

1-1-2009

Of all that is seen and unseen

Jordan Adelle Doherty

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/td>

Recommended Citation

Doherty, Jordan Adelle, "Of all that is seen and unseen" (2009). *Theses and Dissertations*. 3351.
<https://scholarsjunction.msstate.edu/td/3351>

This Graduate Thesis - Open Access is brought to you for free and open access by the Theses and Dissertations at Scholars Junction. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of Scholars Junction. For more information, please contact scholcomm@msstate.libanswers.com.

OF ALL THAT IS SEEN AND UNSEEN

By

Jordan Adelle Doherty

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of
Mississippi State University
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master's Degree in Arts
in English
in the Department of English

Mississippi State, Mississippi

August 2009

OF ALL THAT IS SEEN AND UNSEEN

By

Jordan Adelle Doherty

Approved:

Becky Hagenston
Associate Professor
(Director of Thesis)

Donald Shaffer
Assistant Professor
(Committee Member)

Greg Bentley
Associate Professor
(Committee Member)

Richard Patteson
Professor of English
Director of Graduate Studies

Gary Myers
Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences

Name: Jordan Adelle Doherty

Date of Degree: August 8, 2009

Institution: Mississippi State University

Major Field: English

Major Professor: Becky Hagenston

Title of Study: OF ALL THAT IS SEEN AND UNSEEN

Pages in Study: 82

Candidate for Degree of Master's Degree in Arts

Of All That Is Seen and Unseen explores the concept the Southern literary identity and how that tradition is fading from modern literature while engaging in a dialogue with Flannery O'Connor, William Faulkner, and Eudora Welty. However, it proposes that contemporary writers can recover Southern literary identity through three identifying elements of southern literature: family, land, and religion. The chapters focus on the tragic death of a beautiful, young girl and are told from different narrative perspectives. The genre is Southern Gothic and follows the Faulknerian model of creating a fictional place in Mississippi. The chapters are interrelated and feature reoccurring characters.

DEDICATION

This thesis is for Joshua, who gave me the same advice that was given to Faulkner, who listened to me when I was frustrated, who believed in me when I wouldn't.

And, in the tradition of Stephen King, for you dear reader.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Thank you to Becky Hagenston for being my thesis advisor and cheerleader. I have really enjoyed working with you in and out of workshop. I have much appreciation in my heart for Dr. Shaffer for bringing me the bottle of water at the defense and for all of his comments, critical insights, and suggestions. And finally, I also wish to thank Dr. Bentley for his many class discussions of identity, which partly inspired me to take on this subject. Thanks to my past writing teachers, such as Dr. Bishop who introduced creative writing to me when I was only as sophomore in college and Dr. Vice for being an encouraging, quirky teacher who told me to write about something besides high school. Moreover, thank you to all my family and friends who tolerated my grumpiness when I hadn't slept in over three days or more.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
DEDICATION.....	ii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	iii
CHAPTER	
I. INTRODUCTION: CREATING SOUTHERN LITERARY IDENTITY, A SENSE OF PLACE AND CHARACTERS IN FICTION.....	1
A Sense Of Place	8
Creating Characters With Situational Fiction And Desire.....	13
Works Cited	18
II. THE HUNGER.....	20
III. OF ALL THAT IS SEEN AND UNSEEN.....	24
IV. BLOOD IS BLOOD	43
V. LAND OF MY FATHERS.....	60
VI. JAMIE.....	79

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION: CREATING SOUTHERN LITERARY IDENTITY, A SENSE OF PLACE AND CHARACTERS IN FICTION

“What has gotten into you, son? Have you forgotten who you are?” – Blood Is Blood

I have always been fascinated with Gothic literature, specifically Poe and Hawthorne. I loved to read about the supernatural frights of the spirit of death at a ball, the man hell bent on revenge, and the Devil dealing souls. I admired the dense language, the lengthy sentence structure, and sophisticated use of allegory. The tragic plots these authors created captured my imagination, and I always found myself contemplating their stories for days after I put them down. I would think to myself, “What if I came face to face with the Devil?” or “What would it be like to be so driven by revenge that I would brick a living man in a stone casket?” Both Poe and Hawthorne are two of my main influences, but I cannot credit my inspiration entirely to them. *Wuthering Heights* convinced me that the gothic and the romantic elements in literature belong together, and it inspired me to create a place for my collection as real as the moors. More recently, I have discovered a love for contemporary authors such as Flannery O’Connor and Eudora Welty, as well as the staple of Southern fiction, William Faulkner. Their stories, much like Poe’s and Hawthorne’s, left me debating their meaning long after I read them, so much so that I felt the stories warranted a second read, maybe even a third, and eventually, countless re-readings for pure pleasure. In addition, reading Stephen King’s

story “The Man In the Black Suit,” as well as his craft memoir *On Writing*, I have come to admire him as well for his ability to be the everyman’s writer. I am also a big fan of the post-modernists, such as Vladimir Nabokov and Paul Auster, examine the concept of identity. All of these authors, and many, many more, shaped me as a writer, but these few are the pillars of my philosophy on writing and have directly influenced me during the composition of the collection *Of All That Is Seen and Unseen*.

A common move by many post-modernist writers is to pay tribute in some shape or fashion, directly or indirectly, to their inspirations or to other works within their own canon. Nabokov is notorious for doing this. In *Pale Fire*, within the fictional poem “Pale Fire” by fictional poet John Shade, Nabokov makes many references to himself, one of the most prominent ones being a reference to “Hurricane Lolita” which is quite obviously to his cult, controversial, hit novel *Lolita*, which “was a year of tempests” (Nabokov 58). In addition, in *Lolita*, Nabokov also references Edgar Allen Poe’s poem “Annabelle Leigh.” When Nabokov intrudes upon his own fictional narrative, it is only to remind his readers that there is only one true identity behind all of the characters in his novels, and that is the author. In the same respect, in his *New York Trilogy*, Paul Auster pays homage to writers who have come before him, incorporating many references to them throughout the text. He directly references Milton when Quinn searches for Peter Stillman, Sr.’s dissertation. When Quinn meets with Peter Stillman, they talk about *Don Quixote*.

The idea of referencing one’s inspirations within a literary text struck me as a tradition I would like to participate in with my collection of short stories, *Of All That Is Seen and Unseen* because I feel it shows how a specific writer identifies himself or

herself within the canon. All of my references cite writers who have helped to form me as a writer. For instance, Angela Hester's name is not only a common surname to the people of the actual place of Nettleton, Mississippi, but Hester also references Hester Prynne from Hawthorne's *The Scarlet Letter*. Moreover, Angela wears a pink ribbon similar to the one Faith wears in Hawthorne's "Young Goodman Brown." In addition, my Devil wears a three-piece business suit, which is a reference to Stephen King's "The Man In the Black Suit," which pays homage to "Young Goodman Brown." These are some of the more direct references within the collection, but there are also more subtle ones. In *Blood is Blood*, I reference Flannery O'Connor, who raised peacocks, when Marco describes his mother leaving the jail cell "proud as a peacock." Edgar Allen Poe is referenced with the "tragic, untimely death of a beautiful young girl," namely Audrey's cousin, Angela. Even though I do borrow from the post-modernists in terms of referencing inspirations to create my authorial identity, I also borrow from them on a larger scale, mainly in terms of theme.

One common theme that runs throughout all post-modern literature is the idea of identity- how it is constructed, how it is deconstructed, and how it can be reconstructed. For Nabokov, this idea is expressed in *Pale Fire* in the form of the insane narrator Charles Kinbote, literary critic to John Shade. Nabokov presents Kinbote posing as the exiled King of Zembla, but he constantly drops hints throughout the novel that Kinbote is not the person the audience perceives him to be, slowly deconstructing Kinbote's identity while Kinbote is trying to construct his identity throughout the novel as the King of Zembla. The most telling passage is at the conclusion of the novel when Nabokov amalgamates all the possible identities of Kinbote: "I may turn up yet, on another

campus, as...a writer in exile...I may...cook up a stage play, an old-fashioned melodrama with three principles: a lunatic who intends to kill an imaginary king, another lunatic who imagines himself to be that king, and a distinguished poet” (Nabokov 301). In *The New York Trilogy*, Auster uses the theme of doubles to create confusion about identity. For example, in *City of Glass*, Auster plays with the idea of identity when Quinn pretends to be the fictional detective Paul Auster stating, “listen to me: My name is Paul Auster. That is not my real name” (49). I particularly liked this idea, and I began to ask myself: what is the Southern identity, and how do we, as Southerners, construct it? Of course, since Faulkner is considered a pillar of contemporary Southern literature, I immediately turned to him for an answer.

Faulkner, unfortunately, asserts a disappearance of Southern identity. In his 1933 introduction included with *The Norton Critical Edition of The Sound and The Fury*, Faulkner writes, “But the South...is dead, killed by the Civil War” (Introduction 229). In fact, he laments the industrialization of the South, stating that by having lost the war, the South has lost most of its heritage. Faulkner predicts the assimilation of the South into the North and proposes that the contemporary South is “known whimsically as the New South...but it is not the south” (Introduction 229). He expresses the idea that this “New South” is going to be made up of nothing more than “a land of Immigrants who are rebuilding towns and cities into replicas of towns and cities in Kansas and in Iowa and in Illinois” (Introduction 229). The South, then, must strive to remember where it has come from and keep an eye on where it is headed. It should be wary of adopting any other region’s values. However, Faulkner is not the only Southern writer who believes in the declining Southern identity. Flannery O’Connor and Eudora Welty both agree with him.

In O'Connor's book *Mystery and Manners*, she expresses the same sentiments as Faulkner and elaborates on them when she claims, "the present state of the South is one wherein nothing can be taken for granted, one in which our identity is obscured and in doubt. In the past, the things that have seemed to many to make us ourselves have been very obvious things, but now, no amount of nostalgia can make us believe they will characterize us much longer" (57). The "things" O'Connor speaks of are both good and bad qualities of the South as shown through the mother and son relationship in her story "Everything that Rises Must Converge." The mother in the story is a woman of the Old South, and she constantly reiterates this fact when she claims, "Your great-grandfather was a former governor of this state... Your grandfather was a prosperous landowner. Your grandmother was a Godhigh" (O'Connor 407). The son is of the New South, and he doesn't share his mother's values or feel proud of his ancestry. Moreover, whereas his mother refuses to let go of their apartment in the good neighborhood, Julian doesn't care for it at all. Julian believes that "everything that gave her [his mother] pleasure was small and depressed him" (O'Connor 405). The mother, who represents the Old South, has very different values than her son, who represents the South after the Civil War and the Civil Rights Movement. In addition to these two different attitudes towards identity, the story is set after integration has taken place, heightening the tension between the two characters. Near the climax of the story, a key conversation reveals the difference in identities when Julian tells his mother that "True culture is in the mind" (409). The mother then rebuts him by claiming, "it's [culture] in the heart... and how you do things and how you do things is because of who you *are*... I care who I am" (410). Here, readers can make a clear distinction between the pre-war and post-war identities. Julian, like the

North, tries to cultivate within his mind the customs and conventions of culture that make up identity whereas his mother claims that culture is something more intuitive and instinctual. O'Connor portrays each side equally; the mother seems like a sweet lady at first, but she constantly makes degrading remarks about African-Americans because of her upbringing. Julian, however, is better able to accept African-American culture than his own culture, and he is very unforgiving of his mother and his heritage. These two characters portray O'Connor's initial point about the Southern identity in doubt; not even a mother and son can understand each other anymore. Thus, the South is gradually losing its identity. But O'Connor, unlike Faulkner, does provide her readers with some hope to recover Southern literary identity:

It [our Southern identity] is not a matter of so-called local color, it is not a matter of losing our peculiar quaintness. Southern identity is not really connected with mocking birds and beaten biscuits and white columns any more than it is with hookworm and bare feet and muddy clay roads...an identity is not to be found on the surface...it is not something that *can* become a cliché. It is not made from the mean average or the typical, but from the hidden and often the most extreme. It is not made from what passes, but from those qualities that endure, regardless of what passes, because they are related to the truth (58).

Indeed, local color stories, such as those of Mark Twain, do not create an identity within literature, and those types of stories easily lend themselves to being called clichés.

Moreover, no amount of Southern "details," such as the mocking birds and biscuits she mentions, are going to create an identity. If one were to take away, for example, the setting of O'Connors' "Everything that Rises Must Converge," the story is still inherently Southern because of the language. For instance, when talking to another Caucasian woman on the bus, the mother says, "I come on the other day and they were as thick as fleas – up front and all through" (O'Connor 410). This sentence is a prime example of

how rich language, filled with vivid colloquialisms and syntactical structure that imitates true Southern speech, gives rise to an inherent identity.

Once I read what these authors had to say about the diminishing Southern identity, I began to ask myself what makes Southerners so unique that they have been able to produce a canon of literature that is distinctly theirs. I explored the idea in terms of questions. The first was: how would the post-modernists, specifically Nabokov and Auster, write stories to answer the question: What is the Southern identity to the contemporary Southerner? My second was: how can I reconstruct and salvage what is left of the old Southern identity (as defined by all the aforementioned) that is still present and relevant to the contemporary South? And I easily had my answer. There are three elements left over from what Faulkner and O'Connor term the Old South that still exist within the "whimsical" New South. They are three questions any Southerner is guaranteed to ask when he or she meets someone new in town: Who is your family? Where are you from? Where do you go to church? These three things are what make up the contemporary Southern identity, a holdover of values from the Old South, and they can all be pared down to one-word answers: family, land, and religion. These three words are the components of contemporary Southern identity, the things that set us apart from all the other regions within the United States. Using these three characteristics as a basis for my stories, I have tried to recover the disappearing Southern identity.

Each of the foundational stories in *Of All That Is Seen and Unseen* explores the night's particular events in relation to a character who constructs his or her identity around one of these elements. In the titular story of the collection, Audrey Jean is a Southern Baptist by her birth, but she finds that her grandmother Nan's religion of

Catholicism suits her best. In “Blood is Blood,” Marco cannot understand why his mother places so much emphasis on family when he feels no ties to his Mexican heritage. Last, Herb cannot escape the curse of his land. However, these elements, these distinctly Southern traits, all overlap and connect to one another. Audrey Jean is rebelling against her mother; she is aligning herself with her family of past years when she chooses to admit to the Devil that she is a Catholic. The curse of Herb’s land has been passed down for generations from father to son. Marco wants to own land and have a family, so he can be better accepted by the Caucasian majority and be considered a Southerner, which he truly feels he is. These characters, their desires, their dislikes, and their conflicts, exemplify what Southern identity consists of within the context of the contemporary South.

A Sense Of Place

The land of my ancestors pulled me back here as if there was an umbilical cord still attached between us. – Herb’s Story

No good Southern writer has ever neglected a sense of place in his or her fiction. In fact, writing about place in the South can be quite daunting because it forces one to write between the extremes. The South is easily caricatured, and, on the opposite end, it has been captured realistically, as in the case of Faulkner’s *The Sound and The Fury* or Harper Lee’s *To Kill A Mockingbird*. However, there is an important, yet subtle distinction between setting and place. For this distinction, I take my definition from Janet Burroway, a prominent writer and craft author, who can provide us with a stereotypical definition of setting.

A textbook that has been very influential for me during the course of my academic career is Janet Burroway's *Writing Fiction: A Guide to the Narrative Craft*, and it shows the difference between place and setting. Burroway's book, which is considered a staple for most creative writing courses and has been my professors' textbook of choice in most of my workshops, defines setting as, "events [that] occur in time and through time; people move in space and through space, and take some attitude or the other" (168). This definition seems to treat setting rather indifferently, as if it is only necessary to have a character be somewhere; otherwise, the writer runs the risk of "leav[ing] us bored or confused" (Burroway 169). While I do agree with this statement, Burroway labels setting as a subcategory of atmosphere, and she does not even begin to consider setting as an important element of the story until she explores setting in symbolic terms. Place, however, is an entirely different concept, one that I feel within the United States is uniquely Southern. To better define place, one needs to look no further than Eudora Welty. With this distinction between setting and place in mind, Welty, a fellow female writer and Mississippian, has much to say about place that I have found useful in creating the fictional Nettleton, Mississippi.

In her book *On Writing*, Welty discusses at length the importance of place within fiction. Place, she writes, is "so modest a one that it can be taken for granted: the location of a [story]; to use a term of the day...it may make the [story] 'regional'" (39). This pitfall of creating a heavily distinguished place is one that I tried to avoid in my earlier stories, and in workshops, I was often faulted for a lack of place. However, I refrained from writing about place altogether because I was afraid of it. I certainly didn't want to write a mere caricature of the South that rambled on meaninglessly about sweet

tea and bygone mannerisms, nor did I want to be termed “regional” in the sense that I was afraid people might pigeonhole me and expect me to write books like the *Dancing in the Piggly Wiggly* series. That idea absolutely horrified me, not because the writing was so mediocre but because the place was so terrible. There are most definitely bad novels and stories set in the South, and true Southerners cringe when they read it. It’s almost as bad as a Northern actor trying to imitate a Southern accent. But Welty reiterates a good point from Henry James that writers should keep in mind: “there are only two types of [stories] good and bad” (39). And any caricatured place most certainly falls under bad fiction by any serious writer’s standards. Now, to create a good sense of place within literature, Welty directs us towards three types of “goodness.”

Welty claims that place is concerned with three goodnesses. First, there is “goodness – validity in the raw material” (40). This is to say that there is truth within the story being told, and that it presents an accurate sense of the place. This first instance of goodness is the writer’s inspiration for the place. Though Welty says in the forward of her linked collection of short stories, *The Golden Apples*, that none of the characters or places are real, she portrays her characters and her place as realistically Mississippian. Snowdie MacClain acts like any other Mississippi woman would after her husband leaves her in “Shower of Gold.” She does not make a big deal; rather, she pretends like it never happened, appealing to people’s sense of Southern manners. Meanwhile, the narrator, Mrs. Rainey, is telling the story of Snowdie to anyone who listens. Mrs. Rainey is the equivalent to the town gossip and the nosey neighbor lady, and Snowdie is the poor girl stuck with children and a sorry husband. Those types of people are real in Mississippi,

and anywhere in the South, and they provide Welty her “raw material” for the first type of goodness.

My inspiration for *Of All That Is Seen and Unseen* comes from the tiny, 3,000 person town called Nettleton ten minutes south of Tupelo, Mississippi on highway forty-five, a place I called home for seven crucial years of my life. When I first moved to the town, the most prominent feature that struck me was how much the town gossiped about each other; yet everyone in town was related to someone. This is an idea I try to portray in every story, and one that I tried to play off with the oratory tradition that exists in the South. In addition, I tried to make my characters realistically reflect current times. This is why I decided to include Marco, an immigrant, because southern cities, even in Mississippi, are seeing an influx of Mexicans. Granted, my hometown of Nettleton was not big enough to sustain an authentic Mexican restaurant, but I can imagine it happening in a couple of years. Moreover, in bigger cities, such as Starkville and Tupelo, there are several Mexican restaurants run by Mexican families. I borrowed my raw material for Marco from a mix of these places.

Next, Welty claims that place is concerned with “the goodness in the writing itself – the achieved world of appearance” (40). This statement means that the writer must have the proper tools to compose a story; a good writer is going to construct a good story by showing his reader, not by simply telling his audience. Welty has an uncanny ability for diction and voice. Staying with the same story and narrator, “Shower of Gold,” Mrs. Rainey springs to life from the very first few sentences when she says, “That was Miss Snowdie MacLain. She comes after her butter, won’t let me run over with it from just across the road.” Again, through very few words, readers understand immediately Mrs.

Rainey to be a snoop and somewhat snotty. However, Welty shows who Mrs. Rainey is through her language; she does not state that Mrs. Rainey is an ever-curious neighbor who is looking for all the latest gossip on Snowdie. I have tried my best to structure my stories in a similar fashion by avoiding telling the reader at all costs. Moreover, I have also tried to make my writing vivid by including colloquialisms and metaphors.

And lastly, the “goodness – the worth – in the writer himself: place is where he has his roots, place is where he stands; in his experience out of which he writes, it provides the base of reference, in his work, the point of view” (Welty 40). This is Welty’s most important point, and the one that appears most prominently within her work. Here, she tells her readers that the author looks at his place as a reference point; it is in the context of the goodness of worth from where the writer decides what is good, what is bad, and what is just. This goodness gives rise to the writer’s values, and the values, in conjunction with the other two forms of goodness, produce a sense of place. As helpful as Welty is in creating place, there are benefits to examining what O’Connor has to say as well.

Flannery O’Connor, another prominent female Southern writer, has made an invaluable point about place within fiction in her essay “Writing Short Stories” when she claims, “an idiom characterizes a society, and when you ignore the idiom... [y]ou can’t say anything meaningful about the mystery of a personality unless you put that personality in a believable and significant social context. And the best way to do this is through the character’s own language” (104). I find this quotation particularly useful in addition to what Welty has said. In the South, we have our own way of speaking; it may be slow and painful to hear, but it is how we communicate.

In my collection, I have tried to imitate and implement the same train of thought as that of Welty and O'Connor for my characters. For instance, even if I had Audrey Jean in the best written southern town, and she speaks like a northerner and measures everything in city blocks and miles instead of minutes, says you all instead of ya'll, the story is not going to feel authentic in terms of place. The character's syntax and diction create a sense of place more than any well-described kudzu vine, more than any sweltering, sticky summer day, more than drinking any mint julep on a wooden wrap around porch. Language gives a place life, and that is why I purposely have included words such as "jee-haw" in the opening story, and syntactical structures, such as "you might could do that," throughout the collection that I hope illustrate our Southern language and help to create place. Setting can only take a story so far, but if a writer truly wants to succeed in creating realistic fiction, especially Southern fiction, he or she needs to create a sense of place.

Creating Characters With Situational Fiction And Desire

"A Catholic? A faithful one?" "Yes." It was the first time I had said it, and I believed it fully. I could only wish I could say it to my mother and anyone else who asked, that I could always say what I thought and what I felt. – Of All That Is Seen and Unseen

When discussing how to compose a story, there are two camps most writers fall into, and they are character and plot. However, I believe most writers agree that character driven stories are far better than plot driven ones. Stephen King, who in some respects could be considered a plot driven writer at times, advocates character driven stories and makes an excellent point about plot when he writes, "distrust plot for two reasons: first because our *lives* are largely plotless, even when you add in all [y]our

reasonable planning; and second, because I believe plotting and the spontaneity of real creation aren't compatible" (159). I agree with this statement; any time I have tried to plot out events before hand, the stories are forced into corners, and they come out stifled and boring. However, when I let the story compose itself, the characters tell the story for themselves. This automatic-narration via character is the type of fiction King urges writers to create, and Flannery O'Connor can further reinforce his point via a character's need for free will.

King says that his characters develop not from plot, but from situations or "what-if" scenarios, which is often how I begin writing my stories and why I find his advice particularly useful. King writes, "The situation comes first. The characters – always flat and unfeatured – come next" (161). He claims that as one writes, the characters begin to dictate the direction of the story. King says that composing a story in this manner is like digging up a fossil. The story is already there, but it has to be unearthed, and it is the writer's job to dig up as much as possible. King claims, "a strong enough situation rends a plot moot" (166). In King's story "The Man in The Black Suit," the situation can be summed up in the following question: What if a young boy goes to the woods and meets the Devil and lives to tell about it? King has no need for a plot driven story with this type of situation because the situation is already more interesting to readers. The Devil is most certainly one of the most appealing characters literature has to offer, and the fact that King's character lived to tell the story about escaping the Devil is exciting as well.

My process of formulating a story is similar to King's. I imagine an interesting situation, and then the characters, through their actions and words, arise from it. With "The Man In the Black Suit," King is participating in a literary tradition, and I sought to

breathe fresh air into this narrative convention. Hawthorne is probably the most famous writer of person-meets-Devil-in-woods story, but there are also others, such as Washington Irving's "The Devil and Tom Walker," and "The Devil and Irv Cherniske" by T. C. Boyle. In each of these stories, the main character is always a male, somewhere from twenties to old age, and he makes a deal with the Devil for money, ultimately leading to some sort of damnation. King improves upon the custom by changing the character's age; his narrator is writing as an old man, but when the narrator met the Devil, he was just a boy. This gap in time gives his narrator a long time to gain perspective on the event and on his life. Moreover, the black-suited Devil was not suave and calculating as he is in most other, older stories; rather, King's Devil is more maniacal and seemingly random.

I tried to add my own flair to this type of situational story. By switching a few minor details, I was able to create a new situation within the same literary tradition. I asked this question: What if it's a young teenage girl who met the Devil, and even during a point of rebellion in her life, she resists his offer and escapes? In the first draft of what was originally titled, "Audrey Jean's Tale," which eventually became "Of All That Is Seen and Unseen," I had a problem because I was going through the motions to achieve a desired effect. Herb was simply included to get Audrey and Marco into the woods, and Marco was only there to get Audrey into the woods. When I revised, I realized I was focusing too much on the plot that I wanted and was forcing to happen. To fix this problem, I focused more on her reason for telling the story and what she gained from the experience of meeting the Devil; as a writer, I finally gave Audrey free will.

Flannery O'Connor would agree with King, but she calls situational fiction by a different name. For O'Connor, a character must have free will. She claims, "free will does not mean one will, but many wills conflicting within one man" (O'Connor 115). To reference "Everything That Rises Must Converge" again, there is a point when Julian experiences a conflicting desire. He loves his mother and wants the best for her, but when she touts her values and shows off her ignorance, Julian wants her dead, and he actually imagines her that way, the thought giving him great pleasure. In typical O'Connor fashion, Julian gets exactly what he wants by the end of the bus ride; his mother is dead, but he no longer desires her death. O'Connor let her character have free will, conflicting desires, the ability to change his mind, and without this notion of free will, her story would not be successful in carrying out its ending. However, I believe that in order to create King's situational character driven fiction or O'Connor's free will type character, a writer must first give his or her character a desire.

The first person to recognize the notion of character as desire can be attributed to Aristotle in *The Poetics*, but Burroway, in *Writing Fiction*, has more recently defined it under a different term, which she calls purpose. Aristotle claimed that "there will be an element of character if what a person says or does reveals a certain moral purpose" (Burroway 99) and he goes on to say that desire can be good or bad. Thus, a disordered desire leads to a bad purpose, and a good desire reveals a good purpose. This desire, or purpose as Burroway likes to call it, is what drives a character to action and speech. Moreover, it is important to give characters desire so that readers "identif[y] or sympathy[ize] ... or judg[e]" the character" (Burroway 99). Readers need to have someone they can latch on to and recognize bits and pieces of themselves in; audiences

like to root for the underdog, they want the addict to recover, they want the teenage girl to escape from the grasp of the Devil. A character's desire is what makes him or her relatable.

For example, in "The Man in the Black Suit," the characters have very specific desires. The boy, who is the old man narrating, the tale first wants to fish, and after he comes across the Devil, he wants out of the woods. Then, the boy wants to know his mother is alive and not dead like the Devil his told him. However, now that he is an old man, he wants to be rid of the memory of the Devil before he dies. This is why the man tells the story. The devil, however, wants to cause the narrator nothing but trouble. He's hungry for the little boy, claiming that a bee sting has already killed his mother, and instead, in a brilliant, child-like move, the young boy offers him his prize fish, the biggest one he caught. Without these desires, be they good or to borrow Aristotle's word, disordered, the story cannot move forward, and the characters cannot move or talk without this driving force. Desire, then, or as Burroway alternately but rightly terms it, purpose, is what gives life to a character, even before speech and actions.

When I first decided to write this collection, I came to the computer with the idea of making a comment about Southern identity in a similar fashion to the post-modernists, composing a series of linked short stories, and exploring the narrative power of point of view. However, through the creation of a strong sense of place influenced by O'Connor and Welty, I have created an entire town to deal with, and the project is turning out to be much larger than I expected. By no means am I finished writing pieces for this collection. As the collection stands, readers cannot truly understand the town's reaction to Angela's death, which I feel is an important story to tell but not one that can be told in just one

story. In fact, the only glimpse of other voices within the town that the reader can find within the current collection is within the two stories narrated in the town's voice. Also, I plan to revise the three base stories more. I feel the story has been told correctly, but I am a writer who likes concise diction and words loaded with emotion and meaning. I strive for the beauty and meaning of sentences like Poe and Hawthorne, only shorter in sentence structure. I intend to revise the collection in a novella format. I would like to include the stories of Old Widow Willow, Deputy Jackson, and a present tense stream of consciousness retelling of "Of All That Is Seen And Unseen." Overall, I feel what I have so far is good, but I think I could still do better. In working on this project, I hope I have helped to recover some of the lost Southern identity. But most of all, I hope that *Of All That Is Seen and Unseen* is entertaining to read and enjoyable by all.

Works Cited

- Auster, Paul. *The New York Trilogy*. New York: Penguin Books, 1990.
- Burroway, Janet. "Long Ago and Far Away: Fictional Place and Time." *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*. 5th ed. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2000. 167-96.
- --. "Book People: Characterization, Part I." *Writing Fiction: A Guide to Narrative Craft*. 5th ed. New York: Addison Wesley Longman, 2000. 99.
- Faulkner, William. "Introduction." *The Sound and The Fury: A Norton Critical Edition*. David Miller ed. 2nd ed. New York: W.W. & Norton Co., 1994. 228-32.
- King, Stephen. *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*. New York: Pocket Books, 2000.
- Nabokov, Vladimir. *Pale Fire*. New York: Vintage International, 1989.
- O'Connor, Flannery. *Mystery and Manners: Occasional Prose*. Robert Fitzgerald and Sally Fitzgerald, eds. New York: Noonday P, 1957.
- --. "Everything that Rises Must Converge." *The Complete Stories*. New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 1971. 405-20.

Welty, Eudora. "Place in Fiction." *On Writing*. NY: Modern Library, 1957.
-- --. "Shower of Gold." *The Golden Apples*. NY: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1947.

CHAPTER II

THE HUNGER

Here are the facts, what we can verify, the things that policemen write down in their reports, what the doctors can attest to, what we know for sure: On October 16, Marco and Audrey Jean drive in his hand-me-down Camaro to play a prank on our village idiot Herb. The trio migrates from the city proper to the outskirts near Roberts' Woods. Herb runs in. Marco runs in. Audrey runs in. Her and Marco come out fine, but Audrey is never the same. She is the one to find Angela Hester dead, body splayed out in the October moonlight with green eyes still open. Upon seeing Audrey so upset, Marco punches Herb. Sherriff Malone arrests him, and Marco is held for a couple of days. Meanwhile, Audrey Jean is sent off to Baptist Memorial Clinic where the good Doctor Ratliff says she is so traumatized by finding her cousin that she develops an anxiety disorder and becomes mute as a result.

We still see her walking around town at night, that mother-of-pearl rosary shining in her hands like miniature moons. She's the only one who knows for sure what happened out there, but she sure as hell ain't talking.

If you ask the kids at school, the story sounds like this: Angela Hester is a good girl. She has a natural mean streak, meaner than a yard dog, but she never really means it. Her mother didn't raise her that way. She hates seeing people upset to the point of

tears, so she always apologizes promptly. Her cousin, Audrey Jean, was always jealous of her. Once, in eighth grade, Audrey tried out for the cheerleading team and didn't make it. But Angela did. That really pisses Audrey off. She refuses to speak to Angela after that. It carries on into high school where things really get catty. Angela gets fed up with Audrey's piss poor attitude and starts turning her girlfriends *and* boys against her. "Audrey's stuck up!" they'd say. Or "Mean, mean, Audrey Jean." And then Angela starts pouring out the family secrets like uncarbinated Dr. Pepper – sweet and juicy. "Audrey Jean ain't got no Daddy. Aunt Sam got pregnant with her when she was eighteen and tried to abort her during the last few months behind her Momma's back. She didn't want Audrey. Audrey wasn't meant to be here." We all believe her.

Audrey is mortified. She takes to skipping lunch and break. After Angela exposes that secret, she never talks to no one. We are just as surprised as the rest of town to learn that Audrey and Marco have a thing going on. Especially since they were out in Roberts' Woods. You only go out to Roberts' Woods if you want some. They must have been getting it on. Angela is already out in the woods smoking some pot with her friends. Audrey and Marco go out to the woods to hook up, and they run into Herb making a sale. They all get tweaked out together and Audrey kills her cousin in the meth haze. We figure Marco does this heroic, manly act to take the blame for her, so he hits Herb taking the attention away from her so she can run. But it didn't matter because she's so upset at killing her cousin, she tries to off herself, to finish what her mother had started sixteen years ago, and when that fails just like the last time, Audrey just stops speaking altogether.

That's just one version, but it don't quite jee-haw. Mr. Switzer down at the Piggly Wiggly tells it a little differently. It goes a little something like this: Angela was a quiet, pretty girl. Town Homecoming Queen, the perfect Southern Belle. Would even put coins from her own purse in her drawer if she came out under tender. Never rude. Always said yessir, no sir, have a nice day. The kind of kid you want your own children to be. One day she doesn't come in to work. I come out and talked to Martha to find out that something's going on down in them damn woods again. Remember being surprised hearing that Angela or Audrey Jean should be there. Not so surprised that one of them Camarena boys was there. Though Marco is the best and least troublesome of the three. He probably pressures Audrey into being more physical with him, takes her out to the woods where Herb is waiting to make a sale to some kid. Only Herb is already messed up pretty bad. He's killed Angela already, (how the hell she got there I can't imagine) and he tries to kill Audrey Jean. Marco hits in her defense. It was only right. Would have done the same damn thing, wouldn't you?

Old Widow Willow, our nosey, crazy cat lady, tells it like this: Marco's a nice boy. He knows his manners well enough being that he ain't from around here. He mows my lawn once every two weeks, and he's always so kind to my cats. Bitty likes him best. They share the same color hair. Now Audrey Jean and Angela, that's a different story. Those two little harlots probably drug that nice boy out there against his will. I imagine they got into a fight over who could have him, and being the nice boy he is, he probably didn't want to pick being that the two girls were family. Those two girls probably went out to the woods to beat the snot out of each other – over a boy! Only they probably

didn't know Herb roams around out there casting spells keeping the curse of Old Man Roberts going. He *is* Roberts' descendant you know. I've said time and time again that man is no good for this town. Sheriff don't want to hear none of it though. And now look. Got a dead girl, a girl who can't talk, a young man in jail, and a whole town uncomfortable. We can't even leave our doors unlocked while we walk to our mailbox anymore. That ain't no kind of way to live.

Some of us blamed it on Old Man Roberts' curse. We knew the woods was haunted, full of the ashes of burned crosses, cemeteries we didn't care to transplant to a proper lot, and bloodshed we'd rather not remember. But we were new people. People far from those stories of the past. Those stories didn't make us who we are. We have new stories to tell. But the ghosts of past times keep seeping their way back into our skins, forcing our mouths to moan for them drawing out our syllabus, slowing our speech. We speak slow down here so they can understand.

For days as the investigation is conducted, we watch from our windows, blinds shut but split apart by our thumbs and pointers because we are hungry. Hungry for the story. We see Sheriff Malone and Deputy Jackson rope off the woods with yellow tape proclaiming the message we already know but cannot heed: Do Not Enter.

CHAPTER III

OF ALL THAT IS SEEN AND UNSEEN

*We believe in one God, the Father, the Almighty,
Maker of Heaven and Earth,
Of all that is seen and unseen
– The Nicene Creed*

I know who, or I should say what, killed my cousin, Angela Hester, out in Roberts' Woods. Some people say it was the meth; others think it was a gunshot. There are even a few who insist that she committed suicide. I may be mute, but I hear, and I know how people in this place talk. But I can say with certainty, Sheriff Malone, that the deathblow was delivered by none of these elements or anything that the autopsy can turn up. The story of how she died is a story that I have reserved for myself and no one else until now. Some stories deserve to be told even if the storyteller doesn't want to or can't tell the tale. Only now have I decided to write it down because Marco Camarena, my Marco, is falsely accused of murdering her, and he is going to stay in prison if I do not tell this story. Even so, Angela's story is just as much mine as it is hers, and I'm going to record it for everyone, so everyone can know the truth about Marco, and my precious words won't be marred through all the gossip this town shares. I'm writing this down so everyone knows that he is real because the explanation of Angela's death is the story of how I met the Devil.

Probably a staple of every po-dunk southern town, especially in Mississippi, is a local legend, a haunted antebellum home, or a cursed piece of land. But for most places, unlike here, the stories are just folktales passed down from generation to generation, bonfire to bonfire. We all know how cursed Dead Man's Curve is. How many towns can claim that their curve has taken fifty-five lives within the past ten years? And it wasn't just careless drivers who died – sure, a few kids who were racing wrecked, and occasionally an old man drunker than old Cooter Brown ran off the road– but more often than not, the people who ate asphalt weren't doing anything out of the ordinary. Good people. Bad people. Black, white, men, women and children, young and old, travelers, leisurely afternoon drivers, locals who lived on that road. Dead Man's Curve didn't discriminate. Deadman's desired just one thing – dead men. As if the hearsay cautionary tales weren't enough, someone in town felt it necessary to provide a bit of spiritual guidance to all who passed by. The sign was a single piece of plywood drilled into the “Caution: Dangerous Curve Ahead” signpost, and it only said one word in thick barn-red spray-paint: REPENT.

Just behind Dead Man's Curve is Roberts' Woods, and it is even more cursed than the road. Almost two hundred years after the Salem Witch Trials ended and before the Civil War had begun, Jason Roberts established the town of New Salem as a hidden cove for his family and loyal witchcraft practitioners. New Salem seemed as normal as any other town. It had a general store, a schoolhouse, but it was missing a church because all the townspeople simply went to the woods to worship their pagan god. They cleared an area at the center of the forest to create an altar space for sacrificing animals to their god. Then, the war barreled through Mississippi and as a byproduct of the battles,

the town burned, but Jason Roberts wouldn't leave behind his beloved land. Roberts died in his flaming town casting a curse on the woods that anyone not of his bloodline would pay with his own blood for the loss of his cove. Of course it became common knowledge that the woods used to extend over Deadman's Curve, but when the city built that road, and they chopped down all those trees and poured the tar right over Roberts' land, it's like the town forgot or something. Like we believed the curse didn't exist anymore. This is why Dead Man's was so insidious, and Roberts' Woods were positively evil. I probably don't need to say all this, but many of us choose not to believe these stories anymore. I feel we need a bit of reminding.

Across from the woods is an old barn, the designated area where all the cool kids go to do their drinking, smoking, racing, and most of all, screwing. Marco and I never ventured out that way because we've been here long enough to understand that we weren't welcome, and that the forces out in that forest are more than we could comprehend. Forces that, although many kids witnessed and even more kids had experienced, they continued denying just like their parents. Rumor had it that the Klan still lurked in the thrush and burned crosses. Folks said that if people listened hard enough, the Klan could be heard chanting like tangible opaque ghosts who were plotting their return to power in town. Once, in algebra, Angela told me that Aunt Tesea, who lives on the outskirts of the woods, lost her dog in them. By the time Aunt Tesea found her beloved terrier, she was too late. In the clearing were naked men and women dancing around a bon fire with the dog's red insides hoisted on a stick, the blood smeared all over their faces and foreheads. Most people in town thought it was the ghost of old man Roberts' come back to protect his land. Some folks in town even said that the Evil One

himself called those woods home and waited for anyone and everyone who set foot inside. Of all the rumors, there was one fact: certain death waited for anyone who treaded down the shaded paths. The town always knew what was out in the woods; no one wanted to say though. Because as long as we don't speak it, it isn't true.

This was how Marco and I passed most of our time – telling tales about Dead Man's and Roberts' Woods just to see who could scare easiest. Needless to say, he won more than he lost. What was even funnier is that sometimes right after we got done telling ghost stories for the night when I was least expecting it, Marco would jump out from behind something and scare the ever-loving-crap out of me. I'm a really nervous and jumpy person by nature, so it doesn't take much. But Marco, he would just go all out. I can remember one time on the bus he hid behind a seat and waited till it was time for me to get off and grabbed my leg. It used to make me so angry at him. I would stay mad for hours with him punching my shoulder, which didn't make it any better, saying things like I didn't mean it, but oh god, you should have seen the look on your face.

Now, I kind of miss his stupid antics and plots to play pranks on our neighbors. But one night, one cloudy, dusky, cool October night, spinning yarns about haunted places wasn't enough for him. That same night, I was fed up with my mother. October 18 was the first time I ever defied her. She told me not to leave the house, and I left. She told me not to go to Marco's house, and I went. Mother tried to stop me, and I wish I had listened because if I had been a good daughter, no matter how my mother acted towards me, October 18 would have been an uneventful night.

When I walked up to the trailer from the cornfield, Marco saw the “don’t freaking ask” look of my face. So, we sat on his porch for a couple of hours watching the cars on the highway go by and the last of the sunset. The crickets were just beginning to hum.

“I’m bored.” He flipped his silver lighter open.

I shrugged. “You’re always bored.”

“Let’s go cow tipping.” Marco pushed his thumb down. A small blue flame appeared. My eyes focused on the burning air. I wanted to touch it, but I knew I shouldn’t.

“No. That’s just mean. Those cows didn’t do anything to deserve that.” I reached for the lighter. He rolled his eyes and flipped the lighter shut. “There’s always cards. How about Rook?”

He paused, pursing his lips together in a sort of half smile. “Nope. Let’s go spotlighting.” Marco tossed the lighter to me, and I flicked it open.

“No. That’s illegal. What? Are you like, trying to get us in trouble tonight?” I pressed down feeling the wheel scrape against my skin and sudden warmth filling the area around my thumb. I watched again as the blue flame danced.

“Nope. Just bored.” He grinned. I knew from the look on his face that he had once again concocted some scheme that I couldn’t say not to. “I’ll let you drive.” He reached in his pocket and pulled out his keys. “You know you want to.” Raising an eyebrow, he eyed me. The keys were dangling in front of me. I snatched them out of his hand. If I had known that my impulse to drive would lead to one of the most disastrous nights of my life, I would have gladly forgone the pleasure of driving and tipped over sleeping cows instead. But I couldn’t resist. My mother said driving was forbidden.

And here was the opportunity staring me straight in the face. I smiled. Marco tossed me the keys. I got in and cranked the car while he turned the knob to get the window down and ready to hold that huge light out the side of the car.

“This is going to be good,” he said. By the time we get out of his driveway, there was no trace of the sun left, and the stars began to number the sky. I was laughing as Marco was dubbed all the expressions he saw when people were caught in the spotlight. For Mr. Keith - *When my wife's not home, I don't wear no pants to watch football.* For Mrs. Dalton - *My husband can't satisfy me, so I stash a dildo in our mattress...under his side of the bed.* Silly, yes. Dumb, yes. A hell of fun? Yes. I loved this feeling; it was exhilarating. So, when he suggested that we spotlight Herb, the local loony tune, I was hesitant but up for it. We drove over to the section of town called Little Egypt known by most folks in town as the ghetto.

As I'm sure you and everyone know Sherriff, Herb is our village idiot. He is also a horrible meth addict. Herb looked worse than any New Orleans bum I ever saw. They were at least tidier than he was. His hair and teeth were barely hanging on to his flesh, and his flesh looked as if it were melting away from his bones. There was something off in his eyes. But Herb was harmless because he was an idiot. He kept to himself. Never begged for money or nothing. Made enough meth for himself to sell and kept enough for himself to keep his addiction going. Just rode his old hoopti Cadillac Supreme around town because the aliens told him to do it. When Marco and I saw him at Dale's Hardware buying oil one time, I asked him why he rode his car around town so much. He turned to me with his toothless smile and told me that when he wakes up in the morning, he has a number beamed into his head from the mother ship. If he didn't get in

his car and ride it around until he reached that number, then the aliens will come back for him to do more testing. But, he can't leave the boundary of the town. So, folks would always see old Herb in the hoopti, toothless and grinning, waving hello to whoever passed because he feared for his life.

When Marco I and got about two blocks away from Herb's pad, I turned off the car lights and put the car in neutral. Marco climbed into the back seat, so we could perform a drive-by spotlighting. As soon as we were even with the horizon of Herb's front window, Marco flicked the spotlight. On. Off. On. Off. I snickered through my nose. Feeling around for the headlight switch, I joined in the fun. Off. On. Off. On. Two sets must have been enough for poor Herb. He came running out screeching, his hands above his head, his face contorted into a twisted shape. "Nine miles! Miscalculation! Nine miles! Mother ship, don't take me, I'll give you nine miles." Suddenly, his car door was thrust open, and his wheels were screaming as much as he was. Marco was climbing over to the driver's seat and pushing me out of the way. I pushed back.

"Fuck! He's going to hit us. We've set him off." Marco turned the car back on, threw it in reverse, and kept flicking the lights. I punched the gas pedal and steered.

"What the hell are you doing that for? If you keep flicking the lights, that's just going to make it worse." I wanted to glare at him, but I couldn't. I couldn't tear my eyes away from the windshield.

"Don't you see, Audrey? As long as he thinks we're the mother ship, he won't come near us. He thinks we'll take him away for more testing." He leaned back in his seat, buckling up.

“I don’t like this Marco.” I wrapped my hands around the steering wheel. My knuckles turned white.

“Look, we’ll stop with the lights when he gets calmer. We’ll follow him discreetly around town and make sure he doesn’t hurt himself, ok?” That didn’t make me feel any better, but I went along with it.

For about six of those missing nine miles, we did. And Herb was perfectly fine. Until his Caddy ran out of gas next to Roberts’ Woods. Herb got out and darted directly into the forest still screaming about how he’d walk the rest to meet his goal. I pulled over on the side of the road. Marco unbuckled, throwing his door open. He bolted down the hill. I was stuck jiggling his keys out of his hand-me-down Camaro.

“Marco?” He was at the edge of the forest. My heartbeat was erratic. I stepped up onto the inside threshold of car door, so I had a better sight of where he was. “Don’t do it. He’ll come out in an hour or so.”

He shook his head no. “We did this to him, and now, we got to fix it. He’s a person, and you know what happens to people in them woods.” I remember a shot was fired in the distance.

“Marco!” Holding my breath, I watched as he took off running into the darkness of Roberts’ Woods. Stepping down from my perch, I looked back. He had really done it. Marco had gone into Roberts’ Woods of his own will.

I waited. After an hour, I was worried. I paced. What now? What if Marco never came back from those woods? I couldn’t deal with the answer to this question, so I resolved to go in for his sake. Instead of doing the logical thing, such as calling someone, I did what any emotionally distraught teenager who was worried about getting caught

doing something she wasn't supposed to be doing would do – I tried to solve the problem myself. Walking down to the edge of the woods, I resolved that I would go in and call for Marco. If he did not answer, then I would drive back, no license at all, and get you Sherriff Malone. I teetered at the entrance of the woods. Peering in, I saw nothing but darkness. My body protested, shivering. I marched back up the hill biting off my thumbnail. I paced some more. I tried to reason out the possible consequences of calling someone. It was no use. I was driving without a license and out at the local make-out spot. I would either be in trouble with the law or my mother. Better to solve this myself. Breathing deep, I ran down the hill and into Roberts' Woods. I kept my eyes shut as I heard leaves and limbs snapping under my feet like chicken bones. Unruly bare tree branches scraped against my arms as if they were trying to hold me back in warning. I shouted for Marco, but no reply. I stopped. Tried yelling again. Still, no response. I clasped my hands over my ears and started running back the way I came. What had I been thinking? How would I get out? The sun wouldn't be coming up for hours, and I couldn't see the stars for the thickness of trees. I had no way to navigate. No way out. I stood still again. I called for Marco. I kicked the tree next to me. A few rotten pieces of bark flew off into the darkness ahead. Popping down on the twisted and gnarled roots beneath me, I rubbed my temples. Think. Think. You're a smart girl. Hunters. Tree stands. If I can find a deer stand, maybe I can figure out how far I am from Dead Man's. In the distance, I saw an owl swooping down picking up a smaller animal for its supper. A rat ran over my grave, and I smoothed my chill bumps down with my hands. I wandered around looking upwards every so often to see if I could find the silhouette of a deer stand. Looking down, I scoured the ground for deer tracks and boot prints. If I

could just find one of these signs, I'd be ok. Feeling uneasy, I dug my hand into my pocket, holding tight to Nan's rosary.

Then, I smelled it. Burning rubber. I gasped. It was an awful thing to wish because scorched rubber might mean another wreck, another lost life, but it also might give me the direction to Dead Man's that I needed. Scorched rubber might take a life, but tonight, it might save one as well. I followed the scent as it became stronger. Funny, though, there was no smoke and no crash to accompany it, but I didn't know how far into the forest I was. Regardless, the rubber was my lifeline. If I could find the source, I could make it out of Roberts' Woods. Taking deep breaths, I traced it down to a clearing. I froze dead in place.

In the middle of the clearing, there was a dapperly dressed man. He couldn't be any older than thirty, thirty-five at the most. Good looks. A strong cleft chin, a prominent nose, and blonde hair that fell right into place. He looked like he was from around town but I couldn't quite place him, like he was somebody's cousin that only came to visit every other summer. He was wearing a three-piece black business suit as if he were ready for Easter Sunday or nine-to-five at the New York Stock Exchange. His beauty mesmerized me. I tried to take another step forward to get a better look, but my body stayed frozen. Instincts took over. He kneeled next to a girl. A dead girl? The man in the suit poked her. He rolled her over, and her body complied with no sign of emotion. I cupped my hands over my mouth. She was dead. I stood motionless. Every cell of my body knew this scene was wrong, and it was trying to tell my head, but I couldn't comprehend. I crouched behind the bottom of a tree and waited. Watched. The man was such a strange, yet beautiful sight. He floated across the ground and moved so

gracefully, much like I imagined a vampire would. I clutched the tree harder and the dead bark cut into my hands. Holding my forearm to my face, I covered my nose so the burning rubber stench wasn't as powerful. The man faced the girl up again. Squinting, I tried to distinguish her features more clearly. She was too far away, but my heart knew. I turned away from the scene and leaned against the tree. And there, underneath my feet, was her candy pink ribbon. Picking it up, I glanced back around the tree. As soon as my eyes focused back on the girl's shape, I understood. The dead girl was my cousin Angela, and this was her pink ribbon. "Oh dear God," I cried. Did he kill her? Did he come here to bury her? How did he do it? Why her? What will he do to me? But it was too late for these questions, too late for me to run. His voice intruded on my thoughts.

"Hello, Miss." The man in the black suit towered over me, especially when he leaned in on his toes when he pronounced the Miss. I choked on the stench. The burning smell, the indescribable smell of rotting wood, it was coming from him. My stomach heaved. I kept my head down.

"Good evening." Staring at my feet, I concluded that I must be talking to a vampire. But that putrid odor coming from him led me to believe much worse.

"Everything alright I hope?" My body automatically answered him by shaking my head no. I dug my hand back into my pocket and looped Nan's rosary around a finger. Rolling a bead between my fingers calmed me down. *Don't tell him you're lost.*

"No, sir. I've lost my cousin." I untucked my hand from my jeans, showing him the cotton candy pink ribbon.

"Oh dear," he said, his voice still pleasant. "I'm afraid this is very unfortunate for you. I just found her dead. Just right over there. She's still warm."

“Then I should probably be telling someone back in town.”

“Don’t you want to have a look at her? To make sure that this is your Angela?”

I looked up at him. Staring at him dead on, I realized he was familiar for a reason. He was angelic. He looked like he walked straight out of the Sistine Chapel’s ceiling. “I didn’t tell you her name.” Saying nothing, he offered his arm to me like any gentleman would, but I shook my head. He had luminous cream skin tone, but his fingernails, his fingernails looked like wolves’ teeth. As we walked over to Angela in the middle of the clearing, a full white moon hanging above us, I kept fiddling with the rosary in my pocket. Still silent, we strolled over. The man in the suit, unphased that he had just found a dead body, me shaking because I was probably with the man who created that dead body. He motioned toward Angela with his claw-like hands.

Dropping to my knees, I teared up. There was nothing left but to say it, no matter how much I didn’t want to believe it. “She’s dead.” I touched her wrist, and just like the blonde man said, she was still warm. “How did this happen?”

“The wages of sin are many, Miss.”

I wiped a tear from my face. “She wasn’t a great person, but I don’t think she deserved to be murdered.” I finally looked the man in his eyes. His eyes danced with fire - electric blue fire as if there were two gas lighters sitting right in his irises. I’d never seen anything like it.

“You all deserve it.” He smiled. So gorgeous, and yet, so unnerving.

“I think I’d better go and get some help before we’re accused of being the murderers.” I smiled back at him using the same tactic anyone does when she realizes she’s been backed into a corner.

He grabbed me by the wrist. His hands felt like scalding water. I reached my free hand in my other pocket feeling for the crucifix and shoved it in his face. He let go of my hand, took a step back, and a wicked smile spread across his face. “Back,” I screamed, shoving it closer to his nose, still watching florescent blue eyes.

He sneered while turning his head. “What do you think I am? A vampire? A fucking myth? Don’t mock me girly.” I gulped and held the crucifix tighter. His eyes refocused on me, and he came closer. “You know why I am here? Because Angela was a whore. Miss cherry pie wasn’t who you think she was. She loved fucking. She lied, all the time. Oh, and did you know, that she had just started doing meth? And do you know what she did to get that meth? Fucked strangers. Sucked Herb’s cock once. She even got your beloved Marco off too.” He cackled. “Rotten to the core. And now I’ve come to collect what’s mine.”

“No.” I clamped my hands over my ears. “You’re wrong. They didn’t do anything. He doesn’t care anything for her.”

“Ha. Don’t kid yourself. You know she wasn’t worth two shits and would have thrown you under a bus for herself. Think about it. Did she ever do anything nice for you at school? What about the time you fell down the school’s stairs? Did she stop to help you? No, she made fun of you with the rest. Your own flesh and blood. Did she introduce you to people or show you around town when you and your mom moved back? No.” He got right up in my face and showed his sharp toothy grin to me. “I’ve been watching and waiting on her for a while, and now I have her. But tonight, it looks as if I get a buy one, get one free.” He continued gazing at me.

“And let me tell you about your precious Marco.” The blonde man circled around me. I turned after him. But even when his eyes weren’t meeting mine, I felt his gaze searing into my head. “He ran out after Herb, but not for the reasons you think. He wasn’t being heroic or courageous or any of that. Herb is his seller. Marco is a dealer. And guess who sold your cousin her lethal overdose of meth!”

“No.”

“It was at their restaurant, Mi Casa, Su Casa. Behind the dumpster- ”

“You’re a liar.”

“You’ve got a lot of nerve calling me a liar kiddo.”

“I know exactly who – exactly what you are. You’re not taking me out of here tonight.” My hands trembled from squeezing the crucifix. My knuckles were turning a permanent white.

The Devil eyed at my rosary.

“A Catholic? A faithful one?”

“Yes.” It was the first time I had said it, and I believed it fully. I wished I could say it to my mother.

“I know that rosary. I believe it belonged to a Ella Louise Reid. Your grandmother.”

I clutched my rosary even tighter. “Point being?”

“Nan’s on my side kiddo. There are missing pages in her diary. You know that. Underneath her bed mattress, there are the missing pages. Read them and see if she’s not with me then.”

“I don’t believe you. Nothing you say is true. You’re just playing head games. That’s all.”

“But back to what I was saying. You don’t even know a tenth of what I know about Marco. See, after that one time out here by the lake, when you slapped Marco for professing his love to you, you remember that don’t you? Anyway, he took you back home. And then, he came back out here to make his routine sales only to find your cousin partying with the rest of the little twits from your school like Shelley, McKenzie, Braxton, and Neal. But Angela was already messed up with no cash. And Marco boy was feeling pretty low after what you did to him. So she took him in the shed, and she screwed him in exchange for the goods.”

“Shut up! I won’t believe you. Marco would never do that. He doesn’t sell drugs. And if he did, it would be for some damn good reason.”

The man stood in front of me again, his arms folded like he was a bouncer at a concert. “Why even defend him? You don’t care. Isn’t that what you told him?”

That hurt. My voice started trembling. “I didn’t say that I didn’t care. What I said that day was that I didn’t care to be his girlfriend. I care about Marco. He’s my best friend.”

He pointed his finger up to the sky. “In about five minutes, he’s going to die. He made it out of the woods only to find his abandoned Camaro. He is going to call your cell only to see it vibrating in the cup holder. He turns and looks back at the woods wide-eyed with fear.” He stood behind me with his fingers spread. “He calls for you. Then, he realizes that you probably went in because you were too scared to stay by yourself. So he comes back into the woods. Only this time, he’s not so lucky. About a quarter of the

way in, he hears a shot. A hunter has mistaken the rustling of leaves for a deer. The bullet hits his upper left shoulder, and it's dead on. His blood is pooling around him, and his breathing is labored like an old person before he dies. And Marco is calling out for you and no one else."

"No. That's not happening. You're such a liar. That can't happen."

"Then let's make a deal." He touched his fingertips together as if he were about to pray. But no, this man would never pray.

"Are you crazy? I know what you're up to. I've heard the stories. Fuck you." I turned to leave, but he grabbed me by the wrists again and this time, my skin sizzled like grease. Smoke rose from between his fingers. "You're brave enough to stick a crucifix in my face, but you won't make a deal with me, not even to save your beloved?

Pathetic." He tossed me aside on the ground. I writhed around flailing my arms about because the air kept the burns from stinging. "Now, I've always been the bargaining type. Make an offer. I can save your precious Marco for a very small price, but I would make it worth your while. I've given plenty of men money and power. Women too. I'm not saying this has to be a nasty bargain. I'm quite hospitable if you get to know me."

"He's not dead. I would know. I would feel it in my bones." By then, I was crying in spasms while searching for breaths. It wasn't that I was crying for Marco so much as the thought that I might have been the reason Marco met an early grave. I didn't want him to die for me if I was unsure that I would die for him. "I'm not making any damn deal with you."

"Well," he said, running his hands through his hair while licking his lips, "I'm afraid that won't do. See, I have this policy. You've seen me, and you have no

allegiance to me. So, either you swear allegiance to me or you die. You little half-breeds get too sentimental when you come in contact with me and live. You go running back to Him with more fervor than when you were first converted, and you convert others with your experience. I certainly can't have that."

"You can't have what isn't yours anyway."

"You little bitch. I've tried to be nice to you. I ought to just kill you."

"Do it and I'll be a martyr. More converts." I held my rosary against my heart praying that death would be quick, that my body might return to dust, but that my soul would live forever in the Glory of Our Lord.

I need to digress, here, for a second and just say for all who read this I've never been much of a talker or the type to stand up for myself – ask anyone at school. I get run over a lot, and I'm kind of a doormat. As a daughter, I've always been really good at doing what I was told, never back talking, but something just got into me as of late. Not like teenage rebellion. Just like I finally had confidence in myself. My mother, she didn't want me to be a Catholic like my Nan. But that is who I am, and who I've always been. And when I was thrown against wall, I was able to maintain myself. So, this was like a really big thing for me, and it couldn't have come at a better time. Cause otherwise, I wouldn't be writing this story down.

So, right, I've just sassed him. Definitely not the smartest move, but I feel like it was what I was supposed to do. Did it feel similar to riding a looping roller coaster with no safety bar? Yes, but I felt like it was supposed to do that. And then, I swear I felt hot air against my cheek like someone was whispering to me. Or maybe it was my conscience. Or maybe it was all the stuff I'd seen in movies that told me to do it.

Whatever it was, it told me to stick the crucifix to his head. And I did. Stumbling backward, I watched as his skin now seared like my wrists earlier. He covered his face with his hands and made the most terrible sound I've ever heard. It was like the lament of a mother whose baby had just died and the crying of a hurt deer together. He flung the rosary off his face and retreated more. I crawled over and grabbed it. Then, I ran as fast as I could. In the distance, I heard his voice.

“This isn't the last you've heard of me, Audrey Jean. I will be back, and I am coming for you when you least expect it. I promise you that.”

I ran for what seemed like miles though I know it couldn't have been that much. The entire time my mind was racing. I kept my peripheral vision in mind just in case I saw Marco. I didn't really believe that I would find Marco, but just in case, I was ready.

When I get to the edge of the forest, Marco was waiting. Not a scratch or stain on his dark skin his tar black hair hanging over one eye. His smile inverted when he saw my wrists all blistered up. He started rambling in Spanish, and all I caught was what the hell happened to you. When Herb ran out of the forest, Marco marched over to him. There was a loud thud. I didn't turn around because I didn't want to know. I had enough for one night. When Marco reappeared, he held me like we were a regular couple, like we would be the ones behind the barn making out. I hid my face because I didn't want him to see me cry, but I was relieved to find him alive. The next thing I knew, you walked up, Sheriff Malone, and Marco whispered words that I know have been on his lips for a while. And I wanted to tell him, I did, but I just can't. I can't find my voice anymore. And even though I open my mouth to tell him, there aren't any words left for me to say because all I can do is sob and wail for everything I cannot say.

It's only been a week, give or take a few days, since this happened, and you know that, don't you Sheriff Malone. I'm pretty sure this will get out. But, as I write this, I wonder what will happen to me. I feel like if at any point I put down my rosary and quit asking the Holy Mother for her prayers, for the protection of Jesus, I'm doomed and so is this town. That's why I am always wandering around town at night, rosary in hand. I can't sleep anymore. Can't eat either. You see, Sheriff, I never wanted to tell this story. I was going to keep it to myself. It was going to be my cross to bear, but Marco does not deserve what these men want to do to him. Aunt Tesee has been on a witch-hunt ever since Angela first disappeared. And after she learned of Angela's vices through her autopsy, she just wanted someone to blame. I am only speaking up so Marco might be spared despite what all the kids at school are saying about me and Marco and Angela now, but it's obvious to me that this town wants blood for blood. I think it's pretty obvious to you, too. And even though I am telling the truth, I will probably be sent off to Whitfield by mother and called crazy, and Marco will still be sentenced unfairly.

The worst part of this is that I still see him in town; only he's everywhere and nowhere all at once. He's at the Piggly Wiggly one day and at Riley's the next. And the day after that he is at Dale's Hardware. He walks among us all the time, and now, I can see him. I wonder if he is coming for me now. Will he be merciful and take me in my sleep dressed like he is ready to go to work, the harvest moon sitting like a halo behind his head? Doesn't matter. I now know of all that is seen and unseen. And I now know exactly what I am sure of. And I bet you understand that, better than anyone now, don't you Sheriff? So, you'll deliver my message for me, won't you?

CHAPTER IV
BLOOD IS BLOOD

He pissed me off so much that he made me abandon my lover-not-a-fighter attitude, made me recall all the things *mi padre y mis hermanos* ever taught me about Mexican street fighting, and made my fist find his face quicker than a bullet. When the punch connected, I could feel the hollow of his pale fleshless cheek stretch so thin that blood flew through the air like raindrops splattering on invisible window panes. Normally, I wouldn't give a damn about what Herb does, but after I saw Audrey Jean come running out of the woods wailing like her Grandma Nan had just died for the second time, I couldn't control myself. I hit the damn motherfucker.

Until that point, Herb hadn't caused a soul any problems. But just to see Audrey Jean like that set me off. There were only three people in those woods: me, Audrey Jean, and meth head. I was waiting outside the woods by my car. I had just called Sherriff Malone to tell him that two people were lost in the woods when Audrey came out. She ran straight to me sobbing. I tried to ask her what the hell was a matter. She couldn't answer. She just kept right on gasping for air, two steady streams of tears running down that face of hers with as many freckles across her nose as there were constellations in the sky. It was scary looking at poor Audrey crying, like she knew all the sorrows of life, know? I grabbed her shoulders. I tried to shake her out of it. But then I saw her wrists. On each one, there were two big burns. And on her left arm, a bruise like she'd just shot

up. And I just got mad. Mad at everything. Mad at Herb for doing this to her. Mad that Herb ran out into the woods. Mad that I was the dumb ass who suggested we'd go mess with Herb. Mad that I couldn't protect Audrey like I wanted to because folks around here didn't like me or my family or the idea of Audrey and me together. Mad that Audrey couldn't be brave enough to say screw you and date me anyway. Mad that my tongue couldn't form a proper hard R because maybe then I would be more acceptable. And I just reared back and hit the dude for everything I couldn't say.

Sheriff Malone saw it. He had just pulled up when I swung. When he got out of the car, I knew I was in trouble. He didn't look at Herb; he didn't look at Audrey. His beady crow eyes centered on me. He wiggled his handlebar mustache the way he always does when he tries to look serious. I knew cause he wiggled his mustache at one of my brothers while writing his speeding ticket. He took one look at Audrey, and he recentered his gaze. He took his hat off.

“What the hell did you do here, son? What are you thinking hauling off and hitting Herb and making that girl cry like that for?”

“I didn't do it. Audrey's my friend. Herb did it. He is the only other person out here.” I ran my fingers through her hair, patting her the way a mother consoles her child after the first heartbreak. I felt Audrey nestle her nose in between my neck and jaw, my skin becoming damp and slick.

“I don't buy that. Herb's lived here his whole life and never caused any trouble. You Camarena boys are always causing trouble. Have been since you got into town twelve years ago.” What he said was true. *Mi famille* wasn't known for being very good citizens, especially my brothers. There are five of us - three boys and two girls. I am the

middle child. My older brothers, Jorge and Carlos, are constantly getting into bar fights, receiving DUIs, and speeding tickets. *Mi madre* screams at them constantly, but it does no good. That's why she told me that I was the only one in the family who could take over the restaurant that she had so lovingly named *Mi Casa, Su Casa*. I hated that damn name. It was no better than *El Sombrero* or *La Magnolia*. I hated the damn restaurant even more. I haven't told my mother yet, but I refuse to take over that restaurant. I'm smart. I get good marks in class. I could go to college, be something like a businessman or a computer technician or a high school teacher. But *Mama* she just wants me to be like every other Mexican family here. Establish a good restaurant and just to earn some money and go back to Mexico. I want more than that. And I can do it, I know it, but she ain't going to let me. She'll guilt trip me like always. The sheriff took a step towards me, and I gripped Audrey even tighter. "Hand her over, son. She needs to be looked at. And you going to have to come with me." He put his hat back on, staring off in Herb's direction. Herb was still knocked out with a big bruise on his cheek. I felt her short nails dig into my biceps a little more. When I looked up, Sheriff Malone was pulling Audrey towards the car. "This ain't no place for you to be ,Audrey Jean. Ain't no boy for you to be with either. What would your Mama say?" He wiggled his mustache again.

"Her Mama wouldn't say nothing. She's sorry." I pulled Audrey back to me.

"Listen here, son. I'm not counting that cause I ain't read you your rights yet."

He waddled over a step and stuck his chubby hot dog pointer finger in my face. But I'll be damned if you talk about any of the good folk in this town and Samantha Reid is one of them."

Eyeing him, I whispered in her ear. “Audrey? I know you don’t like hearing it, but I mean it, Audrey, I really do. *Te amo.*” She stopped sobbing and looked up. But nothing. Nothing came out of her mouth. Her eyes looked vacant. I kissed her forehead and handed her over to the Sherriff. Her gave her to the Deputy Jackson and they rode off. The sheriff looked back at me. He held up the cuffs. I put my arms out. He stuffed me in the car.

“Marco, you’re under arrest for assault against Herbert Roberts. Everything you say –”

“Yeah, yeah. I know.”

The ride from Roberts’ Woods to town was only about ten minutes, but I swear, it was one of the longest car rides I have ever endured. When we got to the station, they did all the normal things. Fill out some paper work. Dip my thumbs in ink as black as my hair. Have me stand with the black board in front of my chest that says *Camarena, Marco*. It looked like I had finally joined my brother’s club. I half expected to see Jorge or Carlos in the next cell. But there wasn’t anyone in the holding cells. It was just me and my thoughts.

I lay down on the cot and folded my hands behind my head as if I were relaxing on a hammock, trying to look cool about this whole thing. I couldn’t get the look on her face out of my mind. She hadn’t said nothing. The first time I told Audrey I loved her was no accident. I can’t remember exactly how I realized it, but I could pinpoint the beginning of the feeling to the time when she brought me a thermos of chicken soup while I had the flu. My mother really didn’t have the time to care for me. She was working two jobs, one at the restaurant and the other at the local watering hole, at the

time to support me and my brothers. My sisters were too young to be of any use really. They could bring me water, but they weren't much for company. When I asked them if they wanted to play a game, they brought out their Barbies. Of course, I couldn't say no, and I always wound up playing the Ken doll part. Not exactly what I was looking for. Audrey, though, she comes over with an industrial thermos full of hot chicken noodle soup. She sat right beside me the entire time even though a week later she got sick herself. That's when the feeling started bubbling up like laundry detergent in a washing machine – slow, steady, and gradual.

This past year, a wave of urgency had hit me like a boxer getting ko'd. We had been friends since my freshman year, and when I realized I might be leaving Audrey to go to college and I hadn't told her how I felt about her, it made me uneasy. I couldn't leave with that kind of question in my head. I had to know. And so, one night, I try to tell her. I planned it all out. We were watching the sunset. I try to tell her then, but it was like I forgot how to speak English. Cursing myself in Spanish, I suggested we go ride around. Dumb idea. Cursed myself even more for that one. I rode her out to Roberts' Woods to the shed because behind it there was a lake and picnic tables. It was especially pretty at twilight because the fireflies would be decorating the sky like green Christmas lights.

So, there we were watching the lake and lightning bugs, and I thought I was being a real romantic, and I just said Audrey Jean, I love you. And I try to kiss her but she swats at me. I didn't get it. She tells me that she's not a whore, and that three little words out at the local lookout place didn't count. I got it then. She thought I was just horny. For weeks, it was really awkward. We avoided each other in the hallways. She

sat in the front of the bus, and I sat in the back. We no longer smoked our cigarettes together behind the cafeteria during lunch. But we slowly got back into the routine of things. When we were finally able to talk like normal again, she told me that she cared for me as well, but she was sure to say that, how she put it, “it’s like, like – not love. Like, I like, like you, but I’m not sure if I love you Marco.” But, she went on to explain that there was no way she could ever date me. Audrey said her mom wouldn’t allow it, and that she’d pay dearly if she went against her mother. She also said we’d have to deal with kids at school. I told her I understood. It was a bittersweet moment. To know that the person you love has the potential to return your feelings only to find that the even if the words were said, they won’t be met with actions.

Ever since that talk, I had been planning of ways to convince her, to prove to her that I was being true. This time, I just couldn’t help myself. This time, I knew I might be going away for good, so I told her. I was hoping for a response, but I guess she was too much in shock. It was like a repetition of the first time, only worse because this time, Audrey had no words of hope for me. And now, I was stuck in a jail cell left trying to fill her silence for her. I flipped over and threw my face into the cold pillow. I started debating my options.

I didn’t kill Angela, so I had nothing to be worried about. The only thing I did have to worry about was that I was Angela’s dealer. And everyone else’s at school. And in the neighboring town, Tupelo. They were only about ten kids who bought from me in town and about twenty-five from Tupelo, but the money was more than enough. Money I was keeping in a shoebox underneath the right most floor plank in my room. Money that would buy my way out of that one-way ticket back to Mexico and pay for my education

that would make me good enough for Audrey Jean. If I could get out of this predicament, I would go to a community college, learn a trade, get a job, make some money, come back to Nettleton with a ring, get down on one knee and say Audrey you're my girl. Won't you marry me? No one in town nor Audrey's momma could argue with that. That's all white people want for their daughters. Education, good job, lots of money. But they would still have to get over the fact that I'm Mexican, though I'm sure being Mexican is easier than if I was Black. White people preach all this shit about how race doesn't matter – "the south's gotten better," and it has, but it sure as hell ain't color blind just yet.

But Audrey and I, we wanted a lot more. We wanted a family. Her Daddy has been missing for over fourteen years. My Daddy was a damn meth addict. Our mothers did their best to hold what was left of the family together, but it didn't do much good. Audrey didn't like her momma. They constantly fought. My mom was okay, but she had six of us to deal with along with the wrath of my grandma. I tried to refocus. Options. I thought the best thing to do would be to tell the truth. No hiding what I had been doing now, and if I was lucky, I might get cut a deal if I ratted out Herb, only it wouldn't really be ratting him out. More like pointing out the obvious. However, that was only if they found out I was dealing her the meth. If they didn't ask me about it, I wasn't talking. I'd only have to answer to the charge of hitting a man. I might be able to claim self-defense on that one. Rolling over, I inhaled as much as much as my lungs would hold. As I exhaled, I realized this was not going to be easy. The familiar click-clack of heels startled me.

Mother stood in front of the holding cell. The rims of her eyes looked as if she had taken a red lip liner to them. She held a handkerchief against her chest. I sat up, rubbing my forehead. How to explain this? For a long time, we sat in silence. This was odd. Members of the Camarena household were never quiet, especially in a situation like this one. I looked through the bars to see her face split. Her tears stuck to her face like beads of sweat. I couldn't look at her. Turning towards the back wall, I flattened out my hands so that I was pushing against it with the hope that maybe if I pushed hard enough, I could will the cinder blocks away and all my troubles with them.

"You're supposed to be my good son. My best one." Her voiced lilted on that last phrase –*best one*. Ha. I wasn't Jorge or Carlos, but I wasn't much to be proud of either. She started speaking in Spanish, the rhythmic words flowing from her mouth like a chord progression. "You're supposed to be my son that takes over my restaurant so that while I go home, I can get your Dad out of jail and all of us, *Grandma* too, can live comfortably in -"

"Stop it, Ma. Speak English for God's sake." She stopped. She looked at me and started crying out about how disappointed she was. When she was done with her rant, she asked "Is it true? You sell to her just like your Dad sell to others? You do it, too?"

"Oh, come on." I hit the wall with both my fists, still hoping that I could channel all this insatiable, passionate anger into a tangible force that could break the stones. The cup on the sink jingled. "I sold the stuff, but I never did it. You think I want to be like Dad or Herb? I can't stand the stuff. I did it out of necessity. Dad sold the shit to try to get us money to come over here. He was trying to make life better. I'm doing the same damn thing. I sold the stuff to try to go to college and marry Audrey."

I finally turned around. My mother was drying her face with her handkerchief. She sniffled a few times. I knew what was coming next. Crocodile tears. Plenty of words meant to sail me off on the S.S. Guilt Trip. Not this time, damn it. I was going to show her. “What has gotten into you, son? Have you forgotten who you are? You are Mexican, *a Camarena*. Don’t you know what that means?”

“No, Ma. What does it mean to be a Camarena? Cause I’ll tell you something. I’m nothing like you or Jorge or Carlos. I want to stay here. I like speaking English better than Spanish. And I’m attracted to any ugly Caucasian girl more than the prettiest Spanish girl you could ever bring home for me to meet. I can’t remember anything about Mexico, the way it smells, the tastes, the sights. Here, there’s sweet tea, biscuits and sawmill gravy, sweet jalapeno cornbread, crickets and cicadas, green flat land for miles with cows grazing near barns, the smell of old men and Marlboro’s at the Shell station. Here is home for me. I’m sure if I went back with you, they wouldn’t see me as very Mexican. And up here, I look Mexican, but I’m more Southern, but actions don’t matter either because everyone sees skin but at least here they embrace diversity. In Mexico, I’ll be forever out of place.” I wrapped my hands around the bars and stuck my nose between them so I could stare her down. “So, Ma, what does it mean to be a misplaced Mexican transplanted in the American South?”

Her bottom lip quivered. “You want to be a real American? Have fun being tried by your fellow citizens. See how the embrace your diversity then, son.” She spun on one heel and click-clacked her way out.

Alone again, I returned to my thoughts. I knew what I said had hurt her, but I had been at my boiling point. So many times I had tried to say to her, “Ma, I’m not going to

run your restaurant. I'm not speaking Spanish to you – it causes people to stare. The only Mexican food I really like is tamales. I like gumbo ten times better. I love Audrey Jean Reid even though you tell me to keep the bloodline *pure*.” But she wouldn't have any of it. Ma always got her way because I always let her. Not today. And ironically, I didn't feel any better for it. After that confrontation, that monumental moment I had been preparing for, fell flat, just like the monumental moment I had been preparing for with Audrey Jean. I really did feel like a bad son. I hit the wall with the flat of my fists one more time just for good measure and flopped back on the cot. I had plenty of time to think things over in my little cell.

I wondered where they had taken Audrey to now. I hoped someone had taken her to the clinic to get those burns looked at. Those marks still puzzled me. They looked like razor blade cuts that festered into water blisters. I had never seen anything like it before. The cause could have been anything from tree branches and poison ivy to a cut with an allergic reaction. But then, I had to wonder: who cut her? It had to have been Herb. Audrey wasn't a cutter. Or was she? No, she definitely would have told me. Audrey and I tell each other everything.

Just then, I heard Deputy Jackson come up. He opened the door and threw me against the wall.

“Did you sell her that shit? Cause Angela sure as hell wouldn't go out to Little Egypt but someone like you or your damn brothers would. And now she's dead.” He held me up by my shirt seams, and the back of my head was in splitting pain.

“Angela is dead? I don’t know anything.”

“Bullshit.” He threw me up against the wall once more. I held my hands up in protest.

“Hey, I’ve seen *Law and Order*. You offer me a deal, I’ll talk.”

“I can’t get you a deal. But I’ve got some stuff you want to know.”

“No way. I want to sign something legal. I want something that says my ass ain’t staying in jail for the next however many years of my life. I know enough on you to ruin you. Make you a suspect too.”

“Like what?” The phrase came out as more of a grunt than words.

“Angela asked me what I would say if I knew someone who killed their baby on purpose.”

“She told you that?” Deputy Jackson let me down, and I rubbed the back of my head, my thick hair preventing me from feeling my scalp for blood. He folded his hands on the back of his shaved head. He sat down on my cot.

“What else do you know?”

I sat next to him. “I know it was your baby. So, you fix me up a deal, and I’ll tell you everything I can.”

He grunted. As he left, he muttered, “I’ll see what I can do.”

And in a few minutes, he returned with an immunity deal in exchange for what I knew. “She came looking for me.” He raised an eyebrow. “She did. It’s true. I swear. At the restaurant one night. I was waiting her family’s table. She slips me a two dollar tip and there was message written on one of them asking me to meet her by the dumpster.

I knew what it meant. I always have some in my shoe. So, I sold her all of it. She asked me some weird questions too.” I looked at him and waited for a response.

“The night before she died, she came to me and told me she was pregnant. I told her I would take care of her and the baby, but she said she couldn’t have it. Her father had told her that she had to abort it. I begged her not to, told her I didn’t care what people in town would say about a mulatto baby or us. But she yelled at me asking why I hadn’t been more careful, told me I’d ruined her life, and stormed out.”

Deputy Jackson sat wringing his fingers. I tried to offer some consolation, but what could I really say to hey, my baby’s dead, and my lover probably killed my baby, know? “When it comes to unreturned feelings, I relate.” That was all I could muster. While waiting for a reply, I rested my elbows on my knees. He cracked his knuckles.

“What do you know about Audrey?”

“She’s down at the clinic. Doc Ratliff says she tried to kill herself.”

“Audrey wouldn’t do that. Herb did it.” I knitted my brows, drawing my hands underneath my nose. “That’s why I hit the son of a bitch. Herb’s the one you people should be after.”

“If I find out that he is the son of a bitch that killed Angela, I’m going to lock him up for as long as the books say it’s possible. And if I find out you helped him-” He grinded his teeth together.

“Well, you aren’t. And you already gave me immunity remember. Now, tell me what you know about Audrey.”

“Looks like she botched shooting up with some of your product. On her wrists, he says she cut herself. As for how the blisters got there, he can’t explain it quite yet.”

“But she’s okay? Like she’ll be back at school on Monday and if I get out of here, I could go see her?”

“She’s mute too. Doc says she’s suffering from an anxiety disorder or Post Traumatic Syndrome whatever. He actually thinks it is a combination of both.”

“No words?”

“No words.” He nodded his head while saying this back to me as if nodding would help the message sink into my brain better. I let my brain absorb this information again: Audrey’s mute: *no words*. Maybe Audrey couldn’t say what she felt at that point? What if she never speaks again? How will I ever know?”

“Alright. Here’s my end of the deal, Camarena.” The Deputy lumbered off and returned within a minute or two. He tossed me a journal. “Read it. In truth, Sheriff Malone wasn’t going to let you see it. Leave it on the cot when you’re done. Officer Benton brought your car by. Pick up your keys at the front desk.” But, before the Deputy got out of sight, I called out to him. “Thanks.”

There was no verbal reply. There was nothing but a backhanded wave. He did not even stop to turn around. I watched the door close behind him, the loud clang resounding for several seconds. I took the journal out recognizing it immediately. This journal was one I had given to Audrey as a thank you for taking care of me when I was sick. I opened it up and began reading. There were lots of interesting facts about Audrey I gathered from reading. The entries began on the day when I was first sick and chronicled Audrey’s moods, feelings, school day, homework assignments, and other various tidbits. Sometimes, she doodled on her pages. The pictures were of these cute monsters. They had girly eyelashes and big bows and vampire fangs. Some were more grotesque than

others. Some had only one eye and some had three. Some of her drawings looked like amoebas. But they were all pretty cute. She wrote about books she was reading, such as *Wuthering Heights* and *Twilight*. She wrote about our conversations about these books. There was even an entire section dedicated to Spanish verbs. I smiled at that. Even though I didn't care for my mother's tongue, it was nice to see Audrey trying.

Then, the entries stopped. There were about twenty-five blank pages. I flipped until I reached the end of the journal, a little dismayed that what Deputy Jackson had promised me, I did not find. I didn't see any new information here. As I tossed it on the cot, a folded piece of paper flew out. I dived on the bed, grabbed it, and began reading. It was a letter for the Sheriff. "*My Marco,*" I repeated out loud to myself with a smile spreading across my face. I didn't need to look any further than that. I had my answer. Audrey couldn't say it, couldn't write it, but she definitely loved me.

My mind was racing. I could go home, get my money, buy Audrey a reasonable sized ring, bend down on my knee, profess my love, and finally, have my love returned. I tucked the paper back into the journal and bounded out of the cell and out of the station. The secretary looked at me kind of funny, but I didn't care. I was a man on a mission. I jumped in the Camaro, cranked the car up, and pulled out of the parking lot. While driving back home, I avoided speeding.

When I pulled up in my driveway, my brothers greeted me with whistles and head rubs, passing me back and forth between them like they were playing keep away, and I was the ball. They congratulated me on not being a Byron-reading pussy anymore, and they were glad to see that I was being a real man like Dad. I kept trying to get away from

them, but then they mentioned to me that Ma was packing our bags and asked not to be disturbed. I darted inside.

I went to the back of our doublewide to my and my brother's room. I tore the loose plank up where I kept my meth profits hidden. But when I looked into the hole, all I saw was the deed to the restaurant. I chunked the plank across the floor and started feeling around. Nothing. No stacks. I ran across the room grabbing a flashlight from the closet. I peered down again and still, there was no sign of my money. I stood in front of the mirror, so I could look myself squarely in the eye. It slowly began to seep in what had happened.

I marched across the living room and into my mother's bedroom. She was sitting on the bed folding towels, an odd smile on her face. I held up the deed to the restaurant.

“Where's my money?”

“I don't know what you're talking about.” She folded another pair of pink silk panties and tucked them into the suitcase.

“Bullshit. Police didn't come here and take it.” I stayed calm. My voice was even, and the intonation never rose.

She shrugged. “Then maybe it was your nasty, nasty brothers.”

“I want my money.” I didn't move from my spot. I folded my arms across my chest and blocked the doorway.

Ma stood and walked over to me. She straightened my shirt collar. “You will be the son I want you to be. You will stay here, and you will own and operate this restaurant. You will send us sixty percent of the profits, and you can live off the rest.” I batted her hand away from my shirt.

“I can’t do it, and I won’t do it. Where’s my money?”

“I know what you are thinking, Marco. The restaurant makes enough money to pay the monthly note. You’re eighteen. You can run the place by yourself. After all, you’ve been working there since twelve. All the help is still there.” She paused. “I didn’t want you to have any distractions from the restaurant, school or otherwise. I paid a concerned visit to the Reid and Hester families. Tesea and Samantha were there. We had a talk. It was very pleasant. Samantha decided to send Audrey away. She’s probably going to Whitfield within the next day.”

“You told her to do it, didn’t you?”

“I might have encouraged her, so you could focus on making your poor family in Mexico some money to send home.”

“Whatever, Ma. You go ahead and take my money. Go back to Mexico, give it to Dad, and let him spend it all away on more meth and whores.” A quick raise of her right hand, and I felt a searing sensation spread across my face as if she had transferred several bee stings to my cheek. I rubbed it feeling the heat.

“Your father made some mistakes, but he is still your family, as are your brothers and sisters, as am I! Blood is blood, Marco.” Ma pushed past me with her suitcase and stumbled towards the door. I followed her out, watching her as she tossed her suitcase in the back seat along with my two younger sisters. Jorge, the younger of my two older brothers, got in the front seat of the car. Carlos, in one of his signature Hawaiian shirts, finished loading the rest of the bags and shut the trunk. Then, Carlos came over to the steps next to me. I wanted to ask him if he was going or if he was still going to stay at his place and job in Tupelo. But I didn’t. I watched as Ma backed out of our driveway onto

the highway. For an instant, I envisioned her getting hassled at the line by border patrol, my grandma berating her for marrying my father, or her weak heart giving out from my comments.

My eyes grew twice in size as I watched a hoopti Cadillac smash directly into my Ma's decrepit, rusted Lincoln while she was backing out into the highway. Carlos and I glanced at each other and ran to the end of our driveway. I threw the door open, and Ma was slumped over a freshly painted red steering wheel. I tried to wake her up, but she wouldn't respond. My sisters were in the back screaming. Herb stumbled out of his car, wearing the same shirt as my brother. Carlos was immediately on him, wailing on him. Punch after punch connecting. Blood spattering everywhere all over the gravel. I gazed down. I wanted to tell Carlos to beat the shit out of him, but when I saw the blood, I wanted him to stop. I wanted to stop him. I could do nothing but look on. "That's my brother. He's my brother," I said. He smiled. But then Herb did something I've never seen him do. He punched back, drawing the blood of my brother.

CHAPTER V
LAND OF MY FATHERS

I want to tell a story about the alien who impersonates my dead relative. I know it is an alien because it takes me away for all different kinds of abuses, such as drilling my teeth and sticking needles in the base of my neck when I do not comply with its demands, which are quite often ridiculous and inane. He can't quite be called a ghost because he inflicts physical harm, and his eyes are slanted, pupils dilated ten times the normal size. They look like a cat's eyes before it pounces on its prey, wide and black. It is quite hard to turn down someone who not only resembles your blood relative Jason Roberts, but who is begging you to ride around in your car when you know you're going to get something worse than a taser.

Now, how to go about telling this story, I am not quite sure. I was once a scholar of stories, a literary critic, a professor at a well-respected university not too far from here. I did my damndest to get out of Nettleton, and I figured a good education would be the way to do it. But, my theory, when put into practice, proved wrong. The land of my ancestors pulled me back here as if there was an umbilical cord still attached between us. While still teaching at the university, I found that the best way to combat the alien was to

take methadone¹. Life was much easier after the drugs because I couldn't be for sure if the alien mirage I was seeing was real or not. I imagined seeing lots of things due to the methadone, and when I saw the alien, I was able to ignore it because I couldn't tell if I was hallucinating it or not. For a while, it worked. But as it goes with all drugs, even caffeine, I began needing a more concentrated dosage for the high. And the less high I was, the more inclined I was to do the alien's bidding just to make it go away for the time being. I refused to believe, however, that I would have to head back home to rid myself of it. Believe me, I've tried many times to get away, but I realized I couldn't and gave in. But I'm just rambling really. This is not telling the story I need to tell.

It would seem that since I was once able to pick apart how a piece works, I should know how to compose one. But that isn't the case. I am convinced now that it's an entirely different process to deconstruct a work than it is to compose one. I concluded this after becoming friends with a prominent writer at the university. He and I used to sit in bars and have conversations about writing over piles of chili cheese nachos with extra jalapeños and tamales. I tried to make the argument that criticism is writing in reverse. My pal quickly corrected me saying there is nothing organic in analyzing stories. He then told me that a story simply is.

¹ Believe me, I had tried everything. I took acid, cocaine, heroin, etc. Amazingly enough, I lived through all of this. The methadone was the only drug that ever really relaxed me except for opium. But it's hard to come by. Methadone you can make in your own house.

Nonetheless, I shall give it my best try. By now, I am sure my name has been marred a little around town. I am sure that it has been said that I am a drug addict and crazy; that I believe aliens are after me, and these things are very true. However, I am going to try to give my name a little reliability. I've already stated that I am educated of the highest degree. Moreover, I have no reason to lie. What good would it do me to tell the story inappropriately? I am no Kinbote, no Fanshawe². I have no writer to out-do, and there is nothing self-serving in this act. I am simply a man tied to his land, trapped by blades of grass and stumps of pine trees.

Here, I will try to tell the story in abstract first. Sometimes, it works best this way. Some of the best stories are told in abstract. For example, whether one believes in it or not, the Christian creation story is told in abstract, but Milton made great use of this story. So, too, that form may work for my purposes. Here is me trying my hand at it.

A man who was very powerful, but very angry curses his land. Not to anyone in his family, but to all outsiders. He goes against the natural order, and he conjures evil into reality. Then, the man dies in the fire he created. His wife and children, however, survive because the man told them what he was doing. Upset over the loss of their father, they blame the War. When they get older, they move back to their father's land to rebuild. For a while, it's the man's family who is in power until the land gets more urban, and the others' numbers outweigh the man's numbers. His children are no longer in power. Finally, there is no one left except for one descendant. He wants nothing to do

² Both of these narrators, if you recall, had invested interests in telling their stories. Kinbote wants to prove himself a King, and Fanshawe is obsessed with creating story scenarios in real life.

with his family or his land, but he is trapped. The souls of the dead force him to come home and do his ancestral father's bidding. The land needs souls to atone for the family it has lost. But the descendant is a good, God-fearing Southerner who wants no part of it, and so he is constantly at odds with himself and the land.

I'm afraid that's not how I wanted to tell it. It sounds so pedestrian and vaguely reminds me of a fairy tale. Forgive me. Faulkner had to tell his *Sound and The Fury* three times over before he got it right (in my critical opinion), and even then, Faulkner still didn't think he had told it correctly. He wanted to retell it but died before he could. Since I am not dead just yet, I shall try again. Maybe it is best to tell what I know. The old adage that I have heard touted in the university programs seems to apply best here – *write what you know*³. However, teachers and writers who advocate this style forget one thing that the Romantics have always advocated – *the power of the imagination*⁴. Certainly, I don't know much about being a young teenage girl, but I can imagine what it is like to be one because I am sure the young teenage boy and the young teenage girl

³ This is what all the hip-to-the-news writers seem to be doing or at least that is what my writer-pal-colleague told me. They like to live what I have deemed the “rock-n-roll lifestyle.” That is to say, if you need to write a story about a carpenter, you must go take up carpentry for a year. While Whitman may have agreed with this life, modern life in general doesn't lend itself very easily to it. Perhaps Flannery O'Connor said it best when she said one has all the experience he needs by the time he is twelve. He simply needs to write. This is what provides me the authority to write on subjects, in which I have little to no experience.

⁴ I believe the return to this classic idea can explain the recent growth of magical realism and surrealism as literary movements. After all, good writers are nothing more than good liars, and a good liar needs a damn good imagination.

share similar experiences in the context of human experience. This is to say that a heartbreak is a heartbreak, and male or female, it's going to hurt like hell if it's the first time. In this train of Byronic thought, I am going to continue talking about this horrendous alien and try to connect the dots. After all, this is my job as narrator, correct? To connect the dots and create some coherent narrative for the reader?

There is a young girl with freckles. She lives on the outskirts of town with her mother; she has no living father. Her name is Audrey Jean. She's quiet as a house at midnight on Christmas Eve and quite predictable. The alien has been asking me for some time to bring her to him. But, from the few encounters I've had with her, I couldn't bring myself to do it. She's a sweet girl and doesn't deserve to be put through the same vile tests he does on me when I don't do his bidding. I've only talked to her once when she and Marco, one of the Camarena boys, asked me why I drive around. I gave them the answer they wanted, which I am sure made me appear all the more crazy to them and everyone else in town. This may explain why they decided to prank me in the middle of the night. Only, they didn't know that this was the alien's plan all along. I foresaw what would happen earlier in the day. I hadn't miscalculated my mileage. I had tried to save them. The alien and the land, however, knew better.

Perhaps I should stop here and explain about the land and the alien. The land that the town knows as Roberts's Woods has been passed down in my family from father to son for over a hundred and fifty years. At present, it resides with me and only me as I am single and have no intention to marry or produce an heir. But this land does not grow with rain and fertilizer from dead trees and animal feces. This land is not natural. This

land grows by feeding off the dead. Thus, the alien continually requests a sacrifice, and Deadman's Curve perpetually takes lives.

There are diaries in my old man's study dedicated to explaining this phenomenon. Right after the Civil War, people from town saw their dead loved ones rising from the ground. My ancestor, Jason Roberts, was said to have burned alive with his woods, only the woods didn't burn down. He called for his children to come back to the woods, and they did. When they returned to town, they were never the same. They wanted to spend all their time out in those woods. That's when the killing started. Anything that touched the leaves, the grass, and the tree bark became cursed and eventually, died within a week. But no one in my family truly believes that Roberts died that night in the forest fire. Family lore has it that Roberts conjured the devil himself, made a damned deal with him, and now presides over the woods as a grunt worker to the devil. I, however, am inclined to believe that it was simply the alien taking a form that he knew Roberts would fear.

Now, the alien, that is a different story altogether. The alien does resemble Roberts from the pictures in the albums. And like the pictures, the alien is always dressed in period costume complete with billowed sleeves, vest, and suit pants. However, he is perpetually dusty, covered in what appears to be ashes. But where there should be his eyes, as I have already described, are two big black saucers shaped like almonds. When he opens his mouth to laugh, it is as if a cold gust of winter wind has found its way through the layers of my clothing. His commands are that of Roberts. He asks simple tasks of me. Drive out to the woods. Bring a human sacrifice. Satisfy the desires of your land. If I don't meet those requirements within the allotted time period, I'm taken away for testing while I'm asleep. That's another perk to living off methadone

– the uppers keep you awake. I’ve learned to literally sleep with one eye open so he doesn’t get the jump on me.

This is the story I tell everyone in town. There is some truth to it, but over the years, I’ve come to conclude that the manifestation is not an alien. He’s not Roberts either. He is some sort of representation of Roberts. Ghost is the word that comes to mind, but it is not the word I need. He is not a ghost; ghosts are generally powerless. They can barely manifest themselves in the physical world, and when they do, they do inane things like rolling a ball to prove they exist. This ghost doesn’t want to roll a ball; rather, he wants heads to roll. All in all, it’s better to outright lie about my findings. The town leaves me alone this way. If I even mentioned my suspicion of ghostly or demonic activity, everyone in town would have me on the front door steps of the Pentecostal preacher’s house, the right Reverend James Duffy, ready for a healing. I can see it now – praise be to JE-sus almighty! Here is where he would lay his hands on my forehead and thrust me to the ground. Out demon, out! Oh, but I would have news for him. The alien Roberts doesn’t care to be mocked. As soon as he caught Duffy driving out by Deadman’s and the woods, he’d have his hide.

Another word of importance about the alien Roberts. Though he does appear to be physically like my predecessor, I have also come to suspect that he originates from the woods. Whenever I went out there as a young boy, I would see him lurking behind the trees. At the time I didn’t know it was him, but I do now, and I can say with certainty that it was he who tormented me in the woods as a child. He sent shivers down my spine because his hands were not the hands of a normal man. I never spoke to him, but I always felt as if he was watching me play with my cousins. As a kid, I simply chalked

the figure up to my rampant imagination. I probably should have told someone that I saw him.

I see him most prominently in the woods. Sometimes, though, he manifests in my house at the foot of my bed (only for a split second), and at other times, I see him in my rearview mirror. From the back seat of my run down automobile, he tells me where to go and who to follow. I drive around so as to save not only my life but others' as well. I know this is the main reason people in town think that I am nuts. But if only they knew I was saving their lives! They would thank me, and the mayor Presley would declare a day in honor of my great sacrifice and all the little school kiddies would have a new school holiday. But no one knows what I do.

Anyway, I digress. We must go back to Audrey. He wanted Audrey. But I told him no. I followed her around town like a guardian angel in the flesh. She never went anywhere. She'd go to school and back home. She'd walk to the Camarena boy's house, and they would sit on the porch until it was time for supper. Then, she'd walk back across the cornfield to her house. Once, almost once, I grabbed her in the cornfield. Poor thing. She jumped as if someone had shot her. At other times, I rode around town to see if I could offer another girl instead. Audrey didn't deserve death. I presented him Angela instead.

Now, Angela! There was a spoiled brat. She lived in the city proper. And while she appeared to be so wholesome from any superficial point of view, her life was

artificial even down to her hair color. Now, Angela was no V.⁵, but she was a little too concerned with material things. The girl lived a life of excess without restraint. She used her parents' credit card to purchase bags upon bags of clothing. Her closet overflowed with meaningless garments. She drove a brand new Ford Mustang burning up all her gas within a week in a town that is no bigger than ten miles wide or long! She was always on her phone while driving out to my land where the kids all did what they wanted to do without their parents' permission. Most often, when I rode by just to check up on the land, I saw her and all her little friends passing a joint around while they took turns screwing each other in the back of a Ford Explorer extended cab.

I am not saying Angela deserved to die. I am simply saying that out of the two girls, it was easier to bring myself to take her out to the woods than Audrey. There are some things that the police won't comment on publicly since we like to sweep things under the rug down here. Angela's family are prominent, upstanding citizens of Nettleton. Their family is as almost as old as mine. On the surface, they represent the cookie-cutter "American Dream," but underneath it all there is a lot of dirt. It was all expressed in Angela. But these pieces of information, things I knew all along, will be recorded in the official report. For instance, at the time of her death, Angela was twenty-three weeks pregnant. She hadn't realized it because she wasn't showing because of the

⁵ Recall, if you will, that in Pynchon's masterful novel of the same name, V. is hardly a woman because she has become so materialistic that she ceases to exist as a person but as something. It is quite possible Angela was on a more conventional path to becoming like her. She probably would have been one of those girls who would be more silicone and plastic by the end of her life than she would be actual human cells. What a dreadful thought!

methadone. She used it in the first place to lose weight, but when she realized she was long overdue, she tried to force an abortion through the meth. She called me late one night. She got my number from Marco and was as frantic as if she were calling 911. I couldn't believe my luck when she called! After a short conversation, I assured her that no one would see her out in the clearing. I fixed her up a lethal dose of the stuff and headed for the land.

When I came upon the woods, I saw her Mustang parked by the road. I went in and found her waiting in the middle of the clearing. I showed her the syringe. She told me she had no money to pay me, that she'd given the last of her cash advances on her credit card to Marco a couple of days ago. I pocketed the goods, and I told her my policy like I tell all the weasels who buy and sell from me: cash only. But this girl, she was desperate. She dropped to her knees, undoing my pants saying *no man can resist this*. And before I knew what was happening, her mouth was on me. I tilted my head back in utter pleasure, and I saw the alien's head poking up from the ground. He was watching me, grinning. I closed my eyes, trying to make him disappear, but he was still there when I reopened them. I looked down at her black roots peeking out from underneath the blonde. And then I felt the white hot rush come from within. She wiped her mouth and stood, holding out her palm. I repeated the words from earlier: *cash only*. I turned my back to her and began walking back to my car, rather dumbfounded by what had just occurred. Were teenage girls so slutty these days? Back before I looked like a homeless weirdo from Bourbon Street, I had been a decent looking man and had a few students approach me in class for dates, sexual offers in exchange for higher grades, etc. But I didn't know that sluttiness had gotten so youthful. It really made no difference to me

though. It wasn't like I cared about these sorts of issues before I started using the methadone.

And that's when she fired the gun the first time. A warning shot to show me that she had a gun and wasn't afraid to use it. Turning back to her, I saw that barrel aimed straight at me. I wanted to ask her *you think I really care if I am shot? Please, you'd be doing me a favor.* I took a step towards her, and she shook behind the gun. She looked off to the side, and she fired another shot. A near miss. *Give it to me. Why? Because I can't get an abortion and I'm not having this baby. I've been pregnant and didn't even know it. I'm sure it won't survive anyway. I'm sure if I take enough of the stuff my body will just get rid of it.* And when I saw how pathetic she looked, I just handed the goods to her. She sat down and shot up like a pro. *It's a suicide mission, you know, a kamikaze.* But she just looks at me and asks why I'm talking about drinking. I can't help but feel sorry for the girl. She nods her head, grabs the gun, places the barrel right on her heart, and tells me to pull the trigger. I do. Her eyes are like glass marbles and they twitch. I simply finished what she started by giving her what was left in the syringe to act as a sort of anesthetic.

Realizing what kind of shit I was in and seeing the alien rise completely from the ground, I ran. Ran as fast as I could. On my way out, I don't look behind. I know he's behind me. I can feel his breath on my neck raising the hairs like dead people from their graves. Once I hit the boundary line, I get in the car and head home. It's time for another dosage.

This is where it gets tricky. While I'm high, I realize what is going to happen. I can see it all in still frames like I am taking a picture every time I blink my eyes, but the

frames run together like a fast motion slide show. Marco and Audrey Jean's movements are sharp and abrupt. I see them tossing a lighter. I hear them discussing what to do. I know they are going to come find me. And they do. They drive up, and I run out because alien Roberts is at the end of my bed again. And when I get in my car, he's there too. He's whispering in my ear about how he doesn't like to be tricked. He tells me I do a shitty job at getting instructions right. He commands me to drive to the woods.

When my car runs out of gas, I make a break for it. I didn't know the dumb twit would try to be a hero and save me. He should have just left me out there. Doesn't he know this is my land? Doesn't he know that this is a part of me? About halfway in, I climb up into an old deer stand and stay quiet for as long as possible. I can hear everything – the sound of Audrey's tears falling off her cheeks and hitting the soft, wet earth; Marco's boots pounding into the soil as he runs back to the highway; and I can hear him. Damn alien Roberts. I want to go down there and help her. But I'm too chicken. Eventually, she runs off. Good for her.

Alien Roberts is behind me again. He is sitting right next to me in the deer stand, squatting with those claws on top of his knees. *Drive*, he commands. *You are to drive without stopping. I want every inch of this land covered until you find a way to get her here.* I nod and leave the deer stand. I can't help but feel that he is following me on my way out that he is in the back of my car. I open up my glove compartment and shoot up my spare. But I can still see him. Clear as ever. And when I squint my eyes shut and open them, those empty, black eyes are still staring straight back at me. I drive home. I drive to the gas station. I drive to the Piggly Wiggly. I drive back to the land. I drive for twelve hours straight. At night, when I take off my shoes and get ready for bed, I wonder

if he would show up and tell me to drive again. And if I didn't, I wonder exactly what torture he would procure for me this time. But, he doesn't come, and I get a good night's rest.

A few days later, however, I could not deny the fact that Alien Roberts was able to sustain himself in longer periods outside of the forest. He showed up across from me at the breakfast table (which was actually my meth lab table). I gave myself two times what I normally took in the morning. I usually was pretty strategic about my doses. If I could tell it was going to be an especially bad day, as I could tell it would be today, I would take more than I needed and give myself less this afternoon. When I got in the car to do my riding around though, I headed back to my house. I needed more. That was risky. But he touched me. He's never been able to touch me. But he reached out to me with those claw like hands, grabbed my arm, and demanded that at precisely three after six I drive due south on highway three seventy one. *No excuses*, he said.

From the minute he touched me, my attitude on life changed. What had I done with my life? Quite frankly, nothing, and I wanted to do nothing with it. There is no recovery from being an almost homeless meth addict when I was formerly a professor at Ole Miss. Why had I started taking the meth in the first place? Right, Alien Roberts sightings. But then again, I never asked if anyone else had seen him. I just assumed they couldn't. There was nothing to say that they couldn't see him though. Anyone could see him, right?

This is where it all gets a bit fuzzy I'm afraid. I took a heavy hit. I shot up and then smoked some more. I had to be on the lookout now since Alien Roberts could physically manifest himself now. I started to see colors when I talked. And then the

colors changed into words. The colored words were like a living mood ring. If I said clam, the word was blue. If I said love, the word was pink. It was amazing! However, I was convinced Roberts could see all of this. I needed to leave my house immediately. He could see my thoughts. He would see that I had been planning to double cross him all along. I was certain. I had to get out. He was a powerful man, and he was getting stronger every day. But if I rode around, I would be doing exactly what he wanted me to do. He would probably be in the backseat already, waiting. I threw all my blankets over the windows to my room and hid underneath my bed. I forgot to shut my door. I waited for him as the ground was vibrating with sounds of distant feet. But I couldn't wait anymore. He had to be on to me.

I decided driving was the answer even though it was the answer he wanted. I just would not drive where he wanted. I was having one of those moments again, one where I foresee what will happen. And no matter how I change the outcome, Roberts is still bound to get his way in some shape or fashion. A young girl in town had to die. He wanted Audrey, but I gave him Angela. This is another moment. He's not done with those two, Audrey and Marco. It's not enough for him; it's not enough for the land. This is the point where I ask myself, Why their blood? Then, I understand. Marco has lived here the shortest amount of time, and Audrey's family moved away when her Mother was younger. They are outsiders. The land doesn't like outsiders. Alien Roberts doesn't approve of outsiders. I covered my mouth. Watch it Herb, he cannot only see thoughts, but he hears them as well.

I would warn them. It is my only chance for redemption. I could see it already. I would make them understand that I am not crazy and that I am not lying to them. I would

show them how serious it is. They must believe me. Yet again, I save the town and go unnoticed. The clock. Six o'clock. Where did he tell me to be? I am not supposed to drive by whose house? I glance in my rearview mirror half afraid of what I will find. It's nothing but darkness. I sigh and when I open my eyes, he is there. And I know I have no choice. But I keep my secret thoughts to myself. I don't say them so he can't hear them, so he can't see them. But when he speaks, I see his words, and his words are always red. The first thing I do is I kidnap Audrey. She is still being held in the patient room at the clinic. It is too easy. There is only one nurse to bypass, and Audrey can't speak to scream for help. There I am cradling her as if she is my own, and she silently screams for help. They are examining her in order to send her off to Whitfield. Poor girl. I consider myself an angel in that respect since I saved her from the looney bin. I tie up her wrists and gag her, throwing her in the back seat, but not before handing her the rosary. And then I set off to driving.

At precisely three after six, there is a car backing out of Marco's driveway. My gas pedal is almost touching the floor. This car is a tank. It was made in the early eighties, meaning it is all metal. The other car doesn't stand a chance. *That's a good son* Roberts says. Before I know it, I'm out of the car, trading hit for hit with some big Mexican boy while Marco has an incredulous look on his face. Blood, as red as Roberts' words, is everywhere. Eventually, Carlos shoves me down and attends to his brothers and sisters. Marco is still concerned for his mother. I get back in the car and Roberts is still there. Tell him you have Audrey. Tell him you are taking her out to the woods. Tell him that she is going to die tonight. And I do and when I say these things, the words are yellow.

I see alien Roberts in my rearview mirror. He's smiling at Audrey Jean, and she is chewing through the bandanna. She is kicking so hard she throws herself to the floorboard. *Go home* he says. I nod. I know what he means. Audrey is still wiggling around in the back like an earthworm does after it has been washed out from the dirt during a summer rain. *Go now* he says. I understand. He means the police are going to be here at any moment. I see Marco handing the cordless phone to Carlos. The alien Roberts says he will meet me in the clearing.

When I arrive at my destination, my accursed woods, my land of my fathers, I glance over my shoulder to provide reassurance to Audrey Jean. She is still inching her way this way and that, which I told her is quite admirable for a girl her size. I tell her not to fear the alien. Do whatever he says. I quickly realize my words are yellow, and I try to hide them by swatting at them like flies. Darting out of the car, I make sure the alien Roberts didn't see that. Audrey did, however, and I show her my best smile, not the simple pressed lips in a u shape, but the smile that shows my teeth that look like rotting pumpkins to tell her everything is going to be ok. I won't let anything happen to you. She pauses and begins crying again.

Throwing her over my shoulders piggyback style, I start for the clearing. I am not sure how I am going to pull this off just yet, but I know I am not giving Audrey over to the alien Roberts. As per the alien's request, I have containers of gas waiting in my car. But I am not going to burn Audrey alive like they want. I simply cannot. The sins of my fathers should not have to be atoned through her, and the land cannot punish a person for leaving. And yet, here they were trying to take yet another life. Quite frankly I was fed up with it.

I know Marco is coming. It's another moment where there are still frames flashing through my mind. There is little time. I'm not sure how to pull this off. As I keep walking towards the spot, I tell myself, as I have thought many times, it can all end if I let it. The land doesn't have any power after me, and the alien Roberts will disappear with the land if there is no one connected to it. Or at least that is my hypothesis. This thought is one that I have known very well for a while now, and many times, I have wanted to put into practice if I would only let myself. Tonight, I would at least try.

When I get to the clearing, alien Roberts is waiting on the stump. I set Audrey down in front of him. He says nothing to Audrey; he doesn't even look at her, but he comes right straight for me. He put his claw on my right shoulder congratulating me for getting a request right for once. I nod too afraid that if I say something, he could see my words and their colors. I cannot think of what to do. I was once a smart man, and I feel I still am, but how do I accomplish this feat? I immediately begin to tell myself that I had screwed everything up already by bringing Audrey to the clearing. But no! There still has to be some way. I stomp off to get the gas containers.

As I am dousing the entire premise of the woods with gas, I think I finally have the perfect plan. I think I have found a way to rid myself of the alien Roberts, give Audrey back to her family and friends, and liberate Nettleton of these cursed woods. The answer has been simple all along really, and honestly, I have known it deep down in my heart as well. The answer, however, goes against all human nature, but that is simply an element of the answer that I have come to terms with. I throw the last red and yellow gallon gas container in the trunk. I am beginning to sober up again, and I want another hit. But no, I won't because I feel like that is cheating. I want to know what burning at

the stake feels like. The woods are ready to burn at the flick of a lighter, which is sitting in the front seat. I should be walking back to the clearing, but I stop for a moment to take it all in. This is the land of my fathers, and I can't help but wonder if it has also been a hell for all other Roberts? Did every one of us after Jason experience the alien Roberts? And now, I am fully aware that I have never contemplated these things because I was too busy trying to deny reality. It is such a shame, I think, to figure this out only now. Maybe there would have been a different answer had I thought about this earlier before the meth and before losing my job.

As I walk back to the clearing, I am determined not to let my fear and my natural need for self-preservation sway my will. No one is telling me to do this, not even the alien. No one is even going to know that it is me unless they see what happens or they find my ashes and run tests on them. I highly doubt that would happen. No one is even going to miss me. When I arrive at the place for the second time, I squat down and stare at Audrey for a second. I feel like I want to say something to her, but I really can't say anything. What I do tell her, though, is this: *Audrey, when I untie you, run. Run like the devil is after your soul. Don't look back.* Her eyes widen, and I untie her feet. *The easiest way out is in a straight line. I am going to burn this place up. The perimeter is already lined with gas. The alien can't see us right now, but I know he'll be angry. I am going to chase you, but I am not coming for. Don't be afraid.* I take the gag out of her mouth, and she shoots off into the darkness without a sound, though I can tell if she were able to speak, she would be screaming. I follow her, and I can feel those empty black eyes rising from the dirt. I reach for the lighter in my pocket just to make sure that it is there. When we get to the edge, Audrey leaps across the boundary line and takes one

look back. I hold up the lighter, almost as if I want her approval. Then, I feel his claws on me. Audrey looks as if she has seen the alien Roberts too. She covers her mouth with her hands. I don't even care to look back. *Don't you dare.* But I flick the lighter and toss it towards the edge of the woods. The whole place lights up.

While the woods are burning all around me and the heat is beating the back of my neck, I peer out of the wall of fire, and this is the last thing I see: two teenagers. One, a young, tan boy with the blackest of hair, standing tall embracing a young, pale skinned girl in a blue cloth hospital dress, a white rosary held in her hand. She is barefoot and unkempt, but in the moonlight, she is strangely beautiful, light reflecting off her freckles and tears. They pull away from each other as they realize other people from town are watching. People are separating them. And the girl opens her mouth wide in protest, and the words finally come out. The people are shocked. The words are barely audible from here, but for me, they are visible. I see the color, and it makes me smile. The boy pushes past the others, and he embraces her again, a blue tint blanketing them as if they were from *Starry Night*. The searing sensation begins in my left foot, and I understand this same sensation is the exact same feeling my ancestor felt. But I do not look back into the fire; I keep my eyes on the teenagers, who are now hand in hand, making their way back to town.

And by the time the Sherriff or the Deputy finds this, all that I have written will have come to pass. And I will have lifted the Roberts' Family curse for good.

CHAPTER VI

JAMIE

My name is Angela Hester, and I am dead – of that I am sure. As to where the hell I am, I can't say. I know I'm dead because I have no physical body, but I'm not quite a ghost either. I still feel the pinprick of the needle in my right arm, and I feel my baby's kicking while the liquid snakes its way through my veins. Only I know I am dead. I watched my funeral. I was there when they lowered my body to the ground at Odd Fellow's. I hear my mother's weeping, the sound of my father's sandpaper skin rubbing her cashmere sweater in our eggshell white kitchen. I see my friends whispering about my cousin, Audrey Jean. I am hyper-aware of everything taking place in this tiny town. I yell. I want someone to hear me, but no one does.

I thought when you died, if you believed in God or some kind of afterlife, you would go straight to heaven. But this is no heaven. I can see the entire town of Nettleton from where I am. But I am sure this isn't Hell. There's no burning lake and the temperature is more accommodating than a sweltering summer day in Mississippi. And while I can see all and know all that goes on in town, I relive my own life. It just keeps playing back for me in my head no matter how hard I try to concentrate on what is going on below me. Ironically enough, I thought I would recall the big moments like the first time I drove my Mustang or my first kiss with Michael on the back porch. Like, when you're dead, you're supposed to remember all the good things and sit around and glorify

God with angel wings, right? But there's none of that here, and I definitely don't have any angel wings. But all I do is remember all the little moments, and it's those little moments that hurt the most.

I remember in eighth grade I told about how my mom told me that Aunt Sam had tried to abort Audrey Jean. She got so mad at me. Wouldn't speak to me for weeks. But I hadn't said anything that wasn't true. Audrey *wasn't* supposed to be here. And when I think about that, I almost kick myself for saying it. I see the scene played out over and over again. Every time I say, "Audrey ain't got no Daddy. She ain't supposed to be here." When I said it, I thought it hurt her, but now I think it hurts me more. I wince every time the words come out. I just want to kill myself. But that is the thing about this place. I can't. I know. I have tried. Believe me, I have. I have gone down to the city and let school buses run over me, I have let deer hunters shoot me, and I drank house cleaner, and I am still stuck here reliving every crappy thing I have ever done to anyone. And I am truly sorry for it all now.

That's when this girl walks up. At first, I think it is Audrey. But Audrey is the exact opposite of me. Audrey's got these ugly freckles that cover her entire face. I would lay my base on thick if I were her, but she doesn't. She just wears the bare minimum – base, eyeliner, and mascara. She's pretty flat chested and she's kind of short. Her hair is brown. I prefer to keep mine like it was when I was little – blonde. The only thing Audrey's got going for her is that she has green eyes and that she is skinny. But this girl who walks up looks a lot like me. She looks like she is my age and my height. We look like we should be sisters. I don't wait for her to talk. I want the hell out of here.

"Where am I?"

“Does it matter? You’re with me.” She smiles. It kind of weirds me out. Her smile falls from her face like it is weighted down with a brick. “You don’t know me.”

“I don’t even know where the fuck I am. How the hell should I know you?” This weird chick is pissing me off. I don’t have time for stupid two-year-old games.

“I thought we could spend some time together. You can fix my hair. I have always wanted you to fix my hair.” The girl runs her hand through her hair that looks like pieces of hay and clumps of it fall out. She hands them to me like they are a gift. I scream. “We have all the time we need here. You should get to know me. I’m not going anywhere for a long time, and neither are you.” She steps toward me offering her dead bird’s nest hair. She shoves her hand to me, closing her hand and smiling with this smug approving manner. I bat her hand away from me only to watch her arm fly off from her shoulder. She twists her lips in a weird fashion. They turn in a way that is completely impossible for a normal person.

She sighs. “That wasn’t very nice. Your mother should have taught you better manners.” After she retrieves her arm, snaps it back on like it was a lego or something, she comes back and sits in front of me. She pats the spot in front of her like I am some cat she wants to sit down next to her. But I am too afraid to refuse. “We have so much time now. Isn’t that such a pleasant thought?” I shiver.

“Why are you here?”

She pauses. “My mother.” She pulls a deck of card from her sweater pocket.

“Let’s play go fish.” I nod. I have this strange feeling that this is my punishment, my hell, and at the same time, I feel like that is not the truth. “And you?”

“I don’t know. Where are we?”

“In between, I think.” She pulls a card from the top of the deck.

“What’s your name? Do you think we’re dead? Did you see yourself get buried? I do.”

She places her hand down gazing at me. She looks like she could cry. “Yes, I think we’re dead. Yes, I did see myself buried. But I don’t have a name.”

“You’re dead and don’t have a name? Everyone has a name.”

“I never existed outside of my mother. She is my grave. She has a tattoo on the left side of her stomach that reads Jamie. That must be my name.” I swallow my spit that is as hard as rocks. I grab my left side. A burning sensation starts pulsating from there and spreads. Suddenly, I know. I will be here fixing Jamie’s hair and playing cards for as long as it takes.