appointed king, ordered her eunuchs to throw her out the palace window. Because she was an idolater and a temptress, she was killed, her body consumed by dogs.

Of course, there is another way of looking at her story. Jezebel was a foreigner in a new land, a woman ethnically different, an Other. While standing at her watchtower in Jezreel, she witnessed the murder of her son Joram from Jehu’s planned coup against Ahab’s dynasty. She knew that for Jehu to succeed, he would have to murder every member of Ahab’s family, and as Jehu made his way to Jezreel, Jezebel dressed herself in the makeup and head-dress of her gods. Her makeup and adornments were not last ditch efforts of seduction but an attempt to meet her death with dignity, to die being seen as what she rightfully was—a queen.

The man I have come here to meet is gregarious and warm. At one point during the evening he offers to stand, giving up his seat so another couple can sit together, but when one of them looks and sees me she declines. “You were here already,” she says, despite his protests.

“I’m pretty docile in my personality,” he tells me afterward as a sort of explanation. “You know, black man in a white college town and all. I guess you have to be.”

“I understand,” I say.

He asks me what it’s like living in this town, and I struggle to find an answer. I don’t know him well enough to tell him the truth. I don’t explain about the program, about the casual racism present despite my false assumption our peers should behave better. I also don’t mention the overt racism prevalent not just in the town but in the surrounding areas.

“Where’d you live before here?” I ask instead, changing the subject.

“California,” he says.

“You should have stayed in California.”

“Racism exists there too.”

“Yeah, I know, but better weather.”

“True,” he says, nodding. “You know what? It doesn’t seem that bad here. I mean, I could be wrong, but it seems mostly okay?”

Because I can’t take it anymore, I tell him about the cotton balls. Two students who were arrested for putting cotton balls in front of the Black Culture Center on campus. I tell him about the slurs spray-painted to mock Black History Month. I tell him about the swastika drawn on the wall in one of the dorms. There is a tension on the campus, I say, and it has existed for quite a while, even before I came here, and it is building.

It has not happened yet, but in a few weeks that tension will reach a breaking point with protests that will make national news, the results of which heightening the ways in which I perceive myself to be seen.

“It’s not that bad though, or maybe I’ve just gotten used to it all,” I finally answer, and he laughs, seeing immediately through my lie.

For black women, if you’re not the jezebel then you are the mammy, desexualized but still an object. Always, you are the object, maybe not of sexual desire, but still a reduction of who you are.

Never mind that the idea of the mammy—dark-skinned, overweight and middle-aged—is a construction having no real basis in history. Female house slaves during slavery were light-skinned, of mixed-race, and thin. They weren’t old considering that fewer than ten percent of black women lived beyond fifty years of age. The caricature that’s been so culturally ingrained—from the image of Aunt Jemima popular on pancake mixes for decades, to Hattie McDaniel’s portrayal in *Gone With the Wind*—were, and have always been, fictions created to soothe.

We are jezebels or we are mammies, or we are Sapphires or tragic mulattas. We are the gold-digger, the angry-black woman, or the welfare queen. Object or abject, we are always one or the other, but always considered an Other.

“So have you dated anyone here?”

“No,” I say, already feeling defensive.

“No one?”

“No.”

He pushes for an answer as to why, an answer I’m unwilling to give. It’s too early in the evening for such a conversation. A few weeks earlier I was at a bar and a man, in his mid-forties, came up to order a drink. He smiled and said hello in my direction and out of politeness I nodded back. This provoked him to conversation and then to offer to buy me another unasked-for drink.

“You know,” he said, leaning closer, “I’ve always liked the coloreds. I’ve always wanted to date one.”

These men aren’t unusual. They aren’t specific to Missouri where I am now, but have been in Massachusetts and North Carolina and Kentucky, all the places I’ve lived. They are sometimes older, men who want to reenact some racial fantasy of their dreams, but sometimes they are younger, curious about what it’s like.

It is tiring, I want to say, all the ways in which you’re seen.

“I guess there aren’t many black people here to date,” he says.

“No, there aren’t.”

Perhaps this is why I have dolled myself up for this. Because for the first time in a long while I’d be on a date where I knew I wouldn’t be made to feel an object. For an evening I would be with someone who understands our history, who understands what it’s like to navigate this world. Perhaps this why I had stayed so long in front of the bathroom mirror, and why I had taken out that tube of lipstick, putting it on carefully, wanting for the first time in a long while for my intention to be known.

But in the end I had smeared my lips clean. Too afraid in the end, even to someone who might understand, of how it might appear.

Saturday mornings I get in my car and drive. There's an antique store just on the outskirts of the Missouri town in which I live, and to kill some of the hours of my day I decide to go.

There in the middle of the store is a doll. Black onyx skin. Wide red lips. Knotted black hair. A pickaninny doll. I'm so taken aback that I stop and stare at it. The doll is predominantly displayed on top of a chest of drawers for sale.

The male clerk at the front of the store catches me staring. "You thinking about buying it?" he asks.

"I don't know."

"It looks pretty taken care of. Good condition."

This exchange is too much. He is unaware of the symbolism of the doll, of what it signifies, or maybe he is perhaps pretending in an attempt to make a sale.

"I think I'm going to pass," I tell him.

"You sure? You seem like you want it."

"Yeah, I'm sure," I say, and then head for the door.

The next day I go back and thankfully someone else is working. I pay for the doll quickly, saying as little as possible to the clerk as she places it in a plastic bag.

I bought the doll for the sole purpose of trashing it. I wanted to feel some sort of vindication as I took it apart, disassembled its limbs, cut to shreds the fabric of its clothes, but when I got it home I couldn't do it. How often our history has been erased, sanitized, perverted and disguised. The ugliness forgotten and what's left is its echo reverberating in all the ways we are forced to understand ourselves.

I don't get rid of the doll. Instead, I put it in a box in my closet where it sits now.

I'm not sure I'll ever have children, but if I do one day when they're older I'll take the doll out and say, "Look. This is how they used to see you. This was what they thought of us. Do you understand? So you must always be careful, always be aware of how the world sees you, will continue to see you. It's not right, but like anything, it is what it is."

Leanna Brown's death certificate says she died of "tragic burns to the neck and shoulders." This detail has kept me awake at night—the grotesque images it conjures because of the description's simplicity. I've spent far too long considering the different possibilities in an attempt to understand, but there is no understanding such a horror, no matter the answer.

"You might never know, and you're going to have to be okay with that," my godmother says when I call her to tell her about this new piece of information.

I'm not ready for such a resolution, not of her death nor of the mysteries surrounding her life. I'm not ready for her to be forgotten like so many have been and are continuing to be.

I can't imagine what it must have been like to have spent a month living in a body that didn't feel like her own, but how much of her body was ever her own? Considering the time, and the place, her life, how much agency could she have ever had?

This, I wonder.

Leanna lived for a month suffering from her burns before dying. She is buried in Rose Hill off of Highway 58. She has no tombstone.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I ignore it the first time and the second, but the third time I know it'll continue unless I answer.

"I'm sorry," I say, quickly taking my phone out to check the messages.

"You're popular."

"Not really."

As I thought, it's my best friend messaging me about tonight. He is wanting to know how it's going, if it will continue. If I don't respond he'll assume this has led to sex, and later, tomorrow morning, he'll message asking me to talk about it.

"You're such a prude," he will say when I don't answer, and when I chastised him for it he'll stop, but hanging in the air of our conversations will be this absence of the things I won't say and the misunderstanding as to why.

There is a saying that a woman decides within the first few minutes of meeting a man if she wants to sleep with him, and even though I have decided there is a difference between desire and action, between what one wants and what one is willing to do, and I know that no matter how the night swings I will go home alone.

As I sit across from this man though I wonder if maybe it is really the expectation of desire, that because we are here and we are the same race, these factors alone should be enough to warrant it, and just as quickly as I have made my decision I am now beginning to question the motivation behind my want.

When I look at my skin and remember the history, it goes down easier to believe that maybe Leanna's relationship with this man was consensual because otherwise how

do you make peace with such a past? How does one move on when the legacy is evident from a simple glance in the mirror?

I'm afraid that if the relationship was not consensual that her life becomes reduced to an archetype, but I must remember she was more than just an archetype. She was a woman who lived her life the best she could. She was a woman who managed to provide her children with the name of their father, so they would always know some semblance of their history. She was a woman who died a tragic death but not before fighting for her life all the way until the end.

Consider the woman known as Saartjie Baartman, or “little Sara” in Dutch. Saartjie Baartman’s birth name is unknown. The world knows her as Saartjie, or “little Sara,” the diminutive name establishing her status and her difference. Born on the southernmost tip of South Africa, known in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century as the Cape of Good Hope. She belonged to the heterogeneous indigenous group, the Khoikoi. Dubbed the Hottentot Venus, her body put on exhibition in London, displayed as a sexual curiosity, a freak of nature due to the size of her body.

At No. 225 Piccadilly, members of the public could pay two shillings to view the “Hottentot Venus.” Up on a stage Baartman was made to walk, stand, or sit as she was led around by her keeper. She wore a skintight “dress resembling her complexion” to give the appearance of being undressed.

Four years after arriving in London, she was indentured to the animal trainer S. Réaux. S. Réaux displayed Baartman in Paris, drawing the attention of Parisian scientists, most specifically that of Georges Cuvier, who requested S. Réaux give a private showing.

For three days Cuvier, along with an assortment of anatomists, zoologists, and physiologists examined Baartman's anatomy.

After she died, an artist was commissioned to make a plaster molding of her body, and considered to be of "special scientific interest" to science, Baartman was dissected at the *Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle* in front of an audience of scientists. Her skeleton was removed. Her brain and genitals extracted and pickled in jars. Her organs were submitted to the French Academy of Sciences. She was put on display at the *Muséum d'Histoire Naturelle* up until 1937 when Paris's *Musée de l'Homme* was founded. Her remains and the plaster molding were displayed there up until the late 1970's.

Gold inscriptions of the French poet, Paul Valery, adorn the upper facade of the *Musée de l'Homme*. "Rare or beautiful things are wisely gathered here," the English translation of one of the inscriptions begins, "teach the eye to see all things in the world as if never seen before."

"I'm going to go back there," I tell my godmother one night. "I'm going to go back and see if I can find the records, but also to see the land—the plantation Leanna lived on. I need to see it."

"I don't know why I've never tried. I've thought about doing it, not just trying to figure that out but really sitting down and outlining the whole line but—"

"But what?"

"Life, I think," she says. "Plus there's just too much trauma in that story I couldn't bring myself to deal with it. Who knows anyway, maybe this task was always meant for you."

If I'm honest with myself, this is not a task I want. I am not a historian. I know very little about archival research, and the idea of driving back to that area worries me, especially going alone. I also do not want to dwell in this past. It is too much to think about the injustices of my ancestors, but I find that despite my protests certain questions continue to infiltrate my life. I find myself circling back, and I know that the only way to get some sense of peace is to go.

"If you do end up going there you should also look into what your Uncle Pete said happened with the land. I've always wondered if what he said was true even though now I'm starting to believe that he was right."

My godmother has brought this up a few times before. Her father, my great-uncle, had always argued that some of their land was stolen. After the death of his father, a couple of men came to the house asking his mother to see the deed. At the time she was a woman living alone with eight children in an area heavily dominated by the Klan, and out of fear she relented and gave them the deed. The men took it and when it was given back it was altered, changed to reflect less than half their number of acres.

I tell her about Ta-Nehisi Coates and his essay "The Case for Reparations." "Yes, I want reparations," she says, light-heartedly, although deep down I know she's serious. "Yes, reparations for everything. All we lost. Someone should give him my number because I even know how it could be done."

I do not need to tell you of all the ways in which black women's bodies have been violated. From the auction block as women were stripped down, their bodies laid bare for the world to see and consume. The skin oiled so that it gleamed underneath the sun. The

body was poked and prodded under the guise of an examination. Slave owners would knead women's stomachs in an attempt to determine how many children they'd have. Some were subjected to experimental gynecological exams. They were sold and bought for breeding purposes, and those who couldn't were beaten. The body classified and categorized.

Or the decades of rape. We remember Betty Jean Owens, Recy Taylor, and we say never again.

I do not need to explain about the more than 64,000 missing black women and children that have disappeared and the lack of investigations and the lack of outrage.

Or the decades of state-sponsored sterilizations of black and other women of color. A woman named Elaine Riddick was raped when she was thirteen. She was sterilized without her consent after the child was born. In the state eugenics board's records she is described as "promiscuous," using that as the basis for why she should be sterilized.

Perhaps you too are tired of seeing the images, of listening to these stories, and don't need to hear me tell you about Daniel Holtzclaw, about his serial raping of at least thirteen black women. He preyed on them because they were poor and because they were black, because he had power and they had none, and because he knew, and what he convinced them to also believe, was that the world would not care.

I do not need to explain about the ways in which our bodies have been taken, have been handled without our consent, have been objectified, appropriated, or stolen. I do not need to tell you—but I will.

“So where are you from?” the man I’m with asks, trying again to change the subject. “What about your family? Where are they?”

“My mother grew up in a small unincorporated community near the Virginia border.”

“Oh really? Where?”

To make things easier, I tell him one of the nearby towns. Yanceyville. Even those I’ve met from North Carolina often don’t know of where I mean, and so I say it expecting him to nod and then move on as so many others in the past have done, but instead he holds my gaze. “I know Yanceyville,” he says. “I know it well. My father preached there when I was a child.”

“So did my grandfather,” I say. “When was this?”

“During the 70’s.”

“So around the same time. Do you think they knew each other? I mean, they would have had to, right? They must have. We’re not talking about a big city here. They were both preachers to the same community.”

“Yes,” he says. “They probably did.”

The coincidence of this, of two strangers coming together in such a way, will keep me wondering, and also the meaning, if there is one, behind the odds of such a thing happening.

“I’ll ask him when I can.”

“Your father’s still alive?”

“Yes.”

I know now this will bond us in a way nothing else ever would. We are two black people in academia, that alone would have been enough, but now there is the possibility of the connection between our ancestors. He says we are kindred, and the antiquatedness of the word makes me want to laugh, but I know he's right.

The bar is crowded now, forcing us to sit even closer together, the act forming an intimacy among strangers.

He waives for the bartender and asks for Hennessey but the bartender shrugs and says they don't have it. This doesn't surprise me. We are in a college town, after all, a world of watered-down whiskey and cokes and vodka tonics. He pauses, then tells the bartender he'll have to think a moment longer before deciding what else to order.

"I know it's a stereotype to drink it," he tells me later, "but whatever. I like the taste. I am who I am."

He gives a self-conscious laugh after this that lets me know despite what he says he too deep down is battling the same insecurities.

We never escape it, I think, this fear we are conceding to our depictions, to the world's assumptions and misconceptions. Our past is always there, coming to define and redefine who we are to each other.

"You want to go to another bar?"

"No, we can stay here awhile longer," he says, and watches as I slowly sip my tequila.

We're both quiet now, and in the silence he shifts his weight on the barstool. His hand touches my knee in the process, an accidental transgression, and even though it should not be on my mind I can't help but think of the image of the two of us to an

onlooker. I wish I could say that I am not suddenly ashamed, that I do not blush or turn to look and see if we are noticed. As I glance around the room, I try to remind myself that we are just a couple in a bar having a drink, and that if one were to turn and look they would only see two people, each of them cautious and fumbling, who are continuously learning how to be.

After Water Comes the Fire

A friend of mine can taste the differences in bottled water. We're friends of circumstance, the two of us having become close after I'd moved to Missouri for graduate school. I'd gone over her apartment to study with her when I commented on the containers upon containers of empty gallon jugs she kept in her kitchen. That's when she told me about the water. She said she always bought her water because there was only a specific brand she was able to drink. It must go through reverse osmosis, she said. It must not have fluoride. It must be purified.

"You're full of it. Water is water," I told her, and then I called her elitist. I was irritated even though I knew deep down my irritation stemmed not from the water but in how it marked the differences between us. She's white and Republican, and I am not. She's the kind of religious I used to be, the church on Sunday mornings and Bible study during the week kind of religious I've now forgone. Whereas I grew up the product of divorced parents who scraped and pinched to afford my childhood and adolescence, she grew upper middle class.

That evening I decided to call my friend's bluff. As an experiment I went out and bought all the popular brands of bottled water to test and then I brought them back to her apartment. I poured two fingers full of each into clear glasses and placed them all in front of her. Dasani. Poland Springs. Aquafina. Fiji. Voss. "Okay, tell me which is which," I said when I was finished.

To my surprise she got them all correct. "Well, I'll be damned," I said.

"Told you."

I responded by saying we were going again. “Just to make sure,” I said, collecting the glasses off of her kitchen table.

In the Book of Matthews John the Baptist went to the people of Judea to preach repentance. Many in the surrounding regions came to see him to be baptized. When the Pharisees and the Sadducees appeared, John stopped his baptism. He believed that these two groups were hypocrites, wanting merely to appear repentant while not truly believing. John explained that even though he would baptize them with the water someone else was coming, another mightier than him who would baptize with the Holy Spirit and with fire. The fire referred to the coming judgment of those who have not repented.

This lesson should be enough to convince me, but I’ve still not been baptized. My mother believed it should be a choice and I never made the choice. As a child, I watched as my friends completed the necessary ritual. Every Sunday another one would go up to the pulpit, and I watched the ceremony from my pew. I watched as the pastor held them as they leaned back. I watched as he let them fall into the water, and when he brought them back up, I listened as the congregation rejoiced.

My mother had worked as a church secretary. She’d quit a few weeks earlier, came home and told me she was done. Earlier that afternoon the pastor had gone out to lunch with another woman, and when his wife called my mother had told the truth as to where he’d been. Later, when the pastor found out, my mother was reprimanded for it, and was told to lie to her in the future if need be, and so she quit.

As I'd looked up at the pulpit I knew I couldn't do what everyone else expected. To me it seemed like a ritual, nothing more, and they'd done it for the sake of the rite of passage. For me it was not enough of a reason. I waited until I thought I'd be ready and then discovered I never was.

The year my parents divorced my mother took me to the local community center for swimming lessons. For an hour every weekday an instructor taught a group of others and me how to swim. We learned how to bob, how to float from the front and back, and how to flutter kick. Towards the end the instructor taught us the front crawl and the backstroke.

I would only take lessons there that one time, enough to swim but not to be any good. As part of the divorce I would spend every summer thereafter with my father. He would assume I'd learned enough enrolled me instead in a day camp for the children of military families. Every afternoon a school bus carted us off to a nearby pool where for an hour we'd swim. There was a swimming test and those who passed were allowed to cross the white line and swim in the deep end. I watched from the shallow side as other kids took turns doing elaborate flips from the diving board, falling into the dark water below.

One summer I finally told myself I would take the test. I pushed myself as far as I could go, telling myself I would at least complete the test so I could say I tried, but really I wanted to pass. I wanted to join the others, to feel included for once in my life. I wanted to dive from that diving board. Halfway through the test my body got tired and I switched my body position. I turned on my back, closed my eyes, and floated, briefly remembering

my lessons from the past year. I stared up at the sun before closing my eyes. I back-paddled but not with the same effort.

I heard the whistle of the lifeguard. When I opened my eyes I saw him standing at the side of the pool. He told me I had to stop what I was doing, that it was either swim or give up. I only had a few minutes left so I needed to make a decision.

I'm done," I yelled, quitting. I swam to the pool's edge. I knew I would never try again, not this summer or anytime after. I got out, dried off, and when he told me I wouldn't get the band I only shook my head.

When I was a kid I almost drowned. My mother had decided to take the daughter of a friend along with me to a water park. We'd gone to the wave pool, both of us climbing into a double tube while my mother watched from the sidelines. "Just for a little bit," she'd said, already looking for shade to shield her from the sun.

I did not want to be here but my mother had insisted on this outing. "Be nice," she'd told me, and that meant acquiescing to what I wanted.

Our tube slowly moved toward the deeper end of the water. Soon we passed the eight-foot mark, then the ninth, and the tenth. I was still not a good swimmer, despite the lessons and the practice, and the further we got the more crowded it became, the waves knocking the tubes against each other.

"We should go back!" I yelled.

"Why?"

I knew it was coming before it happened. I saw the manipulated wave, knew in the few seconds before it hit us it would turn our tube over, that soon I would be deep in the water struggling to breathe, struggling to find the surface, the light.

What I've remembered was after—the lifeguard standing above me after having pulled me out, his face red from a mix of exertion and fear, my mother standing behind him in the background, worry wrinkling her face before the expression quickly dissolved.

“What happened?” I asked my mother, coughing, my chest hurting.

“What happened is it's time to go home.”

After the pool, my father would get off of work and come pick me up. Together we'd go to the grocery store to get dinner. Even then my father nickeled and dimed. It's a character trait I've learned over the years to become accustomed to, but when I was a child I was impatient in his need to price compare, and I was not understanding of his habit of always buying the cheapest product.

While waiting in the checkout line my father said he was thirsty. “Well, there's water,” I told him, pointing to the cases by the register filled with racks of bottled water. I went and picked out the cheapest bottle and held it up for him to take.

My father looked at me and laughed. “You've got to be kidding,” he said. “How much money do you think I have to waste?” He told me to wait where I stood, and I watched as he went a couple of feet to a nearby water fountain.

I was too young then to recognize how he saw this choice as a privilege. My father, who grew up in the segregated south, who grew up using black designated

facilities, the black only and white onlys of everything, and then who witnessed the violence from desegregation. It did not occur to me the meaning behind his choice.

“Free always tastes better,” he said, smiling as he wiped his mouth dry.

It’s been over a decade since I’ve swum. Sometimes I’ve thought that maybe I should try again considering how long public pools across the country were segregated. It’s easy to understand the ways in which this has shaped future generations’ relationships to water. The amount of African American children who can’t swim is almost double the rate of white children, and African American children drown at nearly three times the overall rate. The legacy of segregation still continues, and maybe this was why my mother tried so hard to make sure I’d learn.

In a photo album once belonging to my mother is a picture of a man known in my family to have passed for white. With his dark hair slicked back, he’s posed sitting on the edge of a swimming pool.

This man wanted to become an actor, or so our folklore goes, and he made a decision and left his family behind. I’ve heard the stories of when he’d come back to visit, how he’d take multiple cabs, for example, before finally deciding on being brought to the black section where his mother lived. The photo I have was given to the family during one of these visits. It was passed down to my mother and after she died, passed on to me.

I don’t know his name, not what it once was or what it became. I do not know if he was successful in his dream or if in life he pursued something else. All I have, all I know, is this image of him and all of what it signifies.

“Do you know who this is?” I asked my godmother once. She’s the only link in my family who might provide answers to such questions. She said she remembered the picture I was talking about, said that she too might have a copy somewhere in her house if she were to look, but she’d also forgotten the man’s name.

“I’m not even sure I’d know who to ask to try and find out about it,” she said.

“It’s okay,” I told her. “I just find it interesting that he’d send a photo of him at the pool.”

“Well, remember black people often couldn’t go to pools back then. They were segregated, and so it would have been a big deal for the rest of the family to see that, to see a photo of him at a pool. It would have meant he was somebody.”

I’ve heard it said that the next world war would be brought on by water. Across the world huge areas are drying up, and the combination of drought and water shortages will heighten existing conflicts between countries. Water will be, as Goldman Sachs described it, “the petroleum of the next century.”

During the last year of my Masters there was a water ban in Boston. A water pipe broke and began flooding the Charles River. The Governor declared a state of emergency and ordered that all the drinking water must be boiled.

Panic spread across the city. Restaurants closed, posting signs across the front of their doors that they weren’t accepting patrons for the rest of the evening. Drugstores, running out of bottled water to sell, filled the front of their coolers with Coke products, hoping to further their profits. Before I took the subway home I stopped in the downtown Shaw’s, the grocery store situated in Copley Mall known for being one of the city’s

wealthier shopping districts. While in the store I debated what to buy, how much I could even afford to spend on water. I watched as Back Bay shoppers filled their shopping carts with bottled water. They were frantic, desperate as they cleaned the store out.

A woman next to me in the aisle was filling her cart with gallon jugs. She emptied the counter and then caught the expression on my face from staring. “I need it to bathe,” she said as explanation.

“I thought the concern was with drinking it, and even then we can still boil the water though, right? It’s okay if we boil it I thought?”

“I just want to be safe,” the woman answered as she pulled her cart away. “I don’t want to take any chances.”

The summer after I left Boston and moved to Missouri it was hot, every day reaching the triple digits. Even a few minutes outside in the heat felt unbearable, and because of this I tried to wait until late in the evening to do my errands, until the sun had already set, giving an illusion in a drop in temperature, but always the thick headiness of the air remained.

“Did you see them?” my neighbor asked me one such night. She was watering the plants on her deck when she caught me. She was older, a retiree like most of the residents in my complex, and she spent most of her day sitting on her desk, watching as the rest of us came and went.

“Who?” I asked.

“Those kids.”

“I didn’t notice,” I said, although I had. The fence bordering our pool wasn’t locked. The pool was small, more of a wading pool than anything else, and in the few weeks I’d been living here I’d rarely seen anyone else use it which was why when I’d heard the noise I’d gone to my window to see, had looked out and saw the group of black kids in the water.

“They’ve got nothing else better to do so they sneak over here late at night and use our pool.”

I was struck then on her use of our—*our* pool, and I wondered how much of it was intentional.

“I had to kick them out,” she said. “They just had no respect at all.”

“Why does it matter if no one uses it?”

“That’s not the point.”

The point was the principle of the matter. They were not part of the complex and shouldn’t be able to use the facilities. It was an argument I understood but didn’t agree with, because standing there listening to her I was sweating through my clothes. With each second I felt as if heat stroke was coming, and I looked out at the empty pool and it seemed like wasted effort to be up in arms.

“Next time I’m calling the cops,” my neighbor said. I left her to finish watering her plants, knowing full well that she would.

I never saw the neighborhood kids in the pool again. The summer heat acquiesced to fall and throughout all that time the pool stayed mostly empty except for the occasional sunbather.

Despite the months passing, I couldn't get used to Missouri or the town and I spent most of my time in my apartment. I learned to get used to the quiet and each week I settled more into the realization of my loneliness. By winter I preferred it, and so it came as a surprise when I heard a knocking at my door. It was freezing out and I opened the door to find two men who'd come to proselytize. They wanted to give me a Bible lesson, explained how it would only take a few minutes, and I wasn't sure why but I let them. Maybe it was because of their sheepish expressions, their defenses being down from having so many previous doors slammed in their face. They seemed happy and surprised I'd taken the time. I didn't let them in and we all stood in my doorway in the cold while they asked me to read out loud passages from their Bible.

Five minutes went by. Ten. Soon I couldn't feel my toes in my slippers. We were all shivering. They were having a hard time turning the thin pages of the Bible. Their teeth chattered as they asked me to read each marked verse.

"It's so cold. Do you guys want to just come back and do this another time?" I finally interrupted, knowing once I closed the door I was never opening it again. They seemed to sense this too, that there would never be another time, and so they said they'd continue.

"Okay, well, do you think we can wrap this up maybe?"

They got to their point and asked me if I'd been baptized and I told them the truth. They asked, well do you know what will happen to your soul? They asked, don't you want to accept Jesus in your heart? Don't you want eternal salvation? They said they could baptize me. They even had a baptism bus.

"What does that mean, a baptism bus?"

They wanted to bring it and show me, they said. It wouldn't take long. They could bring it right now so I could be baptized.

"I—" I stalled, trying to figure out a way out, but they were unwilling to let this go. I thought back to my mother's desire and how I would wait until I was ready.

I told them okay even though once they left I would already be gone, already getting in my car and driving away so as not to be there when they came back. Still, for a moment I believed maybe it was time, that maybe I was ready, and so I told them to bring the bus and they both nodded, grinning from ear to ear.

During the 1840's in Petersburg, Virginia, a physician by the name of Walter F. Jones once used slaves to test a remedy for typhoid pneumonia. The patient was put on the floor, face down, while five gallons of boiling water were thrown immediately on the spine. Every couple of hours this process was repeated. According to Jones, this process helped patients recover by "re-establishing the capillary circulation."

Decades later in the mine camps belonging to Joel Hurt, the wealthy Atlanta real estate developer and investor, slaves were tortured with what was known as the "water cure," a punishment in which water was poured into the nostrils and lungs of prisoners. It was preferred to whipping because it allowed miners to "go to work right away" after being punished.

In the narrative of his life as a slave, Charles Ball described a time when his master explained to him how he'd found a mode of punishment "much more mild" than whipping. He told Ball to come to the house and there he showed him the water pump. Ball watched as another slave was stripped naked, was tied to a post so that her head was

underneath the stream of water that began to pour, and she was given the “punishment of the pump.”

During the Civil Rights Movement, Birmingham’s Commissioner of Public Safety Eugene “Bull” Connor directed the police department to use high-pressure water hoses on nonviolent protestors. Police aimed the water hoses on children who’d formed their bodies into balls so the pressure wouldn’t sting, but the water was forceful enough to wash them down the street where they were met with dogs or batons.

It’s difficult to not be reminded of all the ways water has harmed. The EPA estimates that 90,000 public schools and half a million child-care facilities aren’t regulated under the Safe Drinking Act. When I lived in Boston, three-quarters of the public schools didn’t even have access to traditional water fountains. When I worked at an at-risk after-school program housed at one of these public schools, kids got their water from five-gallon coolers, and often they ran out. In Flint and Newark and Maine and California and in hundreds of other schools across our country children are being exposed to tainted water. Children have died, and most likely will continue to die, because of lack of access to what I believe should be a right.

Like Hughes, I could speak to you not just of rivers but also of all the vessels of water. There were the oceans that brought us here. We were chained two by two on slave ships. When the tight quarters on the *Zong* made us ill, when disease spread through the ship like wildfire, like spoiled cargo we were thrown overboard. Some of us sacrificed ourselves to the ocean’s depths, choosing our own deaths rather than submit to such a massacre. On the *Moravia* we rose up, refusing our awaiting fate of forced labor, and

when the ship landed on the Georgia shore, we walked together back into the water that had brought us. The water became our salvation, taking us to our promised land, giving us back our power in this new world where we'd have none.

The rivers we were once sold down, down the Mississippi or the Ohio, our River Jordan, as we were transported to the cotton plantations where we'd work until our deaths. On river boats we served as deck hands, cabin boys, and stevedores. We escaped on these rivers in the ferries we operated. We waded in the waters as we hid from our captors. We took ships like the Pearl and sailed south down the Potomac, then north on the Delaware in our hope for freedom.

I could speak to you on all the ways in which water has flowed through our history. Oceans have washed away our blood. Rivers have cleansed away our sins. Water once nourished our spirits and guided us to salvation. Water has harmed but also saved, and it will continue to make us anew.

Easter Sunday and my father called to check in. "I was in the car coming from church and I was thinking about this story your godmother told me once about how the two of them were children. You know their farms were close by, and one day she came to her all excited. She went and pulled her from the field and asked her if she was saved. Your godmother said yes but your mother responded by saying that wasn't enough. '*You gotta believe,*' she'd told her."

This was him asking, I knew. He wanted me to be saved so I could avoid the fate awaiting me for not repenting, but I thought of all the ways those who were once saved have used the Bible for countless atrocities and injustices. I knew my father's response to

this would be to say that hypocrites are nonbelievers, that other's actions shouldn't dictate one's belief or one's choice, and as much as I understood this I couldn't help but wonder what I would believe after I were to go down to that water, and I knew that merely completing the ritual would never be enough.

I didn't respond to my father, instead listened as his laughter from the story died down. "Even then she was so forceful," he said after a brief moment of silence, "but then she always sort of was about her convictions."

"Did you know it's been ten years? Since mom?"

"Ten years? It feels like less than that. Four or five maybe."

My father and I have never been close but since my mother's death we have become closer. We were two people who each live alone, who would perhaps continue to live the rest of our lives alone. Our acceptance of this, that in the end we were all the other one had, was what brought us together.

"Could mom swim?" I suddenly asked, changing the subject.

"No, I don't think so," he said, his voice picking up again. "Growing up there wouldn't have been anyplace for her to have learned how. I taught myself in the pond with all those snakes and goodness knows what else—the things you do as a kid you look back and realize how dumb they were."

"At least you learned."

"Yeah," he said. "It's good you learned too."

A few blocks from my apartment there's a community center with an indoor pool. It would take me two years before I decided to use it, two years of living in this town for

me to embolden myself with the task of buying a bathing suit and convincing myself of the endeavor, and one evening when most of the neighborhood kids were already home eating dinner and the nine-to-fivers were downtown drinking, I got in my car and went.

Inside, I passed the basketball courts with kids shooting hoops and I snuck inside the nearby changing room. I was uncomfortable in my swimsuit the moment I put it on. The fabric itched and I was self-conscious over so much of myself being exposed. My body was not the same as it once was and my insecurity remained. I tried to put it aside as I glanced at my dimpled thighs or at the roundness of my stomach. I tried not to think of my hair, now tied in a bun at the nape of my neck, as I put the cap over my head.

I left the changing room and went to find the pool. I was lucky that there were only a few people there, each of them focused on swimming in their own lanes. I slipped into the water. I felt the shock of its coldness the moment the water hit my skin and I suppressed a yelp. As I floated near the pool's edge I knew I wouldn't be any good and for a moment I wondered what was the point, but then I remembered the way I'd floated in the water long ago. I remembered the cough-choke-burn in my chest from that afternoon at the park. I remembered the image of my relative smiling beside the pool. I remembered the decades of history where something as small as this was once denied.

My goal was to do a mile. Thirty laps. I breathed in quickly before pushing my body through the water. One stroke and then another, I told myself. It was a matter of moving forward, of not looking back, it was a matter of breathing, and so I swam. I made one lap and then turned and made another. It wasn't long before I was tired but I would finish. One stroke and another and another, I thought. My arms continuing to pull my

body forward, struggling, and each time as my head turned up to the surface, to the air and the light, I remembered to take a breath.

And Lest You Forget¹

Introduction to Columbia: The Missouri city of Columbia,² located in Boone County,³ is home to the University of Missouri⁴ as well as Columbia College and Stephens College. The city lies in the heart of the state, almost equidistant from Kansas City (127 miles to the west) and St. Louis (124 miles to the east).

¹ Or, originally called, “Points of Interest.”

² Little Dixie, they used to call this area, this region consisting of between six to seventeen counties in the middle part of Missouri. Named Little Dixie because here the attitudes and beliefs aligned with those of the antebellum South. Here in this region slave populations went as high as fifty percent, the largest percentages belonging to plantations close to the Missouri River.

³ While the exact boundaries have been up for debate, there are six counties considered to be the “heart” of Little Dixie—Audrian, Callaway, Howard, Monroe, Randolph, and Boone. During the “nadir” of race relations, the period of history between the end of Reconstruction through to the early twentieth century, there were thirteen lynchings of black men in these counties. At least two of them happened not just in Boone County but in Columbia.

⁴ You left Boston, where you’d lived for the past ten years, and moved to Columbia for a graduate program. You are hoping for a fresh start.

- Historic Old Southwest Neighborhood.⁵ The magazine of the Mizzou Alumni Association notes that this an eclectic area west of the University of Missouri campus that “shelters many MU Professors,⁶ local professionals and some old-money Columbia families.”⁷

⁵ The “professorial ghetto” a professor will jokingly explain early on in your time here.

⁶ You’ll take a class with this professor. Only one. A few weeks before it begins, a friend of yours in the program will come to you and explain how she’s got a funny story to tell. She was in his office and they were looking at the photos of the people in the class.

“What photos?”

“The ID ones. They’re the ones on the roster.”

She says that he showed her the list. They were going down it and when he got to your photo he stopped and said, “Look at her face. Look at that one. She’s going to be trouble. Just you watch.”

“What the hell? Why would he say that?”

“Oh come on. It was just a joke. It’s because of your photo, your face.”

“What about my photo? What about my face makes me look like I’m trouble?”

She will laugh off your concern, change the subject, but apparently there is something wrong with your face. Your expression too harsh. Perhaps it’s because you don’t smile as often as you should, or because you don’t uptalk at the end of your

- Tate Hall. Named for Lee H. Tate, a graduate who died in World War I. It is located on Conley Avenue, adjacent to Jesse Hall on the University of Missouri

sentences and so every word uttered is implied as being angry. It's because you're too quiet, that you take too long to think, to articulate, and in the span of time between what you want to say and what you actually do say others' perceptions of you changes. Your pause for clarity turns into meaning a pause of judgment.

So you are always revising—how you should act, what you should say, how you should be. You continue being silent. You accommodate. You make the smallest version of yourself you could possibly make but still it's never enough because your face is still your face and no matter how you're seen that will never change.

⁷ A gathering for new students is being held at another professor's house. You're still unfamiliar with the area and even with GPS you're not sure which unmarked house it's supposed to be. You think, *well if you could just get out and*—and what? Stand on the sidewalk waiting? Go up to a house and hope it's the right one? And what if it isn't? So instead you sit in the car and stare down this tree-lined street full of historic homes and wait, hoping someone will finally come along that you recognize.

Then later at the gathering when you tell this story and explain your worry, your fear of accidentally showing up unannounced at a stranger's home, someone will interrupt you.

“Oh you *can't* be serious,” she'll respond.

campus. The building has been recently renovated. Before Tate Hall housed the English department ⁸it was once home to the school of law.⁹

⁸ Your office is in the basement of this building. You remember how before classes had started you'd gone to find it. You stopped and took in a deep breath when you saw the sign with your name. It was something as simple as your name typed on a piece paper letting you know that this space was yours. It didn't matter that the desk would be shared with another person, that your office space was in the back of the room in the very farthest corner. What mattered to you then was that you could look at this paper, see your name, and know how far you'd come.

⁹ In 1936, an African American man named Lloyd Gaines applied for admission to the law school. At the time of his application, only whites were admitted to the university. Gaines applied and received interest from admissions, but after the university learned of Gaines' race from his transcripts he was denied admission. In response Gaines sued the university, claiming that his right to "equal protection of the laws" under the Fourteenth Amendment had been violated. The United States Supreme Court ruled in Gaines' favor, upholding that the school either had to provide a separate law school or admit blacks to the university.

Gaines disappeared on March 19, 1939, a year later from his landmark case. He left his apartment to buy postage stamps, or so he told a friend, and then vanished. He was twenty-eight years old, the same age you were when you moved here to start this program.

- Intersection of Stewart Road and Providence Road. If driving down Providence, on the right at this intersection is the entrance to the Katy Trail.¹⁰
- Faurot Field. Named in honor of longtime coach Don Faurot. Faurot Field is located at Memorial Stadium. It's the home field for the Missouri Tigers,¹¹ the University of Missouri's football team where Gary Pinkel is the head coach.

¹⁰ An old rail bridge used to be here but it's now gone. Once a man was lynched on that bridge. His name was James T. Scott. He was a janitor working at the MU medical school when he was accused and arrested of raping the white daughter of an MU German professor, Hermann Almstedt. While Scott was in jail a mob broke in, took him from his cell, and dragged him to this bridge where he was lynched.

Even now, there is no sign, no official marking of remembrance.

¹¹ You're in a student computer lab in another campus building where you teach. You're trying to print out an assignment for your class and you're doing it here because you are avoiding your office, avoiding the conversations from your cohort about the protests, avoiding their white guilt frustrations and concerns, avoiding their questions asking you for your black perspective. You're alone in this lab, or you were until you hear another person behind you come into the lab.

"It's all such a disaster. I don't know why the football players were protesting in the first place. Like why they even had to get involved. It's not their job to get involved," a woman says to someone on her phone. She's young, a student most likely, and she comes in and sits at a nearby table.

- Traditions Plaza. Traditions Plaza is located in the heart of campus on the Carnahan Quadrangle.¹² Traditions Plaza is also across from Jesse Hall along

“It wasn’t all the football players,” she says. “I wish everyone would realize that. It was just those—”

She stops, swallows. She looks over at you, has suddenly become aware of your presence. *Go ahead and say it, you think. Just fucking say it.*

“Let me call you back,” she tells the person on the other line, then she gets back up and leaves.

¹² A well-known writer comes to visit. You sit in a room with your cohort as this writer addresses what you wish you had the nerve to say—she talks about academic racism, the lack of diversity across the board, the microaggressions students of color often face, and the biases and stereotypes others who, despite believing themselves to be better, often perpetuate.

Across from you another minority student sits. “Yes,” she softly says with each statement made, and it becomes clear to both of you who this writer is addressing, but it is only clear to the two of you.

What you’ve noticed lately in the time since the protests is that there has been a disassociation between the response and its cause. *We have moved on from this stain* is the underlying consensus. Already, there is a sense of finality to the problem, but you are in a room in which you are one of a handful of minorities. When you look out at everyone else all you can see is another problem, one of many, and none of which anyone seems to want to face.

Conley Avenue. The plaza was created in honor of MU's landmark 175th anniversary.

- Gateway Hall. Its name “combines the historic¹³ past with MU as the first established university west of the Mississippi, along with the sustainable and

After this writer has finished one of them points to the window. “Out there was where the protests happened,” she says. “If you look really close you can kind of see the plaza.” You are struck by this action, in how she begins to talk about what had happened. Already, the events have become conversational fodder for tourists. It makes you wonder if in the future the university will do this as well. If in five years or ten it will be included in the campus tours. How much will be mentioned? How much, you wonder, will be erased?

¹³ The poop swastika. For months it'll be all anyone talks about—where it was, who saw it, whether it existed or was completely fabricated. Even your friend will ask, *well how do we know since there's not a photo?* And you'll have to remind her that there is, that there's a police report, that it's all easily accessible online. Never mind that this is not the only racist incident to have happened. Never mind that there is a history of reports of students being called slurs and of veiled threats on social media. Never mind about the cotton balls thrown on the lawn of the Black Culture Center. Never mind because what matters is that for this the doubt has been cast. It is the question that has come to matter. There is such an infatuation with the possibility of a falsehood that no one wants to stop and think about the implications of what it would mean if it were true.

socially innovative values the new hall will foster.” The building is newly constructed and is located on the southeast side of campus.

- Top Ten Wines. It is, according to their website, “one of Columbia’s most prominent wine venues, occupying a unique niche for wine enthusiasts in the area.”¹⁴ Every Tuesday is known as Tapas Tuesdays where tapas are served with every wine, beer, or sangria purchase.¹⁵

¹⁴ Three days before you have to take your oral exams. Three days and the walls of your apartment are cluttered with notecards push-pinned to corkboard. You’ve spent the past year reading the canon of African American history and learning the weight of its history, and you are tired of the patterns you see, of the ways in which the past is continuously played out before your eyes. The world around you appears to be falling apart, and so you take a break, get your keys and you are out, out, out—at a bar forgetting, just having a moment, and after a few hours your shoulders relax and you really do forget about the fact that if you were to turn on the television there would be your campus on full display.

¹⁵ Then the threat comes. *I’m going to stand my ground tomorrow and shoot every black person I see.* Your students email you screen-capped images. *Some of you are alright. Don’t go to campus tomorrow.* You get an email from a friend. You get emails from your department. You get an email from the university.

Fear is like a fever, feel its heat running through your body as you quickly exit the bar and make your way down the street. Fear is what you’ll think as you walk to your car. It’s late, you’re one of the few people out. You do not run because there’s a part of you

- Jesse Hall. This is the main administrative building on campus.¹⁶ Built in 1893 after Academic Hall burned to the ground, the building is one of the major

not wanting to overreact. It's a prank, you'll find out later, and even now you are telling yourself that it is just a prank, that no one could ever be serious in such a threat, and yet still you sit in your car unable to start the engine, unable to even move out of fear of being seen.

¹⁶ Because it's the main administrative building, the campus's center, if you will, it will be the focal spot for a number of protest marches. Students will chant "Racism Lives Here," as the crowds surrounding them become larger as their path of egress is blocked.

"I can't get by. These fuckers," you hear someone from behind you say. You have left your office and are on your way to class when you become blocked because of the march. You turn and look among the sea of faces for the person belonging to the comment but no one now is talking. Everyone stares straight ahead at the line. They grow impatient the longer it takes.

You close your eyes. You don't want to see the faces of the other students, their barely contained expressions of anger and resentment. You don't want to be reminded of your own guilt for not joining in, for continuing to stand there waiting because you are afraid. You are afraid of making yourself known.

It finally quiets down, and when you open your eyes again the crowd has passed. Students disperse. The moment, this one, is over, and as you look around you find that you are the only one left.

symbols of the University. It is located at the south end of the David R. Francis Quadrangle, often called simply "The Quad." Jesse Auditorium, a popular entertainment venue for touring acts, is located at the east end of the hall.

- Speaker's Circle. Speaker's Circle actually used to be known as Conley Plaza. Built in 1986, Conley Plaza was to be a concrete open space framed with seasonal flora from the school's botanical garden. Later that year, a group of students constructed shantytowns on the nearby quad in protest of the university's 127.5 million dollar investments in companies operating in South Africa during apartheid. The shantytowns stayed briefly before the university tore them down. The students built them again. For this act of civil disobedience the students were arrested.

Eventually, the university would comply and divest their funds from connections to the apartheid government. In response to the protests the university president designated Conley Plaza as the only area on the campus where speakers didn't need to have permits.¹⁷

¹⁷ Sometimes you'll catch one of the tours as you walk through this area on your way to teach a class. "It's one of the few areas in Missouri where you can practice free speech," one of the guides explains, but on another time you hear the person say that it is in the country. Both times you want to ask them what specifically they meant by their statements, but you are late and there's no time to ask for clarifications.

You remember though how once you had a student meet with you to discuss a potential paper topic. He wanted to argue that Speaker's Circle wasn't an area of free

- Memorial Student Union. Memorial Union honors university men who lost their lives in service during World War I. Their names are inscribed on the inside walls of the tower archway. In a tradition dating back to a time when most men wore hats, whenever one walks beneath the archway they are to tip their hat as a sign of respect to their deceased brothers. Every student is also to speak at a whisper under the archway.¹⁸

speech, not really, because he felt afraid to be able to say what he wanted without repercussions.

“Well, what do you want to say?” you had asked, and he wouldn’t answer.

¹⁸ This will be the first building on campus you’ll go to. An orientation specifically for minority students with fellowships will be held in this building. You have what’s known as the Gus T. Ridgel Fellowship, named after a man who was the first African American to earn a Masters degree at the university. Even though there’s no building named after him, a room here has been and one of the meetings is held in it.

This fellowship—you almost didn’t want to come here because of it, ashamed as you are to admit it. Despite the honor, you did not want to be labeled the minority with the scholarship.

“Girl, take that money,” a family member will say when you call and ask her for advice, and so you accepted their offer. “They’re still going to see you as black, money or no money, so you might as well take it and move on.”

- Phi Kappa Psi Fraternity House. The Phi Kappa Psi Fraternity House is the oldest fraternity house on campus.¹⁹ Recognized as “The Grasslands,” the house was built in 1878 by George Bingham Rollins, the son of the founder of the University of Missouri.
- The State Historical Society of Missouri. The State Historical Society’s²⁰ mission is to “collect, preserve, make available, and publish materials that enhance

Years later, after you’ve been called the first slur and the second and then the third, you’ll call up an old friend to tell him what happened. “You know,” he’ll say, “I never thought you should have gone there in the first place.”

“Well,” you’ll say, thinking back to your family member’s advice. “They offered me the most money. What else was I supposed to do?”

¹⁹ Once known as Grasslands Plantation, there is a campus rumor that the house is haunted.

“Perhaps it’s the ghosts of the slaves that worked the land,” you’ll respond when your students tell you this about the fraternity. “Maybe they’re wanting their reckoning.”

²⁰ You’ve come here one afternoon to look through their archives in an attempt to find out more about the town’s history. You stand at the front desk, fill out the necessary forms, give the woman working your identification and listen to her as she goes over the rules. When she’s finished she asks you what you’re looking for and you pause, and then for some reason you begin to tell her something else.

“I’m doing research on this senator,” you say. “Bedford Brown. He didn’t live in this state though so I don’t know what you’ll have, what you’ll even be able to access.”

“We have databases for newspapers,” she tells you. “That might prove useful. Also census records. What’s his name?”

You tell her and she begins typing in the computer. While you wait you look around the room at the others quietly hunched over their tables looking at the materials they’ve requested. In the back corner you recognize another student from your department but he does not look up to meet your gaze.

You wait, listening as she clicks through several pages, until finally she looks back at you.

“There’s a collection of his papers in Chapel Hill. Your best bet may be though to go there and look through these.”

“Yeah,” you tell her, explaining that you know about the papers. “Is there anything else?”

“It looks like—” she stops, shifting in her seat as she moves closer to the computer screen. “It looks like he lived here in Missouri for a bit. Did you know this?”

“What? No, no I didn’t.”

She tells you that Bedford Brown left North Carolina after his second bid for senator failed. His son-in-law was John Bullock Clark, a Confederate congressman of Fayette, MO. “It seems like he moved there and lived with him.”

“Do you think if I went to Fayette to their courthouse I could find out where he specifically he lived? Would they even have anything?”

“Maybe. It’s worth a shot. It’s not far from here at least.”

research and support learning opportunities in Missouri studies and the history of the Midwest.” It’s Columbia branch is located on the University of Missouri’s campus, housed next door to Ellis Library.

- Strickland Hall. Formerly known as the General Classroom Building, Strickland Hall was constructed in 1969 to house classrooms for the social sciences.²¹ In

You thank her and go to one of the computers she’d mentioned. You decide to look for information about Fayette and learn about Frank Embree. On July 22, 1899, a mob of over a thousand people gathered together to lynch Embree, but before the crowd hung him he was whipped across his legs and back and chest.

In photographs, he stands straight, his gaze directly ahead. He’s naked, and in the photo you can see the gashes on his body, the cuts in his flesh.

You are unable to look at the photo for long before you are having to exit the browser and stand, quickly walking out of the room and out of the building, looking down, away, from everyone that you pass by.

²¹ My professor has to schedule a make-up class, changing the date to a Friday afternoon in this building. You get there early, beginning your slow climb up four flights of stairs to the room since the elevator will not go to the top floor. You have reached the top and are about to rest when a woman comes out the door. She looks at you and asks where you’re going.

“I have a class up here.”

“There are no classes up today.”

2007, it was renamed “Arvarh E. Strickland Hall” in honor of professor emeritus and former interim Director of the Black Studies Program Arvarh E. Strickland. Dr. Strickland was MU’s first tenure-track, black professor.

“Well,” and then you explain. She interrupts several times to ask for clarification—*Who is the professor? Oh, I know him. What class you say? What room? Oh, you don’t remember, okay what time is your class? Why did he reschedule the date? Why is no one else here with you?*

“I still can’t let you in here. This floor gets locked after a certain time and no one without a key can go on.”

You tell her okay, that you understand, even though you never asked her in the first place. She’s still unsatisfied with leaving you alone so she takes her phone out of her purse.

“I’m just going to call him and ask,” she says.

You stare at each other as it rings. The phone goes to voicemail and she leaves a message. She calls again. She calls once more.

“He’s not picking up,” she says.

She sits down on the steps, but the moment she’s settled there another student comes and she stands up. “Oh, okay,” she says. “I see now.” She smiles, nodding at you both, then leaves.

Later, in class, your professor will turn to you and ask about the phone calls. “I don’t understand, why did she care if you were there?”

“I don’t know,” you’ll say, shrugging, hoping he’ll move on.

- ~~Jake's Market, Uncle B's Ice House, Blue and White Cafe, Ginny Taylor's Tavern and Grill, Richardson Shoe Repair, Alvin Coleman's Liquor Store, Green Tree Club, Shook Herndon's Tavern, Phil and William's Barber Shop, Britt's Pool Hall, Merle Slater's Place, Swanson's Plumbing, Miss Vi's cafe, Coleman's Scrap Yard, Noble's Coal Yard, Lake's Barber Shop, Coleman Cleaners, Green's Funeral Home, Mota Ralph's Chicken and Rib Shack.~~²²

Intersection of S. 9th Street and Conley Avenue. On one side of the crosswalk is Ellis Library.²³ On the other side is Tate Hall.²⁴

²² These few blocks between Fifth and Sixth streets on both sides of Walnut were once the Sharp End District, an area where during the 1960's black businesses thrived. As part of what was known as "urban renewal" these businesses, along with well over sixty more, were all torn down and are now gone.

²³ After the protests, after you pass your comprehensive exams and you decide you are done with this place, you get up one Sunday morning to go to your office and collect your belongings. You stand on the side of the street waiting to cross when a car comes, a white SUV, speeding around the turn. You hold back and wait for the car to pass, and as it does one of them shouts at you before disappearing on down the road.

You don't need to explain the slur or how it felt to be called it. By now, the hurt should not be surprising, but still you feel the shock from it as you force yourself to cross the street, to continue on what you set out to do.

"You should tell someone," your friend says. "Campus safety. Call them now and tell them."

“What good would it do?” you respond.

“Because people should know this shit keeps happening,” she says, “and because people still believe it doesn’t.”

²⁴ You are back in your office staring at the sign with your name. For a brief moment you think about ripping the sign in two, taking the paper and shredding it to pieces. It would give this act the closure you long for. You reach up and grab it, hold it in your hands. *No*, you think, *no*.

It is the memory of Gaines that makes you tape the sign back. It is what tells you to leave this, because it is a reminder of why you are here. Still though, you can’t help but wonder if that’s enough. After everything, is it enough you at least have this? Is it enough that you are here?

If My Heart Should Confess

“I hate this song. It doesn’t make any sense.”

A friend of mine and I have just had dinner, having gotten together for the first time since she’s moved here to Missouri. We’re sitting in my parked car talking when I notice the song playing. “I paid for Sirius once I realized there weren’t any black stations. I got tired of listening to Taylor Swift all the time, but this isn’t much better. It’s not even a good rap song.”

“Kevin Gates,” she says, laughing. “His rap name even sucks! Santana is a better rap name and he isn’t even a rapper.” She pulls out her phone, searches for the lyrics. She recites them, jokingly imitating a poet persona for fun. After she finishes and both of us have quieted down from laughing, I change the subject.

“I’m sorry I haven’t been around,” I say, wondering if she can hear my guilt. “After the protests on campus—I just decided I couldn’t be around anymore.”

“At least everything seems to be settling down for now,” she says.

“Have you seen—” I begin before stopping myself, unsure if I should ask.

“He asked about you,” she says, answering my question. It was not hard for her to guess who I was referring to since there are only a few of us here in this program.

“What did he say? I haven’t talked to him since the start of the semester, since before everything happened. I guess we got into it.”

“He just seemed concerned as all. I think he thought you were upset with him.”

“Yeah, well,” I say, then shrug.

I pause, thinking back to what happened. He was angry at the department’s lack of response. It doesn’t affect most of them so they don’t care, he’d told me. He was

frustrated at my cohort, at their apathy. I'm the only one who has to worry about being shot as a black man, he'd said.

For a while he sent out emails forwarded to the entire department, calling on them to put action to their words. Email after email was blasted off, the effect of which causing increasing hostility in response. He eventually decided he wanted to do a boycott, sending out an email to the handful of us in the program.

You've got to stop this. I'd finally messaged. *You're just making everyone angry.*

That's a good thing, he'd quickly written back.

Why are you doing this? What about school?

This is important, he answered, then stopped responding to my messages.

His proposed boycott dissipated before it could start, most of us were too occupied with just making it through school to deal with anything else.

I'd thought a lot about his response since. He was so sure, so forceful in what he felt was the right thing to do, even at the risk of potential backlash. In contrast, I remembered my father's response on the night I told him about the protests—you are there to work, remember? You are there to get your degree and get out, don't lose sight of that goal. I thought of the ways I had spent my life attempting to erase markers of my blackness until I did not know who I was anymore. I thought of how, even still, the night of the threats I'd sat in my car afraid to start the engine, and I thought of how after, when for a moment the world had seemed to settle down, while walking down the street I was yelled a slur and even then my first instinct was to let it go, to bury it, to ignore the fact that it happened.

You can be good. You can be accommodating. You can make the world comfortable with your blackness as so many of us try to in our daily lives. You can straighten your hair, code-switch, be quiet instead of speaking out, and yet one day you may still find yourself confronted with a group of men, wild-eyed and in a frenzy, who will shout slurs at you, and you will be reminded in the end that in this world it doesn't matter how good you are.

"I should probably get in touch with him," I finally say. In the quiet I reach over and shift to a new station, this one plays D'Angelo. My friend laughs.

"Come on D'Angelo," she says upon hearing the first few verses. "Calling yourself the Black Messiah, as if all of us have forgotten about the time when all anyone cared about was seeing your dick. No one forgot. I still remember."

We both laugh. It's nice sitting in the car with her, the two of us having this moment.

"You know, I feel responsible for encouraging you to come here," I finally admit. "I'm sorry if you've had a hard time."

"It's okay. It hasn't been that bad. I mean, up until now."

"Have you been doing all right?"

She pauses, thinks about my question. "Yeah, someone called me a slur at the beginning of the semester but since things have been fine."

"It happens," I say, and because I am nearing the end of my time here and she's at the beginning, I don't tell her I've been called slurs too, multiple times, and between the both of us it will most likely happen again.

“I’m used to it. Once in school the teacher read out loud *Huck Finn* and kept emphasizing all the slurs. He read them over and over while the rest of class just stared at me. Later, the teacher came up and was like, ‘oh, I didn’t realize, this didn’t bother you, did it?’”

“Seriously?”

“Must be nice to go through your life like that—offending people and not worrying about it until afterward,” she pauses. “It doesn’t matter, they’re just words. I tried telling my parents about it, what with it and then with the protests, and they didn’t understand.”

“I know what you mean. My father went to school the year after Wilmington Ten,” I say, remembering the story of what happened. In February of 1971 in Wilmington, NC tensions over school desegregation had reached a breaking point. Four days of violence rocked the town, resulting in two deaths and the firebombing of a white-owned store. The National Guard had to come in to restore the peace. The Wilmington Ten were a group of students convicted of arson and conspiracy to fire upon firemen and police officers. They were sentenced to 282 years in prison. After their sentence, a movement formed in the state demanding their freedom.

“So it’s like,” I say, continuing. “I call my father up sometimes and I’ll say—well, so and so said this, or this happened, and he’ll be like, ‘so what’s the problem? Your *feelings* were hurt? Is that why you’re calling?’”

“It’s the price of admission for being here,” she says, and I nod.

“You know, I’m thinking about writing about all this—a bunch of essays about race.” I then explain about my family, about their history. I tell her I’m thinking of going

to Louisiana, of visiting the Whitney Museum, the first plantation dedicated to the memory of slavery. “My ancestors were all on tobacco plantations, not so much cotton or sugar like in the Deep South, but I still feel as if I have to go and see the ones there, especially the Whitney. Who knows if anything will come from it but I’m gonna go. The time’s there, better make use before it’s gone.”

“I went to a lot of them for my novel,” she tells me. “We went to one that had an intact slave cabin and it was so hot I almost passed out, but I thought—this was how it was, they were working in this heat, and so I pulled myself together.”

“Those plantations are something else.”

“I know, so many columns.”

“That Greek Revival architecture.”

“All built on the backs of slaves.”

“I’ve never talked about race before,” I suddenly say, thinking about this book I’m working on and my hesitancy to continue with it. “I always thought if I avoided it maybe others wouldn’t see me as different.”

It has taken me years to get to this confession, it has taken me most of my life. Saying it out loud feels as if I am reaching closer, that I am slowly reclaiming back my sense of self.

“People are going to see you that way though. No matter what they want to pretend.”

She has already gotten to a place I am still struggling to reach. I don’t respond, don’t know how to, and for the first time during our evening we both have settled into silence.

“Oh, here we go.” I motion to the new song on the radio. Beyonce’s *Formation* has just started playing. “I used to be so critical of her, but now I don’t know what to think. What about you? Do you think she’s being authentic with this album? That her video is pandering?”

“I don’t know. Maybe. I’m not sure how much it matters though.”

I don’t know this answer either, but what I wonder is how I would have felt had I heard this when I was younger—to witness such an affirmation of blackness, and even though my heart skips a moment, a tinge of nervousness, of insecurity from others around us passing by, I roll the windows down anyway, and let the music fill the air.

As For Me And My House

To get there, you must first cross the Gramercy Bridge, also known as the Veterans Memorial Bridge, which links St. James Parish with the St. John the Baptist Parish. It is a cantilever bridge, the sixth longest one in the world, constructed to replace the ferry system that caused the 1976 accident that killed 78 people. As I drive along Louisiana State Highway 3213 to cross the bridge, there is a slight incline and I try to focus ahead and not on the steel beams keeping me from drowning in the Mississippi below. I've never been a fan of bridges and it is all I can do to keep the shaking of my hands from affecting my steering. My car slows as it hits the bridge's descent, and in the distance I can see the miles and miles of sugar fields. It is early May, several months from grinding season, and the familiar stalks are not yet seen, but I am still able to recognize the fields.

After the bridge I have to make a turn onto LA-18, otherwise known as River Road, this 70-mile stretch between Baton Rouge and New Orleans that parallels the Mississippi. River Road will take me to Vacherie, an unincorporated community, one of the several that exist here. This area consists not of cities or towns but of communities such as Vacherie, and it does not take me long to get there. I drive further still on River Road, passing the St. Joseph Plantation where, if it was autumn I'd be able to go on their "Creole Mourning Tour." Nearby is also the Laura Plantation where a brochure tells me the original Br'er Rabbit folktales were recorded. After St. Joseph and near the Laura, just before River Road curves, leading to residential properties, there is one last plantation—Oak Alley, and Oak Alley is one of two I have traveled here to see.

I have always loved architecture, the way and shape of houses and the materials used to construct them. This fascination I think comes from my father. He sells real estate, but even before then he used to take me on drives to different neighborhoods so we could gaze upon the homes and imagine the lives lived inside of them. It's a practice he still continues because of his job but the difference now is that when I come home to visit and we pass a house for sale or one recently built, he'll ask if I want to see inside, and I'll say yes. I always say yes, and then we'll go.

When my father was a child his own house burned down, causing him and his brothers and sisters to be split up among the other family members who could take them in. It is not something he talks much about but I've thought about it often on these trips as he pointed out to me how it's always the kitchen that sells the house. I've learned from him to look beyond the easy fixes—the personal preferences when it comes to aesthetics, for instance, because “paint is cheap and you're buying the house not the home,” as he often would remind me when I commented on the owner's taste in furniture or the color scheme. My father would note the crown molding in one or whether the floors were actual hardwood or laminate in another. He's observant, taking note of every detail, every feature, as if he was always the one buying. He's American dreaming, and he would bring me on those trips because he wanted me to dream with him too.

You may not know the name of Oak Alley but you've seen images of its plantation before. The plantation has been the site for the films *Interview with the Vampire* and *Primary Colors*, along with a string of other television movies. As I wait for

the next tour to start, I notice a brochure that boasts the productions filmed in part or entirely on the location.

At Oak Alley a plantation bell, once the communication system for governing slaves on the plantation, is now used to signal the beginning of guided tours. When I hear the bell I go to the entrance of the Big House with the rest of the crowd.

This tour, like most, if not all in the South, focuses on the Big House, otherwise known as the plantation owner's home. In Louisiana, these owners were sugar cane farmers, and they were wealthy. They were considered to be antebellum royalty, and when we think of the idea of the Old South with its Southern belles and aristocratic planters, it is images of these plantations that come to mind.

Evie, my tour guide, is dressed in period costume. She wears a plaid hoop skirt with a thick black belt buckled around her slim waist. Her hair is pulled back in a bun. She corrals us all in a dining room of the Big House as she begins to talk about the Roman family of Oak Alley. I am the only black person and even though I've had the past hour to try and settle into the realization that I would most likely be the only black person I see, it's a different feeling altogether standing there with all of us measuring each other up. While Evie talks others snap photos of the room's interior. I shift my position toward the back near one of the framed portraits.

On the tour, there is no talk of slavery, so while Evie tells us of how Jacques Telesphore Roman built Oak Alley for his wife Celina, she doesn't mention the slave labor it took to construct it. The one and only reference to a slave is when Evie explains about the punkah, a large wooden fan suspended from the ceiling, and how it was a

slave's job, usually a child's, to pull a cord attached to it so that a gentle breeze could blow on the guests to keep them cool as they ate.

What Evie does talk about is the Romans. Evie entwines stories of the Roman family with descriptions of the house and its furnishings. We walk up the creaking steps to the bedrooms, and Evie tells us of how after her husband Jacques death Celina was so stricken with grief she could no longer sleep in their shared bedroom.

"Isn't it all just so beautiful?" a woman leans in and whispers to me as we're gathered in the hall. "Can you imagine living during this period?"

"No, I don't think so."

The woman, annoyed by my response, moves away to view another one of the rooms.

I must admit though, Oak Alley is beautiful. I'd be lying if how, toward the end of the tour, I said I didn't almost gasp along with the others when Evie opened the front veranda doors to the image of what's known as the "Alley of the Oaks." The Alley of the Oaks consists of two rows of 300-year-old Virginia Live Oaks that lead to the Mississippi River. After the tour, people crowd outside to take pictures, to pose with the image of these oaks in the background, and I'm not sure I blame them for doing so.

Evie informs us she has to leave to start the next tour and I am left to look out at the oaks with their limbs twisting towards the sky. I stare out at them and it is difficult not to think of *Beloved's* Sethe and her own shame for remembering the beauty of the trees rather than the boys who hung from them.

Like my father, my mother would also take me on drives. On our way home from the store she'd sometimes go a different route to another neighborhood, slowing the car each time when she saw groupings of apartments.

"What do you think about those?" she'd ask, noting a complex.

I would look at the area and smugly grimace. "Those are apartments."

"Well, what if we moved into one of those instead? What if it was just you and me in an apartment somewhere? Would that be so bad?"

"Yes it would. They're not the same. Why does it matter anyway? We have our house."

"Yes, we do," she'd say, and sigh.

I did not realize it then, did not understand the meaning behind her question, at least not fully. After the divorce, my mother struggled. She had health problems, Lupus and a bad heart, and the mounting debt from medical bills. Throughout my childhood she also struggled to find stable income with health insurance. Most of the jobs I remember—a cashier at gas station Taco Bell, working the night shift at a front desk at a Days Inn, as a part time security guard—were not enough to cover the expenses of raising a child alone.

She was asking for a different life, one I didn't want, and so we stayed in the house we couldn't afford to live in because it was the idea of it, of stability and progress and the American dream, that mattered.

In the Oak Alley gift shop are Southern treats galore. Bourbon and mint julep balls. Caramels. Glass jars of moonshine. Creole pecans, pralines, and kettle corn. A man

wearing a chef hat and a blue and white apron roasts pralines in a pan. The aroma of heated butter and sugar wafts through the air.

At the register, a woman asks if I'd like a sample of their pecan liqueur. She tells me the story about the slave gardener Antoine who was the first to successfully graft pecan trees. I take one of the tiny paper cups and sip the sample, almost gagging on its sweetness. "Too sweet for you?" she says, interrupting her own story, and offers up her hand to take my crumpled cup.

There is even a penny machine. I can't resist this, knowing a friend of mine will want one, and so I dig in my purse searching for enough money to put in the machine. I crank the lever, turning, as the machine flattens and presses the design into my penny. When finished, it clinks down into the slot for me to take. My fingers rub over the indentation.

I repeat the process once more, making another penny to keep.

Besides the gift shop, outside there's a "Spirits Bar" and a restaurant serving Creole fare. Nearby the slave quarters, a grouping of century-old cottages can be rented out for the night. It is early in the day still, the swampy heat I'd imagined has not yet come, and right now a cool breeze blows to stifle any sweat. If one so chooses, they can go to the back of the Big House and purchase mint juleps or bourbon lemonades for sale. Iron chairs have been planted around the house's perimeter and I watch as visitors relax in them with their drinks.

Pretend is what they're offering here. Pretend is the name of the game. The Roman family, like the many others who owned these plantations, were wealthy and they had power. They were the planter aristocracy of the South, but they represented only a

few of the time who were. Historians have usually granted planter status to those who owned twenty slaves or more. In 1860, when plantation agriculture reached its peak, there were roughly 46,000 plantations, the greatest proportion of these consisting of estates between 20-30 slaves. The majority of Southerners were yeoman farmers. If they did own slaves, they were usually one or two. Yet, these farmers looked up to the planter aristocracy with admiration. They wanted what they had and believed they could achieve it.

We live in a world where income equality continues to rise, where most of us have neither wealth nor power, but you can come here and pretend. You can come and sip bourbon lemonades on a Big House porch, sleep in a cottage with views of the once-homes of slaves. You can come here and romanticize a life that never was yours, never would have been yours, but for a moment you can believe it could have been. People come here to have the replication of an experience that was, even then, never within their reach.

Not far from Oak Alley, on the west bank of the Mississippi, is the rural community known as Wallace. On the way to Wallace a truck tails me from behind, pushing me to go faster down the road. It is just the two of us and I slow, hoping he'll pass, but he is relentless in his refusal to back down. He honks his horn, a series of loud spurts that puts me on edge. I force myself to try not to look for him in the overhead mirror but I do it anyway.

I end up missing my stop and have to drive several miles along the winding LA-18 before I can turn around. The whole while the man behind me continues to honk as he

edges closer to the rear of my car. I turn off the road, relieved, and the truck passes me. The driver gives me the finger as he disappears down the road.

Circling back, I pass the site of the Evergreen Plantation, one of the most complete plantations in the South. You are probably familiar with the image of its Big House, with its Greek Revival style columns and its two curved front staircases. Quentin Tarantino's *Django Unchained* was filmed at this plantation.

I have not come for this one or for the several others that are available for tours in this area. Not for the Houmas House or the San Francisco. Not the Laura or the Destrehan. There are so many, more even than these I've listed, and if I could I'd go to them all. If I had the time and if I could afford it I would go and see all the ways in which they have chosen to narrate history, to see what they've included and what, more importantly, they've decided to leave out, but because of time I can only visit one more—the Whitney, the first and only museum in the United States dedicated to the memory of slavery.

A few years ago my father bought his dream house. "I'm going to get the house I want before I die," he told me as he carted me along to look. Meanwhile, he scrimped and saved so that when he finally found it, he'd have enough put away to buy it.

The house my father eventually bought is two floors with six bedrooms and four bathrooms. The master bedroom on the second floor opens up to a veranda with a view of the street. Sometimes, my father will take his camp gear and sleep out there.

When I'm not here to visit my father closes off the spare bedrooms. He is rarely downstairs except when he needs to be in the kitchen. Most of his time is spent between

his own bedroom and what's called a "bonus room" which he's turned into a movie room, complete with a popcorn machine, a candy machine, and a mini-fridge.

I told a friend of mine all of this once. I'd just come over to see her new apartment and we were sitting in her bedroom. She was struggling to find a place for all her belongings. She had boxes and boxes of clothes—they had filled up her walk-in closet and filled an additional rolling closet and a bureau and still there was more.

"Your father lives alone in a house with six bedrooms? Why does he need so many?"

"Seriously?" I'd said, looking around. "Because he can afford it and because it's what he always wanted. Besides, do you really need so many clothes?"

"Good point," she said, shrugging.

The house I grew up in was a brick ranch-style home, the third one on a cul-de-sac. Shortly after my father bought it, he planted two Dogwood trees in the front yard. He cultivated a rose garden next to the front porch as a gift for my mother.

As part of their divorce settlement, my mother and I were allowed to stay in the house until I turned eighteen. Afterward, the house was sold and my mother moved an hour away to be closer to work.

"I don't know why she left," my father used to always ask. "She could have stayed in the house and I would have made the mortgage payments. She never had to leave."

"That's not how she always made it seem."

“Well,” he trailed off, not wanting to finish. He did not want to talk badly about my mother now that she’s gone, now that she’s unable to clarify her version of the past.

“She probably didn’t want to stay in it anyway. The house was falling apart,” I said, letting him off the hook.

“Yeah, man that house had some problems,” my father then said, laughing. “The builders really cut corners with its construction. It was the first house I bought though.”

My father has the same nostalgia that I carry when I remember it, nostalgia that blinds me from remembering the settling foundation, the cracks in the walls and the broken chimney. I don’t think about the backyard deck that needed new paint or the piles of molding firewood that had attracted termites. We had a sinkhole in our backyard and every year despite our efforts it gained in depth and scope, and every time my father brings it up I still smile at the memory.

“I have to make a disclaimer of sorts,” Ali, our tour guide, tells the crowd. Ali wears a t-shirt and khaki shorts, his dreads are pulled into a ponytail that falls down the length of his back. His accent is cheery and buoyant as he herds us together. “On this tour you’ll get to see the Big House but that’s not going to be the focus. We’re telling a different story here. I’m not going to glorify the Haydel family to you. I’m going to talk about the exploitation of the people who built this place and gave the Haydel’s their wealth.”

The crowd nods in response. Satisfied, Ali tells us our first stop is the Antioch Baptist church. On our way there, we pass a large bell and he explains that this is an antique church bell meant to honor the lives of slaves. Whenever we see one he asks for

us to ring it, and immediately someone from the crowd goes up and pushes. Its loud clang reverberates around us and I think of the plantation bell I saw earlier, reminded of how they were used to call.

The tour takes over two hours. Ali is unforgiving in his portrayals of the owners, in his retelling of history. He tells us about Jean Jacques Haydel's wife, Marcellin. Because Marcellin couldn't have children, she kept a girl slave named Anna as a pet. The sun bears down, the heat of the day in full swing, as we walk through the series of memorials and listen.

"Imagine grinding season," Ali says. "There was the slave saying, 'can to can't,' meaning working from "can see" in the morning to "can't see" at night. You know, maybe they'd get a break at noon for a meal, the slave bell call letting to know it's time, but mostly the day was work, from dawn to dusk and during grinding season even longer."

"Can you see it?" he asks, and I imagine a field burning. Fire set to flame the land. The field must be burned before it can be harvested. Smoke so thick some slaves get lost in it, their bodies left to burn.

Cane knives—long, with a wide blade to strike through the sharp leaves covering the field. Imagine the sugar stalks seven, eight, nine, almost ten feet tall with leaves sharp enough to cut the skin, leaving a trail of blood over the sugar stalks. Sugar born of blood, will taste of blood from the bodies of those who died in the fields. From the fire, or from those not quick enough to dodge the blade swooping down to cut the stalks, or those whose bodies have given out from heat exhaustion or sickness. Imagine the blood gliding down the backs of those who keep going, the blood mixing with sweat to soil the earth.

As we walk, Ali mentions the 1811 German Coast Uprising. A man named Charles Deslondes, a former slave driver, led one of the largest slave revolts ever recorded. Armed with the machetes they'd used to cut sugar cane, Deslondes, along with five hundred other slaves, invaded the Big House mansions as they traveled along River Road towards New Orleans. The revolt was swiftly and brutally put down. Those that were captured were dismembered, their heads cut off and put on spikes to decorate the German coast. It was a lesson for all the other slaves to see, for them to know that this was what awaited if anyone tried to choose a different fate.

Ali then leads us to a memorial for all the slave children who died before the age of three. He asks us to go through the over two thousand listings, to take note of how most have no names. *Little negro boy*, one reads. *Joseph, a negro girl, a mulatto corpse of a little slave*. That is what I notice. One after the other the listings go—*corpse of a little slave, corpse of a little slave, corpse of a little slave*. Not even names, only a description of their bodies left to give remembrance.

Ali is earnest in the telling these stories, and at times his emotion feels heavy-handed, but I suspect he has to be. Here there is the "Plantation Parade," after all, the series of plantation tours with their own spin on the past, with most of them giving only a cursory look to the exploitation that provided the plantation's existence. Ali has to tell this story because if he didn't no one else would.

He'd explained earlier that him and his family are descendants of the slaves and sharecroppers who worked this land, and how the church we saw earlier was the same one his grandparents even went to. I watch him as he tells these stories, and there are

moments even when I can hear his voice begin to crack, and I can't help but think of what it must mean to retell these stories over and over again.

Ali takes us along the rows of sugar kettles while explaining about the danger of the sugar mills. "They died from heat exhaustion. From strokes. They died from burns and infections—"

"Was there any hope at all?" a woman interrupts. Her cheeks are flushed red and she has a strained expression across her face.

Ali pauses, thinks a minute about her question. "Well, I'd like to think there was. I mean, there's always hope, isn't there?"

Ali's response makes me think of all the ways in which we took control of our lives—the rebellions we formed in our fight for freedom, the hush harbors where we took their religion and made it our own, and the maroon colonies we escaped to. It was hope that moved us forward despite the world trying to force us back.

"We all owe society a reparation of some kind," Ali says, finishing the tour. Everyone claps, and one by one they all go up to shake his hand. He walks us back to the gift shop where we first met and then says goodbye.

Inside now I have a chance to look around. There is no penny machine here. No pecan liquors or jars of moonshine for sale. No kitschy souvenirs or memorabilia. Mostly, what's here are books—the slave narratives of Harriet Jacobs, Solomon Northup, Frederick Douglas and the neo-slave narratives of Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Octavia Butler's *Kindred*, and Edward P. Jones's *The Known World*. While glancing at the books on display, I look up and am struck by the décor on one of the walls. It is cluttered with

an array of post-it notes. I walk closer, see that each one is in response to a question—
“what did this tour mean to you?”

I go and sit down at the wooden benches near the entrance. I’m tired, between the heat and the walking I need a few moments of air-conditioned rest.

A black woman comes up and sits down next to me. She smiles in my direction, then notices my lanyard. “You going on the tour?”

“I’ve already done it.”

“Oh, how was it? Was it good?”

“Yes,” I say, knowing this answer is not enough, but she simply nods.

Others begin to gather. I should go, but I continue sitting a few minutes longer, watching them all wait anxiously in silence. I pull my lanyard off though to stick in my purse, and as I do I notice my hands, tanned a deep brown from the midday sun.

Back outside of the Whitney, I have to stop a moment because the pain in my feet have become unbearable. I look down and see that the gravel has cut through the thin material of my soles and the blisters on my heel are showing through.

My phone rings. It’s my father calling, most likely to ask me about my trip. “Did you make it there okay?” he asks as soon as he hears my voice.

“Yeah, I’m here,” I tell him.

“Good, good,” he says. “How long are you staying?”

“Not long, I’m about to drive back now.”

“Wow, so a short visit,” he says. This is how our conversations go—terse and static because neither of us has ever learned to talk to the other. “Well, with me here I’m

just coming from this house I've been working on and I'm on my way home. Let me tell you it's been a job."

For the past several months my father has been renovating a house that belonged to his sister who died over a year ago. The house is falling into disrepair, and rather than deal with trying to sell it themselves, my father bought the rest of the family out. His plan is to fix the house up himself, to put in new carpet and cabinetry, a new heating system, paint, and then resell it in the hope of making of profit.

"How it's going?"

"Well, you know, I think it's almost done," he says. "When you come to visit I'll take you to see."

He then starts on one of his digressions, this time telling me about the amount of foreclosures happening in his hometown. Families, most of them black, can't make the payments on their homes anymore and are losing them at a rapid pace. He tells a story about how one of the homes, a foreclosure, was bought for thirty thousand and then sold for three times as much.

"Families were given loans they couldn't afford to begin with, with rising interest rates, and now they can't keep up with the payments. It's a shame. They're really making money off my people," he says, "but that's always been the story."

That has always been the story. Is it too much to say that I want our lives to have a different story? Perhaps it is too much to ask for this, like I wonder if it is even possible for us to have new stories unburdened by the history of slavery. I once believed there could be, that I could write them, and yet I am here. I am here because my family came from slaves, of those belonging to former state senator by the name of Bedford Brown.

While there are no tours of his plantation it is listed in the National Registry of Historic Homes. It is the tobacco fields of North Carolina that have been my family's story. My ancestors never worked on sugar fields. To my knowledge, I have no stories of Louisiana history embedded in my past, but when I look out and see the church it finally becomes clear to me why I am here and why I've come. This is not my history, my story, and yet it is. It is my story and it is yours because we all are stained with this past. My family was not slaves to these owners but they still were slaves. They did not die on these fields but they died on others. All of the actions of our ancestors are entangled in the shaping of this country, in who we are and what we've come to believe and understand about ourselves.

My father quiets. I tell him I have to go, that I still have the long drive back, and after I hang up the phone I think about taking another photo but the surrounding gate of the Whitney has blocked most of the view. If I strain my neck a little I can see the top of the church from where the tour started. I hold my phone up in the air to take a picture of the steeple, one last photo before I'm gone. As I make the shot, I can hear in the distance the sound of the bell, another tour beginning, and I know that it is time.

And For By Grace

For my mother's family Sunday tradition meant Sunday prayer. For the first meal and the last they would gather together, link hands, and say a series of prayers—the Shepherd's Psalm, The Lord's Prayer, and everyone's own selected Bible verse. Her father, like many of the men in the family, was a preacher and this practice I assume came from him.

After my mother was married and had started a family of her own, she stopped doing the prayers except for the few times she would carry me back to North Carolina. Our visits home were rare, every other year at most, and because of our distance and the amount of time we were always gone, our return always held a certain significance. Out of all the family my mother was the one who left. While a teenager she'd taken out a map of the state and circled colleges as far away as she could go. She picked one, and during her first year there she met a future Army man, married him, and then moved even farther away. "I wasn't going back there," she used to tell me whenever I asked her about this time in her life. "I would have done anything to get away."

I watched her as she shifted in her seat, her anxiety becoming more visible as we got closer. "You should start memorizing a verse now," she said during our drive. "Don't embarrass me."

Her father, a man I've never known, had long since died, but my grandmother had remarried another who was also a preacher, a man who could recite the entire Bible by heart.

“What kind of verse should I pick?” I asked, taking out my own Bible and flipping through the pages. I glanced at all the highlighted sections I’d marked from previous Sunday scriptures as I tried to find something that would work.

“I don’t know, just pick one,” she’d sharply reply.

A painting hung on the wall of my grandmother’s kitchen where we gathered for prayers. The painting depicted a white-bearded man who sat at his own kitchen table. He was hunched over the table’s edge, his hands clasped together and placed in front of his forehead. His eyes were closed. He prayed.

On the table in front of him was a loaf of bread, a slice of it already having been cut, most likely from a previous meal. Nearby was a metal bowl of possibly soup or oatmeal to go with his bread along with a book, which one would assume at first to be a Bible, but was actually a dictionary. Next to this a knife lied flat.

A loaf of bread, a bowl of soup, a dictionary. The simplicity of it all made the image seem somber, poignant. The man prayed for his meager meal, grateful for what God had given him.

There is a story I must tell you but in order to do so I must tell you of another one. It is that of Eliza Cook. While a slave to Dr. James H. Cook, Eliza gave birth to seven of his children. After slavery ended, James Cook’s wife wanted Eliza gone. Perhaps she was full of shame for her husband’s indiscretions, or maybe it was jealousy, or spite. Whatever the reason, she demanded her husband force Eliza off the shack she lived in on his plantation. Cook submitted to his wife and Eliza, a woman who found herself with

nowhere to live, nowhere to go, and with seven children to feed, turned to the Freedman's Bureau.

In North Carolina, the bastardy laws required every unmarried woman with a child to name the father within three years of the birth of the child. The law also required fathers to support their illegitimate children or face imprisonment. In Eliza's case, she'd been enslaved during her children's infancy and was unable to testify to their parentage. She argued for a new law to be made that would address situations like hers—women who'd been enslaved but now were free and who, according to the Civil Rights Act of 1866, should be entitled to the same rights as white women. With the help of the Freedman's Bureau Eliza took James Cook to court to force him to support her and all of his children.

Within my family there's been a story handed down through the generations. It's of a black woman named Leanna Brown who, like Eliza, had a relationship with a white man. The relationship produced two, possibly three children. In the census records for 1880, she is listed with these children on a nearby farm to his property. On the census, each of the children carries her last name, but somewhere between then and now something peculiar happens. The surname, at least for one of them, the boy, was changed to that of his father.

Eliza's case brings forward the possibility that like her, Leanna did take the father of her children to court in the hope he would acknowledge them. Like Eliza, it is possible she showed a sense of agency during a time the world wanted her to have none, and so it is possible that maybe he did relent and claim them.

At least, this is what I start to think, but then I remember the rest of Eliza's story. The court argued that the Civil Rights Act didn't apply to her situation and thereby didn't fall under the jurisdiction of the U.S. District Court. They refused to hear her case. Cook, having won, evicted Eliza and the children from his plantation and they were left dependent upon the Freedmen's Bureau to survive.

My grandmother would eventually give the painting to my mother as a gift, but my mother didn't want it so she threw it away without telling her.

"The picture depressed me," she said afterward. "I couldn't look at it. I wish now though I'd kept the thing. It could have been worth something."

The name of the painting is called Grace and was actually originally a photograph taken by Eric Enstrom. After the photograph was developed and printed, Enstrom's daughter began hand-painting copies in oils and selling them in her shop. Travelers stopping in the town of Coleraine, Minnesota saw the framed picture through the studio window and were taken with the image. One after the other got sold and the picture's popularity increased. In 2002 the image became Minnesota's official state photograph. Eventually Grace became one of the most reproduced religious images in the country. It is in homes all across the country—above their dining tables, on the living room walls, small photos placed in wallets and purses. What my mother hoped was rare, significant, was just a copy of a copy, reproduced hundreds, if not thousands of times.

No matter how much I practiced, halfway through the Sunday prayers I'd falter, forgetting the rest of the words. I'd mumble through the rhythm hoping no one would

notice, then we'd finish and get to the verse and by then I couldn't remember which one I'd picked. I'd stall, letting the others go, hoping during that span of time I would remember, but it would come to me and I would open my mouth to find I had no words to say.

"Jesus wept," my grandmother whispered. "Just say Jesus wept."

Jesus wept. The shortest verse in the Bible, said by Jesus after seeing Lazareth's sister's grief. Even though Jesus had come to raise Lazarus from the dead and there was no reason for his tears, he bore witness to Mary's sorrow and was moved by it. Her pain brought on his own.

My grandmother said the verse again, urging me to repeat after her, but my mother interrupted. "No," she said, gripping my hand tight. "She has her own verse. She can say it. Hurry up now so we can eat."

Unrelenting, my mother would make me stand there until I said it, and the rest of the family would patiently wait, and so they all stood firm, silently still. I swallowed hard, glanced up at the familiar painting, and then somehow I remembered.

"For it is by grace—for it is by grace you have been saved," I began.

The hymn "Amazing Grace" was written by a white, British man by the name of John Newton. Newton was a slave trader. The song was inspired from an experience Newton had while sailing his slave ship back home. During the night they'd passed through a violent storm and Newton had woken to find his ship filling with water. He prayed to God for a "great deliverance" to save him and his ship from the ocean's depths. His deliverance came and Newton wrote the first words to his hymn from the experience.

Newton renounced slavery five years before the publication of “Amazing Grace.” He became an evangelical minister, of all things, and the hymn echoes his regrets over his involvement in the slave trade. The “Amazing Grace” spoken of alludes to God’s forgiveness of Newton’s sins. “I once was lost, but now I am found,” the first verse of the hymn goes. “Was blind, but *now* I see.”

During the eulogy for Clementa Pinckney there was a point where President Obama paused, then he bowed his head. A brief silence followed, and as he lifted his head back up he began to croon the first few words of “Amazing Grace.” The crowd roared in response. Never mind that later he would be criticized for using a hymn written to describe God’s forgiveness for a man’s participation in the slave trade. No one thought of this now, instead the audience stood. They clapped their feet and cheered as he sang to them the well-known hymn. In a moment of black pain it was a call to rise up. It was a balm meant to soothe a wound open for far too long. It was a way of saying—we will get through this, together we will come together and heal in the ways we’ve always done. We will exhibit God’s grace and get through and, and perhaps, forgive.

“What is the thing you couldn’t forgive?” my mother asked me once. “Like, how far do you believe forgiveness goes for a person? Because I think it’s not the same for everyone.”

We’d gone out for dinner, one of the few times in my memory when she had a little money to afford it. The question had come out of nowhere, and I supposed she asked it as a personal musing and had not meant for me to respond.

“Are you talking about dad? For leaving? For the divorce?”

“What? No, I’m not talking about your father.”

“Who then? *Your* father? Is this about him?”

I’d regretted asking her the moment I said it. She was always dodgy about telling me about her father, and the few details I knew were when she’d let her guard down. I’d hoped that maybe this time she’d finally tell me everything. I settled back in the booth and waited for her to say the words.

“Just forget it,” she answered, then took a long sip of her coke before telling me she didn’t want to talk anymore.

A few weeks earlier, I’d sat on the opposite side of the bathroom door listening to my mother grimace in pain. “Are you okay? What’s wrong? Should I do something?”

“I am going to have my tubes tied,” I heard her say to herself. “No, I am going to have them taken out and *burned*.”

It’ll be years before I’m able to thread this story together, before I fully understand the context of these events and their relationship to each other, and when I do I will be angry at everyone—at my father for leaving, at the man who would not leave his wife, and at my mother for all of what she never said.

Charles Wilden is the name of the man in the *Grace* photograph. Wilden was an itinerant salesman, a peddler who sold foot-scrapers. One day Wilden ventured upon Enstrom’s door as he was preparing a portfolio of his images to take with him to a convention. It was Wilden’s “kind face” that made Enstrom ask if he could take his

picture. Enstrom was the one who told him to pose, to clasp his hands and bow his head, among the intentionally placed items on the table.

Not much is known about Wilden. A few years after he posed for the photo, he signed over his rights to the image for five dollars. Stories about him tell not of his piety but of him as a drunk. He was married and divorced. He was a Swedish immigrant, but from where and when no one knows for sure. Where he lived after the photo was taken, what became of his life, and where he died, is a mystery. He is a man who is both famous and unknown.

A study lead by Dr. Rachel Yehuda, director of Mount Sinai's Traumatic Stress Studies Division, found that the effects of intense psychological trauma could be hereditary. In the study, the DNA of Holocaust survivors and their children was examined. They found a pattern to suggest that not only could life experiences like stress have a chemical effect in someone's DNA but also that such an effect be passed down from one generation to the next.

Even though the study was on Holocaust survivors, I have thought of it when you spoke to me about apologies. I thought of when you gave your call of forgiveness and this is my response—the readying noose hanging from the tree, the bodies plucked from beds in the night, the bodies hung, the bodies lost, the postcards taken of all the mutilated bodies, the collectibles of body parts, the ways bodies have been fetishized—the eyes that would stare and mock what would be admired on the body of another, the eyes that would use their stare as justification for the rape of a body, all these bodies beaten, the bodies shot, the law of three-fifths of a body, the sterilization of bodies, the jumpin' Jim

Crow depiction of our bodies, the imprisonment of bodies, the legalized murder of bodies, the systematic oppression of bodies, the tainted water meant to fill the spirit of bodies but poisoned them instead, the shame taught over the body, all the bodies still being silenced, and now the ways in which my body has been changed before it ever even was my body—you apologize, asking for forgiveness, but an apology does not change what came before, and forgiveness does not fix all of what's been done.

I must understand the story of my mother in order to understand myself, but the truth is I don't know it, not all of it, although I can give pieces. Like how during a visit at my godmother's she decided to pull out all of the old family albums. She passed over the photos of her own father, my great uncle, turning the fading pages until she found the few of my grandfather's picture. They were photos I'd seen before, most of them taken right before he died.

She turned another page and found the program from his funeral. She read out loud to me the obituary. "Look at that," she said after she'd finished. "There's nothing here. What kind of man has nothing good said about him in his own obituary? What kind of man must he have been?"

"He beat her, she told me that," I said, surprising myself with the sudden declaration. "He was obsessive and controlling. She was afraid of him, and I think he, I think—"

I stopped, not being able to say it. I couldn't bring myself to finish.

My godmother closed the album and placed it on the floor. "I've been thinking about how I'd gone there to help her pack up her things," she said. "It was after we all

learned about the cancer, that at this point it was terminal, and I'd gone there to help her decide what would go where and with whom, and we were toward the end of it. The whole thing had been hard, listening to her make all of those decisions, watching her, and then we both got to talking. I don't know how or why but it came up and I just said to her 'you don't have to tell me, you don't have to say it, but I know something happened. Something happened in that house with you and I'm sorry it's taken me so long to finally put it together, but I know now and I'm sorry.'"

I was quiet then, an echo of my mother's own response. There was nothing for me to say because I did not know how to make peace with knowledge such of this. I was unable to forgive when I was, am, still unsure of the depths this pain continues to go.

Forgiveness is always what is asked of us, but I think of the mothers of men who've been killed. Mothers who've watched the deaths of their sons filmed, their last breaths documented for public consumption for all the world to see, and then having to console themselves with the knowledge that this is necessary—that strangers can see their sons shot in the backs, to see them fall into the grass and dirt, to see them choke and struggle for air, to see them struggle to stay alive—because if others did not see it would not be believed. Even seeing and there are those who do not believe.

I think of the fathers and sisters and brothers and sons of those who'd come to a place of worship and were killed in a massacre of hate. I think of how after, they'd looked into the face of the man who did it, who would maybe even now kill them if he could, and yet still they looked at him and preached forgiveness.

I think of all the ways so many of us live in this world. The injustices we face, the indignities, the shame. The ways in which the measure of ourselves becomes slowly reduced until we no longer recognize ourselves, no longer know the value of who we are. To be black in this world and not be filled with hate means at times having an unlimited amount of grace, because still so many of us continue to forgive.

In an interview with Lezley McSpadden, she looks toward the camera and explains how she'll never forgive for what's been done to her son, she will never forgive for the taking of his life. As I watched the interview, her statement to me felt like a salve. Her refusal to forgive and let go despite the public's desire for her to do so. I played the recording of it again and observed her frustrations over the injustice. Her anger soothed, and I listened, and my own heart felt saved.

Earlier this summer I was walking out of a movie theater into the sun when I felt the buzz of my phone. It was a friend of mine who I hadn't heard from much since the semester ended. "Finally, I was beginning to worry about you," I say upon answering.

She explains how she'd been busy with packing up her belongings. She graduated a few weeks ago and is now moving across the country. "I'm finally checking my messages and I saw you called. How are you? What are you doing?"

"I was watching a movie. It's over now though."

She asks what I went to see and instead of giving the title I explain the premise. "It centers around the plight of a white Mississippi famer, this man Newton Knight, a deserter of the Civil War who organized a company of men to fight against the Confederates."

“Oh, I saw that,” she says. “Or I went to see it but I only got through part of it before I had to leave. It went longer than I was expecting. What happened during the rest of it?”

“The film shifts to Reconstruction. Did you see that part?”

“No, I left right before.”

“I was glad the film didn’t stop with the end of the war and Reconstruction was also shown even though it was brief. You know, for blacks Reconstruction held this sort of promise and in the film you can see the beginning of that promise—they showed the Freedman’s Bureau meetings and the first black schools being built. It was a moment where there was the belief that the course seemed to be changing, but then the backlash happens.”

“Like now,” she says. “Post-racial America.”

“Yeah,” I say, waiting to a few seconds before going on. “Still, there are these huge swaths of in-between time that it seems people forget or don’t want to think about when we remember black history. It’s always the Civil War, then Jim Crow and lynching, and then the Civil Rights Movement, and like you said I guess now it will be Obama.”

“I wish I’d finished the film. I need to go back and see it again. Maybe we can go together before I leave.”

“I’d like to,” I say. “What’s interesting is I knew about Newton Knight but I didn’t know about his relationship with Rachel.”

Rachel was Newton’s grandfather’s former slave. Newton took up a common-law marriage with her and together they had five children. However, Newton also previously had nine other children with his white wife, Serena. Newton and Serena separated but

never divorced, and they all lived together between two separate houses on Newton's 160-acre plot of land.

The story between the three of them reminds me of my own family's history. "It makes me wonder," I tell my friend. "You know, about what I've been trying to research. I see a film like that and I think maybe it was possible that he claimed them in some way, that he gave at least one of them his name, and that he was more than what I've always believed."

"Or maybe he wasn't," she says, and then I remember Eliza's story. I remember again that the miscegenation laws outlawed black women's marriages to white men, and how the relationships between free black women and white men were defined by law as "fornication." I convince myself that even if their relationship was consensual the outcome would have been the same—he would pick another, married another, had children with another. "You still haven't found out anything either way?"

"No, no record of anything and so I just keep going back and forth, aligning myself one way and then another. Maybe she was raped. Maybe it was consensual. Maybe he left her. Maybe he didn't have a choice. Maybe they all lived together on neighboring plots of land. Maybe he kicked her off. Maybe she sought vindication for what he'd done. Maybe he felt guilt over what he didn't do. I don't know. None of it makes much sense and I am tired of trying to understand."

She listens to me talk for a few minutes more before interrupting. "I don't understand how you're able to think about all of this and not just want to hate all white people," she says. "Because if it was me I would."

It has been a long year for both of us, what with the protests at our university and their repercussions. Her comment relays her own exasperations for the racism present in the town we live in as well as the failures of the people in our program—for the length of time they were silent, and their sudden desire to get to the forefront to speak after the news went national. Like me, she is upset over their ignorance and their hypocrisy, and now their guilt has filled them with ideas of diversity trainings and workshops, with reply-all emails about colloquiums to discuss topical “race relations” texts, but no amount of guilt can save them from themselves.

“I don’t know,” I say, and even though I can sense her dissatisfaction with my answer, she lets me change the subject.

My mother was not one for forgiveness. When my father left her, when they finally got divorced, she decided that instead of forgiveness she would turn to hate, and through the years she convinced me to hate him too.

Towards the end of her life she would apologize. “I am sorry for what I did,” she said. “For making you hate him, but you’re going to have to learn how to forgive.”

“Why?”

“Because soon he’ll be all that you have left.”

She paused, and we both thought about the weight of her words. “You’re going to have to forgive me too,” she said.

“Your father left us both, you know,” my mother used to say. *“He didn’t want you either.”* I’ve never known the whole story between them but a part of me continues to

hold on to her truth. I know one day I will have to ask him for his. I know one day he will tell me and I will have to forgive, but for now I am not ready to go down that path.

“Get your research done?” he asks me upon seeing me walk in the door. I’ve come back briefly over the summer to visit before driving back home for work. During the past few days I’d gone to the state archives downtown looking through whatever records I could find.

My father believes I am doing researching for a book but he does not know on what and he does not ask. I should tell him, but to do so is to tell him not just about Leanna but to tell him about her children, and I know that the end of that story will lead me back to my mother and what may have happened to her, and why she was the way she was, and I know that eventually it will lead back to us and the reason for this distance we’ve created.

Instead, I keep my answers vague. “For today,” I tell him. “I’m tired though.”

“Have you been able to find what you were looking for?”

“Not yet.”

My father nods and then focuses his attention elsewhere. I go upstairs and empty my bag on the floor, sit down and look through the copied images of the records I’ve found.

I should let go of this, I think. I should just forget it and move on, but somewhere in this story is the root of something I need to understand to explain all of what came after.

There is not much about Leanna I’ve been able to learn, but from what I know of her life it is one that in every way feels fraught with instability and pain.

He could have loved her, I think. He could have loved her but left her still. He was young at the time, far younger than I am now, and the world had taught him to believe she was nothing more than a possession to be used and disregarded.

In every conjured potentiality of this past there is an action needing forgiveness, but the question I have often wondered is if she gave it.

Could you do it? Could I? What if, in the end, it was the only choice you had? Would you still hold on to that hate to pass down to your children? “*She went and had ‘em up,*” the story goes. “*She had ‘em up,*” is the story passed on. To me that is an action of vindication, of revenge. A punishment for the hurt she endured.

But what if he claimed them in some way, however small? There is no indication to lead to this conclusion beyond folklore, beyond the name carried down, and yet—suppose it happened. Suppose for me a different outcome. Suppose instead, it was enough for her to forgive him for what he’d done. Suppose this one acquiescence was enough. For what he continued to do every day he was alive—for marrying another, for letting the standards of the era dictate his own morality, for his denial of these children.

Suppose for all of this, she forgave anyway, believing it to be her only course to saving herself. Suppose forgiveness could do that. Suppose it was possible. Suppose it was necessary. Suppose that forgiveness, if for a moment, could be what finally set her free.

Glory Be Her Name

“So I guess we’re related,” I say light-heartedly to her on the phone.

“Yeah, how about that? I guess we are.”

Earlier this afternoon I'd received an email from a woman who'd read one of my essays. *I believe I am someone you're looking for*, her response read, then she explained how the woman I'd written about in the essay, Leanna Brown, was also one of her ancestors.

One night over thirteen years ago I'd decided to browse through a genealogy forum where I'd seen this post—*Seeking information on the mixed or african american siddle family. Possible starting with a Billie Siddle*. I'd replied to the message and hoped for a response but nothing ever came. Nothing, that is, until this email in which she explains how she is the person I'd tried contacting all those years ago.

She'd listed her number at the bottom of the email in case I wanted to get in touch with her. I wrote back almost immediately. *Yes, how about today? What time works best for me to give you a call?*

Now on the phone I listen to her try and map out the link between us. She goes through the line, rapidly listing off each of the names. "Which one of her children do you come down on again?"

"The boy," I tell her. "Willie. He would have been my great, great grandfather I guess."

"Okay, so, let me see," she says, pausing. "That would make us third cousins I think. Yeah, that's right. We're third cousins."

"You did that faster than I ever could have."

She laughs. "Yeah, well, it's not that hard when you've had a little practice."

There is a story I once believed and it begins like this—a woman named Leanna Brown was a slave to Bedford Brown, Senator of North Carolina. Sometime during her enslavement she had a relationship with a white man who lived on a neighboring farm, and the results of their relationship produced three children, one of them my ancestor.

As I hedge closer to the truth, I know some of those pieces are incorrect. Yes, she was a slave, and most likely she was a slave to Bedford Brown, although in looking at his slave population schedules there are none listed fitting her age and description. She had a relationship with someone that produced three children. In looking at the 1870 census, the next one taken after the war, she's living with David Swift and his family, and so perhaps a reasonable assumption would be that maybe he is the father, that maybe he had an affair, and I would consider this possibility except one of those children, the boy, took the surname of a white man by the name of Siddle.

The Siddle family knew the Browns, this I am sure. They bought close to five hundred acres of land from Bedford Brown's estate after he passed away. "Proximity," I've often told my godmother when I lament about my search. "The closest I seem to get is establishing proximity, but nothing beyond that."

"It's a start though," she'd say, her response always managing to prompt me back toward looking.

While I can assume Leanna and Willie had a relationship, it is the particulars of it that I have questioned, just like the particulars of Leanna's life. It is because these are the pieces I've yet to learn that I'm unable to let it go, believing somehow if I go a little further, if I just dig deeper. I look at the name passed down and it is a fact that I can't

explain. If they were not married, if she was not his slave, then how did this child come to take his name? How did these children come to exist?

For a while I'd stopped thinking about all of this. After a series of red herrings and false starts, I told myself I needed a break, pushing all of what I'd found to the side. I have to go to my desk and search a moment to find all of the notes I've collected. There's a corkboard on the floor I'd used to try and map out the genealogy and I lift it up to look at what I'd written.

The woman on the phone tells me she is a descendant of the third child, the youngest, the one Leanna lived with right before she died.

"Lillie," I say, remembering and I imagine her on the other line nodding in response. I look at what I'd written on one notecard—Lillie Bedford, mother Leanna Brown. Father, John Smiley.

"I just have so many questions. Maybe you can help me out with some of them?"

I ask her about Leanna's death, the largest piece of her story that's bothered me, and she says it was a house fire. "She'd been living with her daughter and her husband, and she was getting old so you know. It was very tragic," she tells me. "That's all I know, all that was told to me."

"But she was a fighter," I say, feeling the need to clarify. "She lived for a month with those burns."

"Yes, she did."

She too had tried researching about Leanna and she tells me bits and pieces of what she's learned. While most of it is about the daughter, every now and then she offers

another anecdote about son. “Willie was one of the witnesses to Lillie’s wedding,” she says. “I always found that nice. That both him and Leanna were there.”

“So you saw the actual record?”

“Oh yeah, you know there are always mistakes. It said on one of the census records that her father was a man named Smiley and that’s incorrect. You never know. So you have to go and look at the actual thing.”

I’ve found this out the hard way when I searched through census records. *Leanna, Leak, Lena, Leah*. So many variations of the same person. So many errors. So many ways in which a person could easily disappear if one weren’t careful in their looking.

I pick up the notecard I’d written with Lillie’s name. “So John Smiley is not the father?”

“No, that name is incorrect. That’s not her father.”

“I know the family always wondered if she was actually Willie’s daughter,” I say. “The story was that because she was born later, closer toward when Reconstruction was sort of falling apart, that maybe Leanna lost whatever right she had to getting that child the same name as the father. But I’ve looked at the records and it seems as if neither of the women have his name, only the male child.”

“That would make sense when you think about it. It’s the male child that carries on the name. Maybe that’s how she convinced him to do it. So she would have some link, and the children, back to who they were.”

“It’s a decision that took an incredible amount of foresight,” I say.

She tells me stories about Willie her family told her. Anecdotes I’d never heard before. “He was likeable,” she says, interrupting my thought. “He was also very thrifty.

When he went to work in the coal mines, he always saved his money. Every penny. You know they would get their allotted rations, their pork or whatever, and one time he accidentally burned his and he ate it anyway. He was careful with what he'd been given."

"Because he saved that money he ended up being able to buy a lot of land that he built on their house on. It was close to three hundred acres." I stop myself from continuing, thinking of the family he raised, how after he died his wife, now a woman alone with several children in an area surrounded by the Klan, was one day greeted with men who'd asked for her deed. She'd offered it and when it was given back to her the acreage had been altered. Their land lost—stolen.

Like Leanna she did the best she could with the circumstances surrounding her life. Like Leanna she was given a difficult situation, and even though my first instinct is to fault her for letting go of the deed, I've learned that sometimes this world will present itself with a singular choice.

Which is why when I think of Leanna I wonder. She somehow made a different choice. *She had 'em up*, my family used to say. *She took that man to court she he would acknowledge what he'd done.*

"Leanna," I say, shifting the conversation back. "Tell me what you've heard."

It is easy to frame Leanna's life under tragedy. There is an entire history that propels this conclusion to the forefront. While black men could be lynched, castrated, or imprisoned for even the accusation of rape, white men faced no legal ramifications for sexually assaulting black women. Black women were not women according to law, and so they were raped and abused while their stories of victimization largely went unheard.

I know the stories of fancy girls, light-skinned women and girls who were sold off as concubines. I've learned of Thomas Jefferson's sexual assault of fourteen-year-old Sally Hemings, an assault that produced six children. I've read about Harriet Jacobs and the house her master built to rape her in.

Even within these stories there are examples of survival. Harriet Jacobs escaped from her master's sexual advances and hid in her grandmother's attic crawlspace for seven years. Harriet Tubman, our Moses, followed the North Star toward freedom, who then shepherded hundreds more to escape.

Then there is Celia, a nineteen-year old slave girl who was raped for five years by her master before she finally decided she'd had enough, clubbing him one night when he came to cabin and burning his body in the fireplace.

It is these stories of survival I hold on to, these moments in which these women reclaimed their agency. They are a reminder to me of the strength of women, the same strength, I hope, that runs through me.

"Ain't I A Woman?" Sojourner Truth asked, and I've wondered it when I've looked at the outline of my lips and I've wondered it when I looked at the stance of my hips and I've wondered it smelling the sulfur taming my hair from the kink.

I've wondered it when I think of my mother's three white dolls, the only ones she had growing up, and I wondered it when she told me once how she preferred to call herself Creole in an avoidance her blackness.

I wondered this question when I think of Leslie Jones. Her private information hacked, nude photos of her body exposed for the world to see. A video of a gorilla who was shot and killed at a Cincinnati zoo prominently posted on the top of her website.

The attack on Jones reminding me of the Washington mayor who ranted about Michelle Obama's "gorilla face." The association not an unfamiliar one in our culture. Scientific racists made claims about how blacks were genetically inferior, closer to primates as a species than Europeans. Around the turn of the nineteenth century the depiction of the coon caricature became mainstream, especially popular on postcards.

I am reminded of it when I think of the women who've also been victims and yet their stories are often erased from the larger narrative of police violence. Women who've been dragged from their cars, shot inside their homes, killed with their children near.

And I've been reminded of this question during all the years of my life in which I've learned the shame of my skin, of my lips and my hair, and the shame of my thighs. It has existed so long that I do not know when it did not make up a part of who I am, because even as a child I remember sitting in the tub, a washcloth between my hands, as I scrubbed my skin raw, wishing afterward that the water wouldn't be so clear.

"Ain't I Woman?" I've wondered, but also—*ain't I enough?*

Up until now I have given you one story of my mother but I must tell you of another. In college, she was diagnosed with Lupus and the doctors predicted she would not live much farther past adulthood but she did so anyway. She was a woman not meant to have children but she got pregnant with me anyway. Three months before I was meant to be born, she got bit by a brown recluse spider bite. The combination of the bite and her

illness forced her into labor. The doctors did not believe she would survive the delivery but she did anyway.

When I think of my mother, I think of the time a man she was seeing stole her car and went on a joyride through the city. Throughout the night my mother drove in my borrowed car searching, at last finding him in a parking lot smoking with a group of women where in a wild fury she managed to grab him and drag him out of the car.

I think of the time she came home, having picked up a stranger she found standing outside of the Wal-Mart looking for work. She'd offered him a deal, cut our grass and she'd cook him dinner and give him a little cash and he'd agreed. I watched my mother stand in our kitchen as she sliced pieces of leftover meatloaf to put in a container.

"Are you crazy?" I asked her. "Why would you bring him home? You don't know who he is."

"He's fine," she said calmly. "Besides, he needs help."

Alone, with an illness, with mounting debt, and working several jobs that never paid enough, still my mother managed to raise me. It took the man she loved leaving to break her, and then loving another man who would not leave his wife to break her again.

She would get pregnant and decide not to keep it. "It is the one thing I regret," she told me, "but what was I supposed to do? I made a choice and now I have to live with it."

The last job my mother had before she died was working the night shift in a correctional facility for inmates with mental illness. "I feel bad for some of them. I wish there was more I could do," she'd say, refusing to tell me more beyond that. Sometimes she had nightmares and I would hear her crying out in her sleep.

When I think of my mother, I think of how after she got sick she kept it a secret from me until the very end, until it became unavoidable to hide it from me any longer. She was afraid it would keep me from graduating college. She did not want me to follow the same pattern of her life. She hid it so I could finish, and even though it almost broke me to do it, I finished.

My mother was a woman who did not know the full potentiality of her power, who died unknowing the possibilities of her life.

“I have one last question,” I say on the phone, pausing. “Do you know anything about the photo?”

I tell her about the picture I found. A copy of a framed portrait taken of Leanna, the only image I’ve ever seen of her.

“Oh yes, I have the original. I’m the one that put it out there. I think I’d even passed a copy along to the county historical association,” she explains.

“I was wondering where it came from. What kind of image is it? I couldn’t tell.”

“It’s an old tintype. They were pretty common for the era I think. It was painted over because the image was starting to fade so that’s why it looks like that.”

“What about her in the photo? She looks—I mean, I don’t know. I don’t know all that much about this period, but to me she looks—”

“Taken care of,” she says, interrupting. “She looks well taken care of and well loved.”

I wait a moment to see if she'll go further, if she'll offer the suggestion that has been on my mind, but when she's quiet I decide to bring it up anyway. "I've often wondered if maybe, and I'm hypothesizing here, I can't prove this at all, but I've wondered if the reason for that, I mean she's so light, and she looks so young in the photo, so I thought maybe it's because she's possibly related to him or the family in some way."

"I'd never considered that."

"Because why her?" I say, my voice picking up. "The man had a lot of slaves. Why is she the one that worked in the house? Why was she one that looks so taken care of?"

"I mean, it could be. It's possible. It might explain why I couldn't find her in his slave census records."

"I don't know the answer. It's just something I've thought about. Another piece I can't prove. Gosh, I just don't know. I don't know about any of it. Her life then or even after the war. None of it makes sense."

"You know, what I've found interesting is that she's listed as keeping house in that 1880 census you mentioned. Keeping house meant you were a woman at home, tending to the house, and she's a woman listed living at home with three children."

"Right, so the question is who's taking care of those children."

"And who's taking care of her?"

"And why?"

"Exactly."

“Another piece I’ve thought about—the children all came after slavery, but the second one, I guess your great grandmother, if you look at the timeline and trace it back, he was conceived right around the time he gets married.”

“I didn’t know that.”

“So, that story, the ‘had ‘em up’ story, I’ve wondered if there was a connection there, like her taking him to task, so to speak, but you know I just have so many theories about all of this.”

“I mean, it’s possible.”

“I guess I’m interested in that idea because it brings forth another way of looking at the story. It’s another way of examining her life.”

“It is true that there were women who took the white fathers to court,” she says, echoing my godmother’s response.

“But then I think of that area during that time frame and it just seems.”

“Yeah, it seems crazy,” she says. “Her whole life. She’s always been someone who’s fascinated me. Her life was just—”

“I know,” I say.

“I think she would be happy you are telling this story. That someone hadn’t forgotten about her.”

“I’d like to see that deed. You said all their names are on it?”

“Yeah, it’s the only thing I’ve found that has all their names on it, that connects them all together in any kind of way, and it mentions how all their land bordered each other. I can’t believe after all this time it’s all I got, and I almost even missed it altogether, but it is what it is.”

I tell her I'll send a copy of the deed and she'll try and get together copies of whatever records she's found. "I think I may have pictures too," she says.

I'm about to hang up when I remember one last question. "Have you ever contacted any of the white side? Heard from any of them? I'm curious to know what story they know about it, what they were told, if anything."

"No, I never got in touch with any of them."

"I wonder what they know. I've thought about trying, but I'm not sure if anyone would still be alive to even know anything about it."

"For what it's worth, I think you're close. Somewhere in those records is the answer you're looking for. You might try the apprentice bonds, if you ever get a chance to go. They're often neglected records when people are searching. If you can find one her name would be listed as the parent, and his too possibly, either as the father but if he was apprenticeship master—it would give further credence."

"I wouldn't have even thought to look at those."

"It's another possibility," she says. "Like I said, there's something somewhere. I would bet money. It's really just a matter of finding it."

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie spoke about the danger of a single story, but what of the danger of no story? What if when you look for representations of you, you find nothing there?

Once, in a class, we were discussing a student's piece. It was the first few chapters of a novel where the protagonist was a young black girl attending a mostly white

school. It was a story about the ways in which one's environment can contribute to feelings of self-hate.

It was familiar story, with echoes of moments I'd read about before. We were talking about a scene where the protagonist recognizes her difference, a moment recalling Franz Fanon's, moment that every one of us experiences—when we recognize not only our difference but that the world sees us as inferior.

A couple of classes before we'd read Toni Morrison's "Recitatif," a story about race that removes all racial codes. The timing of both of these together had been unexpected but appropriate.

"I never, I never really thought about any of these before. I guess I never had reason to," one of my students says in a low voice.

Because I knew if I pushed too hard I would lose them, I decided not to talk about the lack of diversity in publishing. Instead, I tried a different approach. I asked them a simple question. "When you're writing, when you're reading, if no race is mentioned, what are you picturing? Is it always a white person?"

They were quiet as they thought about my question. My students didn't answer because we all knew the answer. White was the default. White was the story, and so it's become ingrained in us to picture one answer and it was only now, perhaps in this moment, where they'd finally begun to question as to why.

"I think about this a lot, how when I construct my own stories, often the image in my head is white. That's a problem, but I'm not sure how to fix it," I say, continuing.

"Even in my own mind I'd erased myself."

“There is power in looking,” bell hooks writes, and glory be the name of those who showed me the way, who showed me that there was another way of seeing, and I see now Marley Dias who took it upon herself to solve the lack of representation in the books at her school. I see Misty Copeland, the first African American woman named principal dancer of the American Ballet Theatre, but also of Raven Wilkinson and Janet Collins and Lauren Anderson and Carmen Lavallade.

I am interested in a different story now. Tell me not a story of brokenness but of the ways we have fought and survived. Yes, tell me of the men who fought in the war of our freedom, but tell of the women too. Tell me of Mary Bowser, known to have a photographic memory, assumed the identity of an illiterate slave while pretending to be a slave in the Confederate White House. She snuck out information to Union forces about troop movements, Union prisoner locations, and military strategies. Tell me of Mary Touvestre, housekeeper of the Confederate engineers, who stole a set of plans for the building of the C.S.S. Virginia and traveled to Washington, managing to meet with the Secretary of the Navy.

Countee spoke of a brown girl dead, but show me instead these double-dutch girls playing across my street. The rope crackles against the pavement as they shift their feet to the rhythm. Show me these students on my campus quad dancing to Formation while their white peers look on. Show me the women who have let down the wild glory of their hair, proclaiming beauty in all its variations, while being unafraid and unashamed. Give me the stories from those whose love of their blackness came from a love of themselves. Tell me of the history of women we have overlooked—those who marched alongside you in Washington, who stood behind as you traveled to that mountaintop. Tell me these

stories of the women forgotten, women lost, women with their own dreams deferred. Tell me of the darker sisters who cooked your meals in the kitchen, who made heaven from scraps to fuel your children so they also could grow strong. Where now is their seat at this table, so beautifully prepared? They, too, have sung America, have built this America, and it is time to tell their stories of how.

This is my call.

I write for women like us, someone told me once, a friend, and I am reminded of this every time I look on the screen and see a woman who looks like me or when I hold a book in my hands from someone who looks like me or when I see a woman who looks like me on the street unconcerned with the stares of the world. Each time I am reminded me that there is more than one way of being.

Once, she came to visit and we were sitting in a bar having a drink. The night was winding down, last calls were being asked for.

“I just want to say,” I began, stumbling through the words. I looked at my watered down drink, held the glass between my hands, and I realized I couldn’t finish what it was I wanted to say.

I am not sure what I eventually said to her after I had broken the silence, but if I had the moment to do over, if we could have gone back to the beginning, I would have said this—I did not know who I was until I saw you, and I did not know all of what I could be.

And so, I think of others who are still waiting to get to the place I’ve finally come to, and I think of the women with stories of their lives we’ve yet to hear. I know you are

out there. I know you are waiting, and to you I say, someone is listening. Someone is waiting to hear, so tell me. So come forth, and let's begin.

The Inheritors

In the center of the Yanceyville town square is a monument of a Confederate soldier. It is the first thing I notice when I pull up here. I've seen images of it before when I looked at photos of the courthouse. The soldier stands tall, proud even, looking northward as he grasps his rifle. He is on a pedestal, high above the rest. Inhabitants of the town literally look up to him as they drive around the square. The United Daughters of the Confederacy erected the monument in 1921. During their unveiling ceremony the audience sang "America" as well as the "Dixie" song. Below the statue is this inscription—*to the sons of Caswell County who served in the War of 1861-1865 in answer to the call of their country, in whatever event that may face our national existence may God give us the will to do what is right, that like our forefathers, we may impress our time with the sincerity and steadfastness of our lives.*

Across the country others are fighting to remove memorials such as this, memorials that the United Daughters of the Confederacy worked to litter the South with. Memorials like in Birmingham and Louisville and Dallas. In New Orleans, plans to remove the imposing monuments of Robert E. Lee and P.G.T. Beauregard were met with death threats and the torching of one contractor's car. A few months ago in the town where I live, there was a petition to move the 11,000-pound memorial known as "Confederate Rock" off the county courthouse property.

"I don't mind the statues, as long as they're there and open for everyone, then they can have their memorials of history, but I want ours too. Where are ours?" My godmother's words are on my mind as I stare up at this memorial.

It has taken me a couple of hours to get to this place. Caswell County is situated right on the border between North Carolina and Virginia. Its proximity to Virginia has made research about my ancestors difficult. That and Caswell County is made up mostly of a number of small unincorporated communities. There's Casville and Prospect Hill, Pelham and Quick. "*You never wanted to stay long in Quick,*" my mother used to say, "*and you never wanted to be near it once it got dark.*" Near Quick is Ruffin, the area where my mother grew up. I will go there next but I wanted to come to Yanceyville, the town existing right in the county's center. I came to Yanceyville first mostly because it is large enough to be a town and I knew it could be a place to stop. There are a few mom-and-pop restaurants scattered around and there's the downtown, if one could call it that, which consists of this town square.

I stand in front of the statue but look beyond it, because there is the courthouse, the only antebellum public building left in the county. In the basement of this courthouse a senator was assassinated by members of the Ku Klux Klan. John "Chicken" Stephens, Republican state senator, who'd been an agent of the Freedman's Bureau and an active member of the Union League. I learned about Chicken Stephens through trying to find more information about Bedford Brown. Stephens was elected to state senator over Brown, and in researching this I learned about the murder. The Klan had gathered earlier to Stephens' fate, held a "trial" *in absentia* of Stephens where they sentenced him to death. Former Democratic sheriff Frank Wiley lured Stephens down the stairs of the courthouse where other Klansmen were waiting, and the moment Stephens finished coming down the steps they were on him. They stabbed him to death and left his body to

bleed out on a woodpile while they all went back upstairs to finish with the meetings being held in the courthouse.

A few months earlier in a nearby county another man was lynched. Wyatt Outlaw, the first African American Town Commissioner and Constable of Graham, was hung from a tree in the courthouse square. On his chest was the message, “Beware, ye guilty, both black and white.”

These two events sparked an insurrection known as the Kirk-Holden War. Governor William Holden imposed martial law on Caswell and Alamance counties and sent in troops. Around a hundred men were arrested, some highly respected members of the community. Holden had instructed that the writ of habeas corpus be suspended. Lawyers sent out requests to the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, which were granted but then ignored at the instruction of Governor Holden. They were taken to federal court where a federal judge ordered all but a few released, and those that weren’t were never tried. The fallout from this insurrection led to the impeachment of Governor Holden. He was impeached, convicted, and removed from office for his perceived wrongdoing.

When all of this was close to over the former senator Bedford Brown would pass away in his home. His son Livingston became the executor of his estate, and three tracts of his land totaling over 300 acres was sold to a white family by the name of Siddle. A father and his two sons. One of them built a general and liquor store and became relatively successful with his business. The other son farmed the land. He soon met a girl, perhaps already had met her. A girl who was once a slave but now was not, who like him also worked the land, or on it, and just before this man decided to marry another, she

would have two, maybe three, of his children. One of those children will take on his surname.

To me it seems an impossible thing to have happened, to believe that they could have had a relationship, even taking into account that he eventually would marry someone else. Not far from here, in Eden, one of the largest groups of the KKK is located. Just a few years ago in Reidsville, a town my grandmother lived before she died, the Loyal White Knights of the KKK invited residents to a “whites only” cross burning. So to imagine a situation in which this man could have acknowledged, claimed, any of these children is difficult to fathom.

I stare out at this two-story masonry structure with its domed copula. I should go inside, at least see the courtroom with its original 19th century decorations, and I will go, but before I do I take out my phone to finally call my godmother.

“You made it!” she exclaims upon the first ring.

“Yeah, I’m here. I’m in Yanceyville.”

“So what are you going to do first? Are you going to go through the records that are there?”

“No, I—” I pause, looking around the square. The library is in one direction and in another is the newer courthouse where the more current records are kept. A block away is the Richmond-Miles Museum containing county artifacts. There is not much time to do everything, even waiting here I know I am wasting it and need to make a decision. “What about the house?” I finally ask her. “Tell me how to get to the house.”

North Carolina, once hailed the “Tobacco State,” is tobacco country. Among its counties Caswell used to be one to the richest in the state with tobacco being its leading agricultural product. In 1860 there were only two other counties that exceeded the amount of pounds of tobacco produced. In Caswell it was tobacco, not cotton, that was king. One of the reasons for this is due to the invention of Bright Leaf, or flue-cured tobacco. Flue-cured tobacco could grow in even the poorest soil, providing opportunity to struggling farms.

Flue-cured tobacco was born here. The story told is that of Abisha Slade’s slave Stephen. During the night Stephen fell asleep while watching the wood fires in the barn used for curing the tobacco. By coincidence he’d awoken to salvage the dying fire. He threw charred log butts in, and the combination of the dry heat from the charred logs caused the leaves to turn a bright yellow color. Abisha decided to sell Stephen’s mistake anyway, calling it Bright Leaf tobacco, and it quickly grew in popularity, becoming the state’s signature.

“That story!” my godmother exclaimed when I reminded her of it. She doesn’t have to explain because I know what she’s going to say—the familiar stereotype so embedded in our culture. “I’ve never fully believed it. Never believed it happened the way it did.”

Tobacco is rooted not just in North Carolina’s history but in our country’s. It was the first crop planted in Jamestown. It was tobacco that George Washington issued to his troops during the Revolutionary War. Tobacco leaves are embedded architecturally in the structure of capital buildings, including “the Corinthian Columns in the old Senate chambers.” During the Civil War, tobacco revenues help fund the war effort in the North

and a tobacco tax helped in the South. In WWII, General John Pershing believed that tobacco helped men cope with the stress of battle and so he urged the government to send it to the soldiers, including it in the soldiers' rations.

Tobacco is a thirteen month crop. The process of flue-curing began in early January when farmers would prepare the seed beds for planting. By the next month they would plant the seedbeds and six weeks later the seedlings matured. During the time farmers worked on the main fields, preparing for transplanting. Using a mule they'd plow through the field, breaking up the soil, fertilizing it, making furrows in the dirt. In April the transplanting of the seedbeds into the fields began, and then somewhere around the start of August it would be time to harvest. Farmers would pick the leaves and haul them out of the fields to the barn. There, these leaves were tied and hung on laths in the barn to cure.

When I think of tobacco, I don't think of my mother climbing the rafters of the barn to hang the laths, or the hours of her life she spent underneath the sun toiling with the rest of the family to pick the leaves, nor of any of my ancestors who built their livelihoods from the plant. No, when I think of tobacco I think of how in the old way, each year the soil was burned. It seems counter-intuitive, to destroy in the hopes to grow, but the burn had several objectives. It removed competition from weeds. It prepared the ground for the next cycle of crops, and in this way the soil could be made anew.

My godmother thinks I mean my mother's house, but that is not what I mean. I meant Bedford Brown's house, known as Rose Hill, and I meant the road. I've been told that this road was once known colloquially as Siddle Road and it connected two

properties—on one end Senator Bedford Brown’s land and on the other a family of white farmers. It is the idea of this road that has made me ponder the possibilities. This road, this bridge, between a once slave and a white farmer. After all these years it is what has finally brought me back.

So I am not prepared when instead she gives me the directions to my mother’s childhood house, and I am not prepared when she tells me the man who owns the property will come and let me on the land, and I am not prepared for when I drive down the road and I see it.

I was a child when I last came here, and when I think of it I think of my family packing up boxes. I think of the house as mostly empty and dark, because it was evening when we came, the sun already having long gone. I have dreamt of this place many times in the years since and it is always full of darkness, of shadows, and an overwhelming sense of urgency to leave it.

The house now is falling in disrepair. It needs new paint, and from my view inside seems to be filled with junk. The man I’ve come to meet says as much. His name is Eddie and he is soft-spoken with a kind face. “I’m working on fixing it all up. If I’d known a little earlier I’d have tried to at least clean it out,” he says, almost mournfully. “Right now there—there’s a lot of stuff inside. It’s not really a good idea anyway to be going around up in there.”

Even if the offer was available I’m not sure I would. It is almost too much to think of what happened here, and I am glad I’m unable to go inside. Instead, I tell him I just want to take a few pictures, if it’s all right, and he nods.

As I look at the house I try to remember the stories of its layout. *Your uncle and I shared a room on the first floor, and in order to get out I had to go through my parent's bedroom. I remember creeping across the wood floor and praying neither would wake. Upstairs Pigaboy lived. He wasn't allowed downstairs, came down the steps through this foyer toward the back of the house where he got his meals.*

I follow the perimeter, pausing only once to try and see inside one of the windows. To the left of me are woods. I walk toward them but I can't see much further beyond the brush so I go further, edging as close to it without going in.

"Down that way is the settlement of your great-grandmother's," Eddie says, having followed me a little ways. "It's kind of cool to see something of the 1800's."

He is pitching me to come back, back when more of the woods have been cleared, when the house has been repaired and the junk inside cleaned, when it has become something more than what it is now.

"You want to see the lake?" he asks after I've circled the property and taken my photos.

Eddie's managed to build a lake on the land. He says sometimes he'll bring a boat down there to fish. He wants to take me to see it and explains that even though the path down hasn't been cleared it'll only take him a few minutes to do it.

I tell him he doesn't have to show me, that just being able to see the property is enough, but he persists enough for me to realize that I should go. I get the sense that he's been waiting a long time to show someone all he's done, and so I say okay, getting in my car and following him in his tractor as I drive down.

After slave labor was lost due to the end of the Civil War, Caswell, like the majority of the south, turned to the sharecropping system. Under sharecropping families would rent out plots of land to work for themselves. In return at the end of the year they'd give a portion of their crop's yield to the landowner as payment. Instead of blacks getting their promise of "40 acres and a mule" they instead found themselves in a situation where they were forced to sign labor contracts with white-owned farmers and planters, many of them their former owners, in order to make a living.

In a book about Caswell's history, William S. Powell's notes a sharecropping contract made between Bedford Brown and a group of men who'd agreed to work for him. Powell briefly details the contract before explaining how the end of the document had been signed with a mark by several men, with one of them, David Swift, having written his name for himself.

"David Swift," I'd said at the time, repeating the name in the hopes of jogging my memory. It took me a few moments before remembering the 1870 census record I'd copied. Leanna Brown is there listed as a house servant living with David Swift and his family. Her name is misspelled, and she's on the very bottom of the record so in passing it's easy to miss it, but she's there.

"They were probably kindred in some way," my godmother explained when I told her this.

"Related, you mean? Like a brother?"

"Maybe, but not necessarily, but close. To take someone in your home in that way, to take care of them, it implies a kindred type of relationship, especially when you think about the time period."

So Leanna is living with a black family and working for another. *Leanna Brown, house servant*. In the 1880 census she will continue to hold the same position. *Leanna Brown, house servant*. The question then becomes, to who was she a house servant for?

“She could have been a kept woman,” my godmother supposed to me once. “She could have worked for the Brown family and then worked for the Siddles. She could have taken care of his kids and he could have helped with money to take care of her own.”

“Maybe,” I say, but the truth is I don’t know the circumstances of their relationship—not how they met, whether their relationship was consensual or if he raped her for years. I do not know if he cared for her. I do not know if she worked for his family. I do not know if his wife knew or his children ever knew. I do not know if he had any part in the land my ancestors inherited, the land my mother’s house was built on, the land they all eventually lost.

I follow Eddie for quite a ways down a windy grass hill. The further we go the more I tense up. We drive until I can go no further and I stop my car.

“We’re going to have to walk now a little.”

I’m hesitant at first, but I let him lead me along through a narrow path he’s cleared. Along the way he too reminds me to be careful of snakes. I try not to think of it as we walk, the sun already blinding and so my hands shield my face. We walk, both of us quiet, and then I see it.

The lake is impressive when you imagine how it was the work of one man. He explains how when he bought the land it was all trees and he had to clear it all away.

“I’m going to build a road so that you can drive on out to the other side and to the highway.”

“The property goes that far?”

“Oh yeah. You see all around here,” he waves his hand and points off in the distance. “Everything up to the tallest trees is the property line. Your family once owned a lot of land.”

“It felt expansive to us as kids. It was like our own world.” My mother used to tell me, and in the recognition of this a sadness comes over me realizing all that was lost. To put a face to it, to see its breadth and scope, and I have to look away.

“I’m just trying to, you know, bring the place to what it used to be. As best as I can get it and for as long as I’m able, God willing, I’m going to try.”

My great-grandmother had meant for the land to be a place the family could always come to, but she never made any legal arrangements beyond the verbal expression of her wish. After she died, my grandfather, his brother, and both of their families maintained the farms while the others left—the eldest ones settling up north as part of the Great Migration. After my grandfather died, the family fought like lions over who would inherit the land. At the time, my grandmother was living on the property with her young son, and the family was faced with the decision of what to do with her, if she should be allowed to stay in the house on land that was legally not hers.

“I remember your mother talking about her being in a room with everyone arguing over it. She’d had a tape recorder hidden on her lap. She’d pretended to be knitting but was actually recording the conversation. She couldn’t believe how they were, how much they fought.”

My grandmother eventually decided to leave on her own and the land got put up for auction and Eddie was the one to put in a bid.

This man has lived here his entire life. He loves this land, seems to love it more than I or anyone else in my family possibly could. As I look at him, I wonder if in the end this is how it should be, and maybe me coming here is a kind of letting go.

“You should come back next year,” Eddie says after a while. “Come around again and let me know early on. I’ll have time to bushwhack all the grass and you’ll see, and I’ll fix up the house.”

“I know some of the family has been wanting to see all this.”

“I’d like to show them, show you all what it could be, because it’s really something. It really is.”

In 2004 North Carolina introduced the Tobacco Transition Payment Program, or the Tobacco Buyout. Farmers faced with disappearing contracts were able to receive compensation for their lost income. The funds for the buyout were initiated from the “Master Settlement Agreement” with the major tobacco companies in 1998. They pledged an estimated \$9.6 billion to pay to growers and quota owners “in equal annual installments over ten years.”

With the tobacco buyout, the federal government removed all regulation on the quantity and price of tobacco produced. In the past, quotas and pricing regulations determined how much a farmer could grow or what they could expect to earn, but now it was the tobacco companies, the cigarette manufacturers and leaf merchants who could dictate how much is grown through their contracts. They had the power to drive the profit

margins per acre of tobacco down, and for those farmers wanting to survive they had to either consolidate or decide to get out of the business altogether.

Tobacco growers consolidated in order to grow more to be able to sustain their farms. They hired contractors to procure field labor, often consisting of undocumented workers and even children.

One does not have to look far to see the patterns. Slavery was a system and with its destruction has come new systems. The sharecropping system. Awhile back I'd made a visit down to Vacherie, Louisiana, had gone to bear witness to the string of plantations along River Road. At the Whitney, my tour guide had finished the tour by making the connection to sharecropping. "It was just another form of slavery," he'd said.

The rise in Black Codes were another system where things like "Loitering" and "Breaking curfew" became criminal acts, the results of which warranted imprisonment. As convicts they could be leased out to white plantation owners to work their land for free. Then came the rise of chain gangs. Shackled together as they worked, often working at gunpoint, often under whips. There's "school-to-prison pipeline" that targets students of color. Children, punished for "zero-tolerance" policies that criminalize minor infractions of school rules, are taken out of the public school system and sent into juvenile and criminal justice systems. The "tough on crime" and "war on drugs" arrests and subsequent convictions, also meant to target men and women of color, for non-violent felonies. The rise in human trafficking of women of color for commercial sexual exploitation or forced labor. The continuing exploitation of prison labor. In Louisiana near the northeast border is the Louisiana State Penitentiary, or Angola Prison. Angola,

once a former plantation, is now a maximum security prison farm that was named after the homeland of the slaves that worked on the land.

At the time, I'd wanted my tour guide to go further, to make these connections, but I understood why he didn't. It is a perhaps a hard sell to make people think about the ways this still continues. It is easier to shame the past. It is easier to look back and find our morality.

My father's never been interested in the past, at least not of ours. Films about African American history, about slavery or the Civil Rights Movement, he'll pass over despite their popularity. "I don't need to see it when I lived through it," he explained once when I told him about *Selma*.

"What about to remember history?"

"I remember it," he responded.

So it was a surprise when the night before I left my father agreed to the suggestion of *Roots* as the evening entertainment. I imagined it was because I would be gone once morning came, making the long journey back to the town where I live.

The *Roots* miniseries has been remade in hope of engaging a new generation with this connection to the past. Every night they've premiered a new episode of the series, and tonight was the third.

My father appeared agitated as we watched it. He periodically got up and walked to the kitchen, first for a glass of water and then again for a snack. "I can't decide what I want," he said out loud.

"Just pick something," I called back.

He asked me if I'd seen his phone. He sifts through the mail on the counter. "You look through any of these coupons? There might be something here you want."

"Yes, dad, come on, and sit back down."

He opened one of the cabinets, settled on a cup of a coffee. I listened as the water heated up in the machine and finally, realizing my father would not stop until I changed my mind, reached for the remote and paused the show.

"What are you doing? Why'd you stop it?"

"I thought I'd wait for you."

"You, that's all right. You can keep going."

"I'll wait."

He finished with the coffee and settled into the seat on the sofa. "Okay, okay," he said, before taking a long sip from the mug. "Go ahead and hit play now. I'm ready."

My father relied on his memory of the original to orient him, but still asked questions, mainly to keep himself engaged. By the time a commercial came he'd fallen asleep, and I had to wake him back up after the break was over.

"So you're off tomorrow," he said, opening his eyes again. It came out as a statement, a reminder to himself that I was once again leaving. This has been our story for as long as I can remember. It is one of distance and loss, of leaving and goodbyes. He left my mother and he left me, and because of this I have left him ever since.

"Yeah, I'm going to drive back to Caswell County first though. To mom's house."

He seemed surprised by this, as if he'd forgotten I told him this was what I was doing "Maybe I should come with you? It's been years, decades even, since I've seen that house. I'm curious as to what it looks like now."

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“What not?”

“There’s some other stuff I have to do. I need to go it alone, I think.”

“Yeah, yeah I figured.” He looked up at the screen. “Your mother had a lot of problems.”

“I know.”

He looked over at me, waiting for me to go further. We’ve hedged around this conversation a hundred times over the years, each of us hypothesizing, getting closer to what the truth of her life was, while neither of us fully wanting to admit what happened. He refused to be the one to say it first, wanting instead for me to relieve him of the burden, but instead I kept quiet.

“I loved her though,” he said quietly. “I don’t think I can watch this,” he finally admitted before standing up. “I’m sorry, I might watch it another day but I can’t right now.”

“It’s okay.”

He explained how he had work to do in his office. Contracts to finish. Since it was late, he went ahead and told me goodnight. “I guess I’ll just check you out in the morning,” he said before leaving.

I remained in the living room. I turned the volume down low so as not to disturb my father in the other room. For a brief while longer I tried to focus, but my attention was elsewhere. We can love people and they still be damaged, I thought. We can love them and that love could be everything and yet still not be enough. Before this story ends I must tell you that I loved my mother. I loved her, too.

In the episode of *Roots* we tried to watch, it follows the story of Kizzy, Kunta Kinte's daughter. Kizzy gets auctioned off to a poor farmer by the name of Tom Lea who, upon her first night there, rapes her after she declines his sexual advances. Kizzy becomes pregnant with his son who will be known as Chicken George for his skill training his master's birds for cockfighting. There's a scene in the film where Chicken George and his father have traveled for one such fight and Lea bets on Chicken George's freedom. Right before the fight begins, they announce each of the opponents. "Tom Lea of Caswell County," a man's voice booms in the film.

I've said goodbye to Eddie and am sitting in my car deciding on where to go when I check my phone and see my father's called, most likely to check in and see if I'm okay. Because I don't know where to go next, I call him back in an attempt to stall my decision.

"Just wanted to make sure you were doing okay," he says after he hears my voice.

"Yeah, I'm fine. I saw the house. It wasn't what I expected."

He doesn't ask me to clarify what I mean, instead wonders when I'm heading out.

"Soon," I say.

He tells me that he decided to watch the miniseries. He's been watching it for most the day, actually, starting from the beginning and had now finished the episode we'd started to watch together before he decided he'd had enough.

"In the film they talk about Tom Lea."

"Yeah, the farmer. The father of Chicken George."

"Did you know they mention Caswell? Tom Lea of Caswell County?"

I had not picked up on it the first time and so he describes the scene and then I remember. “Yeah, I guess it was Caswell.”

“Tom Lea of Caswell County,” he repeats. “Isn’t that something? Hey, your grandmother. Wasn’t her last name Lea?”

“Yeah, it is. Lea. I’m pretty sure it is.”

“That’s a pretty small coincidence, don’t you think?”

“I hadn’t thought about it.”

“There’s got to be some connection,” he says. “You should look into that while you’re there.”

“I mean, maybe. I don’t know.”

I don’t tell my father that Lea is a popular surname in the county. The idea of researching it would be like finding a needle in a haystack, and there is only so much time. My father though is convinced it is a thread worth pursuing. What are the odds? He tells me. Her family could have been his slaves, he says, and I tell him yes, maybe, probably so.

Once there was a black woman who had a relationship with a white man. They had two, maybe three children, and one of them took his name. The answer to how this was possible, and why she did it, is one I’d sought to answer.

“You might never know the story, and you’re going to have to be okay with that,” my godmother used to tell me. It was always there in the undertone of her responses, it was her way of saying maybe I should let this go.

I did not understand her response then, but I thought of it as I stood in an unlocked room of the public library. I'd decided before I left I'd at least come here, thinking I'd just see what I could possibly find.

The woman at the desk brought me to this room. "We keep a lot of the sort of stuff you're looking for here." She goes to one of the shelves and pulls a couple history books about the county and places them on the table. "This should get you started," she says, then leaves me among the collection.

I glance at the books before turning my attention toward the shelf where they came from. I look at the empty space and then shift my gaze toward what's left, and right there, as if it was waiting for me, is a book of the Caswell County Bible records.

Often located between the Old and New Testaments, these Family Bibles contained "Records" or a "Register" section where the names of births, marriages and deaths were written among the pages. The front of the Bible could also include family relationships.

The book is a typed account from all the Bible records they found. Because it is not the actual thing I wonder what, if anything, could be left out. Still, I take the book off the shelf and hold it in my hands. If I were to turn and look, to see his name among these pages, to see what he left behind, I know that the answer would not be enough. I know that even if the children were there, were at least named there, it would still not be enough. Like with everything, it will lead me to more questions, more possibilities to the way things were. In the end, what would it change? I will never fully know the story between them, not all of it, like I will never know the story of my mother.

I wonder what our descendants will say about us a hundred years from now, when we are all buried in the family plots of our ancestors or are dust dissolved into the sea, when we are long gone from being able to answer for our actions. Will there be the same questions? *Was it possible there was love? Was it possible they were good? Was the world all filled with hate?*

I wonder what they will say about the people we once were.

After the library I get in my car, realizing there is one more place left for me to go.

“We went down the road a long time ago,” I remember my godmother telling me. “We all went there as a family because I wanted the rest of them to see it, at least once in their life to see it, and we drove down a little ways and—I don’t know, maybe it was because it was close to dusk and this orange glow had settled over the land, or maybe it was because I knew the place’s history and I had all that on my mind, but we started down it and I said we had to turn around. I couldn’t do it. An uneasiness settled over me and I didn’t want to go further, didn’t want to see anymore, so we turned around and headed back home.”

I drive west from Yanceyville on Highway 158. I’ve entered this address in my navigation system and listen as the voice guides me there.

“You’ve arrived at your destination,” the voice says as I pass by the familiar placard.

“What? That can’t be right.”

Behind the placard is nothing but dense trees. There's a narrow gravel driveway but from my view I can't see where it leads. On the other side is another road, the way more clear, but I'm not sure if it's the right way either.

I try the one by the placard first. It takes me several attempts of driving back and forth along the highway before I'm able to make the turn. I pull in and ease on the brakes, inching forward, but the closer I move along the closer the brush seems to get to my car, the road begins to narrow further, and it is when I can feel my car slowly start to decline down a hill that I finally stop.

I'm tempted to get out my car and walk it. If I had to guess I'd suspect that somewhere further down this road is Bedford Brown's home. Just a little further past these trees, beyond what I can't see.

I call my godmother again. "Do you remember where it was? Like how far from the placard?"

"It should be right there. Right off it."

"Were there a lot of trees? Because I'm down here and I'm sort of stuck and I'm not sure if this is right. There's this other road but it's not dirt there's gravel."

"That's probably it, but I can't tell you exactly. I mean, it was long ago. I'd have to be there and see it to be sure."

"Okay."

I edge my car back out, slowly making my way to the highway. When it's clear I back out and then make a quick left turn down the gravel road opposite me, and then I stop.

I am not sure if this is it either. To my right is a small brick house that sits close to the highway, but in front of me on both sides of this road is mostly land.

Taking a breath, I press lightly on the gas, going slow so as to limit the amount of dust that clouds the air caused from my tires against the gravel. After a few moments I see two abandoned structures—what look to once be a barn and a tobacco shed. Both are rusted and falling apart. A cluster of round hay bales is in front of them, blocking the entrance. I drive a little further before I stop my car and get out. I walk to the edge of the field, thinking maybe I'll venture toward the barn, but the thought of rattlesnakes makes me step back on the gravel.

I try to picture it, what it could have looked like then. The rows of tobacco leaves in full bloom. Their homes far off in the background. My ancestors worked this land. This land lost but now found again. They farmed it and they died on it. I know that this will be the closest I'll ever get to a piece of them and an understanding of the life they lived. It is not mine, will never be mine, but I am here. I made it and I am here.

The sun begins its slow descent into the horizon. The heat settles down. It will be dark soon and I should leave before it comes.

"I thought this would feel different," I say out loud.

And yet, I continue waiting, despite knowing there are no answers here, just dirt and grass. Heat. Miles of what appear to be mostly empty fields. Abandoned structures on the fringe of collapse.

"All right. Okay," I say, sighing. "Enough now."

I'm about to go back to my car when I hear a noise, the sound of a tractor in the distance. I look and far off I can see a man plowing. He does not appear to notice me

standing there, so focused is he on his task at hand. I don't move even though I know I should. I'm trespassing, having gone too far down off the highway. There's no reason for me to be here standing alone on a gravel road looking out to nowhere, and whatever reason can't be explained in the brief seconds it would take to get him to hear me. I know the ways in which this story could end. Still, I continue standing there, believing somehow if I don't move maybe he will not see, will eventually turn in another direction.

But he does notice me, and my heart skips as our eyes meet, and I don't know why but I raise my hand. It's instinctual, and it's only after it's up in the air that I quickly recognize my mistake.

"I'm sorry, I was just—" I shout, stopping myself before I can finish.

He can't hear me over the noise of the tractor so he shuts off the engine. I watch him stand, and even though I now have the urge to turn away, to get back in my car and go, I wait.

There's a part lodged deep inside of me that believes in this moment's significance, believes if he would just reach out his hand—he may not be the world but he is someone, and his action, however small, feels to me to hold an entire history within it.

I know that the past does not belong to us, that there is nothing we can do with what's already been done, but there is now. Now as I hold my hand in the air, as I look out at this man. Do you see me? Do you finally see? There is just this moment as I stand here with my arm outstretched, my heart full of foolish hope, waiting to see what you will do.

A Plumb, Falling

A plumb line is made by taking a weight and tying it to a cord. The weight, once suspended, makes a true vertical line. It is a standard to measure what one has built. Plumb lines were once used in construction to make sure that the walls were level. They were used to “plumb” a wall. It is an old tool, one used throughout the world and throughout history. The ancient Egyptians used plumb lines in the construction of their pyramids. The “scales” pictured in hieroglyphs were plumb lines. On each side one can see the weight hung by strings.

In the book of Acts of the Bible, God uses a plumb line. “What do you see?” he asked Amos as he showed him the plumb. For God, justice and righteousness were the plumb line. It was God’s scale, this line, measuring our own sins we’ve cast upon one another. In the passage of the Bible, the Israelites have failed to live to God’s grace and his law. “I am setting a plumb line among the people. I will spare them no longer,” he explained, telling Amos that he would no longer overlook their sins.

Here I am, standing outside in the cold, waiting in line for tickets for the Smithsonian National Museum of African American History and Culture, the only museum dedicated to documenting the life, history, and culture of African Americans. It’s only been over four months since the museum opened and timed entry passes are completely sold out, but their website says there are a select amount of passes held during the week for those who those willing and able to visit later in the day. This morning I’d called the museum to ask about the likelihood of getting one of these tickets. “Is it worth

it all to try?" I'd asked the guy who answered the phone. "Or would I just be completely wasting my time?"

"We can't guarantee anything," he told me. "You said it's just you?"

"Yeah, just me. No one else."

"Maybe, you'll get in," he said, "but really there's no telling."

I have flown to D.C. for a conference but I have left it for this, to walk a mile through downtown D.C. in search of the museum. I get there an hour before the time the tickets will be passed out and there is already a line. I head to the back of it and wait.

A black couple soon comes and stands behind me in line. Before long, they are talking to the next group of people that have joined us.

"I'm so excited about this I don't know what to do with myself," I hear the woman say.

"We came from New York. What about you?"

"Philly."

"I can't believe it's sold out."

"Yeah, we tried in December and I think when I looked there were tickets and then I checked again and suddenly they were all gone. It's crazy."

Because I keep glancing back, one of them asks me where I'm from. "That's far!" he says when I tell him.

"No kidding," I say, and we both laugh.

The great chain of being, or "ladder of being," was a hierarchical structure believed to have been decreed by God to represent all matter and life. It's a taxonomy

formed in a continuous line, a ranking of the natural order of the simplest to the most complex forms. Implicit in the understanding of the great chain of being is the premise that every existing thing in the universe has its own place—God at the top of the chain, followed by angels, then humans, and animals, continuing on. It is meant to be an order of the hierarchy of all existence.

Pseudoscientists of scientific racism drew from the great chain of being for their arguments. If there was an order, a hierarchy, then there were those that were superior and those that were below them.

In 1906, Ota Benga, a Congolese pygmy, was put on display at the Bronx Zoo. He was made to carry around chimpanzees and other apes. For the audience watching, he shot targets with a bow and arrow, wove twine, and wrestled with an orangutan. Eugenicist and zoo director William Hornaday labeled Ota, ‘The Missing Link,’ believing him to be the last missing link of the evolution chain. “Our race, we think, is depressed enough, without exhibiting one of us with the apes,” said the Reverend James H. Gordon, superintendent of the Howard Colored Orphan Asylum in Brooklyn. “We think we are worthy of being considered human beings, with souls.”

In the United States, scientific racism was part of the justification for slavery. It was easier to commit an atrocity upon someone when one believed that they were lower, or when they believed that they were not even human at all.

It is getting close to time for the museum to hand out the tickets. Like me, others shift their from side to side, anxiously waiting for them to start.

An older black woman comes up to the line. “Anyone here on their own? Anyone here alone?” she asks toward the crowd.

“I am,” I say immediately. “I’m alone.”

“I have a ticket for you then,” she says, showing me the printed out paper in her hand. “You can just take this and go right on in.”

I stare back at her. She sees my hesitancy and tells me she’s a docent at the museum. “I’m not trying to trick you here. I assure you this is a real ticket. All you have to do is take it and go.”

“We’ll hold your spot in line,” the white couple in front of me says. “It’s really okay. Go ahead.”

I still wait, unsure, too afraid to miss my shot.

“Go,” they reiterate, and finally, with nervous steps I step out of line, take the woman’s ticket, and go toward the museum’s entrance.

The Mason Dixon line was created between 1763 and 1767 when two men, astronomer Charles Mason and surveyor Jeremiah Dixon, set out to settle a border dispute involving the land between the British colonies of Maryland, Pennsylvania, and Delaware. They constructed a demarcation line among four states, creating the Mason-Dixon line, a cultural border that eventually came to signify the states that permitted slavery versus those that prohibited it.

In order to construct the line, Mason and Dixon lay markers and later cairns through all kinds of terrain and weather conditions. At night, they would take astronomical observations of the stars to guide their way, lying on their backs as they

looked through a telescope to measure the angles between the stars and the meridian, the due north line.

Slaves, too, looked to the North Star. Unlike other stars, the North Star always remains in a fixed position, always pointing north. The surrounding cluster of stars creates a picture, what they thought looked like a dipper. They called it the Drinking Gourd, named after the hollowed out gourds used to dip and drink from water. On the cup's edge were two stars that always pointed to the North Star, and in following that line of sight they found the star that would guide their way as they made their passage north of the Mason Dixon to deliverance.

The museum is separated into two sections, the lower three levels detail African American history and the upper floors are of African American culture. Not wanting to wait, the people around me head for the escalators up to see what's there first.

I take the escalator down and am in in a large room where lines are quickly forming. Entrance into the history exhibit has to be spaced out due to the amount of people who've come. I shuffle along with the others to try and find the line's end.

There are rows and rows of people filling up the entire space. They are senior citizens and they are children. They are in wheelchairs and crutches. They are being pulled along by their parents' arms. As we wait they are sharing their own stories about what they know of the museum, about what it has meant to be black in this country, about Obama's hope. I look at them and I realize that they have been witness to so much of what lies ahead, and yet there is such a collective feeling of joy, of celebration for something long overdue, and standing in the midst of them I am overwhelmed. This will

be the moment that gets me, not anything that I would experience later, but this—of being here and being able to share this moment with all of them.

I can feel the ache in my throat beginning, and I have to leave the line before it comes. I find the bathroom, go into the stall, and begin to cry. It takes me a few minutes to get myself together, and when I open the door I see a woman standing by the sink. She looks at me through the mirror's reflection and tries to smile.

"Are you okay?" she asks.

"Yes," I start, my face flushed hot with embarrassment. I'm just—"

"I know, it's a lot," she interrupts, and I realize she believes I've already gone through the exhibit. She takes some tissues from her bag and hands them to me. "Look, we're here, aren't we? Just remember that if it gets too much again. We're here and we're going nowhere."

We are here, I think. We have survived because survival has been etched deep within our bones, and after everything that's been done to us we are still here.

There are so many barriers, both imaginary and visible, between ourselves and in our lives. Places we are and aren't allowed to go. The different demarcations of our existence. Our lives, our history, is a compendium of these lines that have been created. For instance, there's the assembly line of slaves—as they marched onto boats, as they marched to be sold, with their bodies on the ships lined side by side, no room to move, no room to breathe.

Or later, in the fields as they worked, their backs toward the sun as they picked cotton and tobacco, chopped sugar stalks.

A stake of wood nailed to another to form a cross, placed in the ground and lit on fire.

Or a rope falling down, perpendicular to the tree from which it hangs.

Eugene Williams was just eighteen years old when he swam south of the invisible line of the Lake Michigan's beach, not understanding that the 25th Street beach was for blacks while the 29th Street beach was for whites. When he ventured on the other side of this boundary, whites saw and threw stones. He drowned in the lake, his death a catalyst for five days of race riots that followed.

In our present day, you can draw a single line on the map of certain cities marking the racial divide between whites and blacks. It is Eight Mile Road in Detroit, or Main Street in Buffalo, or Delmar in St. Louis, otherwise known as the Delmar Divide. It is US 275 in Tampa, and US 49 in Shreveport. It is the railroads in Pittsburgh and Hartford. These barriers have been stitched into the fabric of our country, the railroads and highways the thread forever separating us.

We are ushered inside the exhibit, but really what has happened is that we have moved into another smaller room. A guide stands near a glass elevator. He guides a group of thirty in at a time, and once the elevator has descended he begins his speech to the new crowd that's formed.

"Congratulations, this will be the last line you'll have to wait in today."

The crowd laughs in response. The guide then tells us that the history exhibit is over a mile long and that there are no bathrooms until we get to the end. "Go before you

start. Make sure you have tissues,” he says. “A lot of what you’ll be viewing will be difficult, so prepare yourselves.”

The elevator comes and I go in with the next group. We pack inside, the doors close, and we go down.

“Look,” a child says, pointing, and my eyes follow to what she sees. Now I understand the reason for the glass. As we go down we can look at the walls and see a timeline, counting backward through our history.

“1900, 1800, 1700,” we all read out loud, and my heart whispers say her name. As everyone counts my heart aches in the knowledge of the Wilmington riots, of Bloody Sunday, of the bus boycotts and lunch counter sit-ins. I think of prison chain gangs, of poll taxes and literacy tests. Of the cotton is king fields. Of necks broken from the tightening of a noose.

I am thinking of the swing low sweet chariot roads that took us home to freedom. I am thinking of all we risked and all we lost.

1900, 1800, 1700, 1600, 1500.

The elevator stops at 1400. The doors open, and what we’ve waited so long for has now, finally, begun.

My whole life there has been a story I’ve borne within me and it begins like this—with a child who in the bathtub would scrub her skin raw until it bled, with a mother who also hated her skin, who endured an unspeakable pain and died with the secret of it still within her, with a family that harbored decades of shame, with a grandfather whose religion couldn’t save him from himself, with a great-grandfather who

was light enough to pass who had a father he had to pass in order to get to know, and lastly with a great-great-grandmother—a woman born in slavery, who became free, and during Reconstruction had a relationship with a white man, a farmer, and who gave birth to several of his children, managing somehow to have one of them carry the father's name so that decades later, over a century, someone, me, would be able to look to this name and know.

I'm told that when this son became older and wanted to see his father, he'd travel the distance to the town where there he passed for white, and no one was the wiser. His identity was categorized in the physical spaces he inhabited. Black in one, white in another. With a literal crossing he shifted identities, how he acted in the world, and what I imagine, what he believed about himself.

The one-drop rule of the time dictated that if you had any black ancestry in you at all, you were black. You could look white, could pass for white, but if it was found that any of your ancestors were black, you were black as well. They came up with other classifications—terms like mulatto, quadroon, octaroon, to describe the sons and daughters who came to be born that looked like their own—but these classifications were meant as further distinctions between what for them was a central distinction. They were not white, something different, something *Other*.

So within this prism of understanding imagine two families. One a white family, another one black. Imagine their children—white children and black children connected by blood with few, if any, racial distinctions between them.

My mother once told me a story of the time they integrated the schools. “They brought all the black students into the auditorium with the white ones, and all the black students went to the back of the bleachers and sat together, and all the white students were in the front, and it was us and it was them,” my mother said. “We were here and they were there.”

Years after her death I will relay this story to my godmother—my mother’s cousin who grew up with her on neighboring family farms. “What makes you bring this up?” she asked.

“I don’t know,” I said. “It’s just been stuck in my mind for some reason. Perhaps with everything in the news.”

She pauses for a moment before responding. “I remember that too. After all these years it’s really the one thing I also remember—that image of the auditorium waiting for them to call each of us down from our different groups and tell us where we should go. It’s funny that between us it’s what stuck in both of our minds.”

“Why is that do you think?”

“Good question,” she said. “You know, it’s not that there were so few of us that we grouped together. There was actually a good mix between black and white students at every school, and we were about fifty-fifty, and I don’t remember anyone telling us to sit together. By the time I got to the auditorium that’s just what it was. So who was the first person? Did someone separate the first group of black students and tell them where to sit? Or did they just sit in the back because that’s where they assumed we belonged?”

I could spend hours telling you of the museum—of each one of the displays and what they entailed, of the hours it took traveling up the ramps through the documented centuries. I could describe to you each piece that brought to the forefront the history I have learned and made me see the realities of the stories I'd been told. The cowskin whip lashed on the backs of slaves, or at fragment of rope used to lynched Matthew Williams. The "Colored Only" and "White Only" signs designating segregation. The stool from Woolworth's, Harriet Tubman's shawl, Carlotta LaNier's dress. When I see the Southern Railway Company Car I am able to reach out and put my hand on the exterior.

Before I leave, there is one last line I wait in—a line to go see the Emmett Till exhibit. As I wait, I listen to two students discuss who Emmett was. "Did you hear about how she lied?" one of them says.

"What?"

"It just came out like last week. The woman who said he whistled at her. She lied about it all."

Everyone is quiet once we get to the exhibit, once we're inside the space that holds his casket. I realize too late that I wasn't prepared for this, and so I leave—walking away from the exhibit and toward the exit. I have seen everything by now, and there is no need for me to go back, no need for me to even look back as I find my way out.

I open the glass doors and suddenly I am back where I started, in the main area where I waited with hundreds of others to go in. This feels symbolic, this circling back I've done, but I will not catch this meaning until long after I have left the museum.

They say that progress is cyclical, that it is not a straight, solitary line, despite what we may want to believe, but it instead happens in waves.

What unsettles me when I think of this is to imagine what is coming, because with every moment of progress there comes a moment of backlash. We have made progress and now we are seeing the tide of it recede. So I look at what's come before and I wonder how much will be repeated. I worry that when it comes I will not be ready. I will not be strong enough to weather any of it.

But, I'm told that another way of looking at this is to understand that in order to finally get to some sort of end there must be an examination of the beginning. We must understand the past if there will be any attempt to move forward.

I take this weight and hold it in my hands. I feel its heaviness as the muscles in my fingers relax, letting it slip and fall through the air. If the weight is heavy enough it will sink straight down, but it may not. If it doesn't, I'll watch as it swings. Waiting. Believing that it will steady itself eventually.

VITA

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