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Run from Cover

Vanessa Wells Beeson

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Run from cover

By

Vanessa Wells Beeson

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

Mississippi State, Mississippi

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In *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O'Connor says this about the use of violence, "With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially" (113). As a fiction writer, one of the questions I struggle with is the justifiability of an overtly violent landscape. In my critical introduction, I will explore how the writers Christopher Coake, Monica Drake, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Benjamin Percy leverage violence through the symbolism of architectural and natural structures—e.g. buildings and caves—in order to reveal something essential about their characters and the larger world. I will also discuss how I strive to use architectural and natural structures in my own story collection to say something essential about characters navigating a landscape fraught with violence and loss.

DEDICATION

To Ray and Avett Beeson

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CHAPTER I
CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

In her 1957 essay collection *Mystery and Manners*, Flannery O'Connor writes: "With the serious writer, violence is never an end in itself. It is the extreme situation that best reveals what we are essentially" (113). O'Connor claims that violence can be successfully deployed in fiction as a means to revealing something important and true about a work's characters, which will hopefully translate into something meaningful in the life of the reader that speaks to the larger world. In particular, writers Christopher Coake, Monica Drake, Charlotte Perkins Gilman, and Benjamin Percy leverage violence in the way O'Connor describes through the symbolism of architectural and natural structures—e.g. buildings and caves—and in doing so evoke the architectural and environmental uncanny in their stories in order to say something essential about either violence, loss, or both. I argue that these writers employ the architectural and environmental uncanny to unsettle their subjects, something I also strive to do in my collection of stories, where characters try to navigate landscapes fraught with violence and loss.

The uncanny is the sense of un-home in a place that should be home. In his 1919 essay "The Uncanny," Freud defines the uncanny as "that class of terrifying which leads back to something long known to us, once very familiar" (1-2). He borrows from German the term "unheimlich," which he says is "the opposite of *heimlich*, *heimisch*, meaning

‘familiar,’ ‘native,’ ‘belonging to the home’” (2). The first short story I ever wrote (not included in this thesis) is an example of the uncanny for me. “Under the Mimosa Tree” was a short story about how my grandfather honored my grandmother after she died. My grandparents’ house was my first home and there was a mimosa tree in the backyard that didn’t grow well in the Midwestern climate. Once my grandmother died, the tree flourished. My grandfather took it as a sign that my grandmother’s spirit was still with us and somehow attached to the land, so he buried her ashes beneath the tree. When he died a decade later, we buried his ashes under the same tree. While my short story detailed our family lore surrounding the tree as a symbol of my grandparents’ love in life and death, the uncanny occurred for me a few years after the story was written and after my family had sold the house. I downloaded Google Earth to find that the new owners had cut the tree down. The tree’s absence gave me a sense of un-home in a place that had once been home.

Anthony Vidler discusses how place, specifically architecture, embodies the uncanny. In *The Architectural Uncanny: Essays in the Modern Unhomely* published in 1992, Vidler claims, “the theme of the uncanny serves to join architectural speculation on the peculiarly unstable nature of ‘house and home’ to more general reflection on the questions of social and individual estrangement, alienation, exile, and homelessness” (ix). He goes on to say, “architecture reveals the deep structure of the uncanny in a more than analogical way, demonstrating a disquieting slippage between what seems homely and what is definitely unhomely” (ix-x). Violence or trauma in fiction are often personified in homes and natural places, which bear the violence that befall their inhabitants. In Christopher Coake’s 2005 short story “All Through the House,” the author employs the

architectural uncanny through narration, point of view, description, and character dialogue to demonstrate the psychological projections of a suicidal murderer, Wayne; a murder victim, Jenny, wife of Wayne; and a survivor, Sheriff Larry Thompkins, Wayne's best friend who is having an affair with Jenny that Wayne finds out about just before he commits the crimes.

"All Through the House" is narrated in reverse chronology, through alternating points of view. Telling the story backwards amplifies the story's uncanniness by disrupting the idea of time as a stabilizing linear certainty. Additionally, because of the story's unusual form, we see the house before we see its inhabitants: a husband and wife, two young boys, and the wife's parents, all who are brutally murdered on Christmas Eve in that space. By presenting the house before the characters, the house itself becomes like a character, much as in Edgar Allan Poe's story "The Fall of the House of Usher."

Coake's story is framed by sections of time titled "Now" and "Then" (245, 296). The story opens with "Now" and begins with a third person omniscient narration describing the woods first (245) and then transitioning to describe the animals that inhabit those woods: a deer in the meadow, ever-present raccoon and rabbits, a fox's den (246). The point of view is still omniscient, depicting the wild, when the reader comes across the story's first character, Sheriff Larry Thompkins:

After his cruiser has rolled away down the track, the woods and the meadow are, for a time, silent. But before long what lives there sniffs the air, and, in fits and starts, emerges. Noses press to the ground, and into the burrows of mice. Things eat, and are eaten. Here memories are held in muscles and bellies, not in minds.

The policeman, and the house, and all the people who have come and gone here, are not forgotten. They are, simply, never remembered. (247)

This environmentally uncanny, non-human point of view alienates the reader from the house in the woods as something unsettled and inaccessible.

The story ends on a “Then” section with imagery of the same woods years prior, before the house is even built; this section, because of all we’ve read already, foreshadows the violence set to take place in the clearing in a distant future. Wayne and Larry, as boys, are camping out in Sullivan Woods, and “near their tent was an old circle of charred stones, ringing a pile of damp ashes and cinders” (297). This imagery serves as a microcosm of the house that will be set ablaze in that far future. This nontraditional way of storytelling amps up the story’s uncanniness as we come to understand this house isn’t a home but instead a site of an incredible act of violence.

Description throughout “All Through the House” reveals a house with bad bones. The house gains notoriety when an acclaimed crime author writes an exposé about the murder/suicide that has happened there. As sheriff, Larry must police the area, keeping away teenagers and gothic gawker-tourists. Two of those tourists, a young couple, confess to Larry that they hope to conceive a child in the uninhabited murder/suicide house; Larry narrates, “The house, they said, was a place of energy” (248). Larry runs off the couple and appraises the house, “its empty windows, its stupid dead house-face, and couldn’t imagine anything further from the truth” (248). Larry sees the house not as a source of energy but the exact opposite: he anthropomorphizes it as both “dead” and “like a baby crying” (248). Later on, we get a sense of Wayne’s dream home as a house with bad bones:

The house squatted, dim and orange. It had never been much to look at, even when new, it was small, unremarkable, square—barely more than a prefab. The garage, jutting off the back, was far too big, and knocked the whole structure out of proportion—made it look deformed. The windows were too little, too few.

(250)

The description shows the house as deeply flawed even from the beginning; the structure is less a homestead and more a deformity. This deformity is rooted in how Wayne goes about buying it without consulting his new wife, Jenny. While Wayne feels a connection to this land in his rural hometown, Jenny sees opportunity elsewhere and feels betrayed and disappointed when Wayne makes the purchase without her consent. Even from an architectural standpoint, the marital home is an immediate source of conflict and disappointment which will permeate the couple's relationship until the end.

Architectural uncanniness is present in the dialogue as well, as when Larry recalls a particular memory of the couple's housewarming party. The dialogue between Larry and Jenny, who ends up murdered, shows how the house symbolizes a loveless marriage. At the party, Jenny tells Larry that she hates the house and says, "*Why did I ever agree to this?*" When Larry asks her if she's talking about the house, Jenny replies, "*The house, the marriage. God, Larry, you name it*" (250). For Jenny, the house and marriage are one in the same: a mistake. As ugly as the house is, she views her marriage as even uglier and regrets her decision to be with Wayne. Wayne's desire for this structure to be his idyllic home juxtaposed to Jenny's utter aversion to the place shows two opposing instances of the house itself taking on the psychological projections of the story's characters.

“All Through the House” has seven sections told from five points of view with the sections told from Jenny’s and Wayne’s points of view, in particular, evoking the architectural uncanny. Jenny’s point of view occurs in two sections: first when we see the young couple on their first anniversary as Wayne tells Jenny his plans, and second during the night of the murder/suicide. The anniversary night imagery “reverse foreshadows” the clearing as a site of future violence. That section, titled “1970,” opens with Jenny’s point of view as Wayne leads her blindfolded through the woods. From Jenny’s point of view, we later learn the blueprints reveal “A simple two-story house—the ugliest thing she had ever seen” (291). When Jenny says the house isn’t her dream, Wayne topples the picnic table, breaks their wedding china, and cuts himself (293-294). The point of view foregrounds Jenny’s fear while the broken plates and Wayne’s spilled blood reverse foreshadow the murder/suicide that will take place in the house. Wayne’s point of view at the story’s end is uncanny as well. In the final paragraph, Wayne, a boy at the time, imagines greeting his future wife in a home in Sullivan Woods. He sees her at the kitchen table, she stands to welcome him, he embraces her, “and said, into her soft neck and hair, his voice deep: *I’m home*” (301). With this closing image we see a man who *we* know will grow up to commit murder and suicide. In this final scene, though, he is just a young boy in a clearing, imagining an ideal home with an ideal wife. The architectural uncanny brings to the surface this future violence which we know will befall the inhabitants of this particular place. In seeing young Wayne’s fantasy, we see the source of his desire not as a benign dream but as a seed of desecration and destruction. As readers, we know Wayne’s desire to build a dream house and dream life and his failure in doing so in this wild place is what shapes him into a killer and causes him to take his own life.

Like “All Through the House,” Monica Drake’s 2016 short story “The Arboretum” evokes the architectural and environmental uncanny to conjure up physical manifestations of a spiritual reckoning to acknowledge a past violence. In Oregon, where “The Arboretum” takes place, a murder is not considered a material fact and is not something a seller is required to disclose during a real estate transaction. New buyers Baysie and Colin and their young daughters, Vanessa and Lucia, get more than they bargained for when they purchase an overgrown arboretum as an unlikely oasis amid a yawning desert of suburban sprawl. Unbeknownst to them, the home is a site of multiple child murders, and there is an allusion that the land was once the site of slavery. In this story, both the architectural and environmental uncanny provide the same distorting, destabilizing feeling we find in many Southern gothic texts. When Baysie runs into a local in the grocery store, the old woman tells her, “Slaves used to work that land” (27). The arboretum is first a site of slavery (pre-1843 before Oregon’s first black exclusion laws outlawed the practice and banished blacks). Next, it becomes the site of “a Sears’s kit house in the late 1890’s” (20). Lastly, it is the final undeveloped land parcel surrounded by a commercial wasteland. The history of the land provides insight into the history of America’s sources of capitalism. Drake uses the sense of space arrested in time to signify a history of commercial consumption that can’t be forgotten.

The uncanniness of “The Arboretum” is found in structures—architectural and wild—that seem to want to leach secrets of a former violence. At first, the house and land are a pastoral dream for Baysie, who desires to give her children an upbringing in the country where they can live and play unencumbered by the concrete jungle of city living. Her description of the house, however, is immediately uncanny: “The house would haunt

their dreams when they grew up” (15). In seeking a rural setting to raise their children, the couple finds “an oversized, irregular lot with an aging orchard, saddled with a possibly problematic well and a decrepit house” (17). The dilapidated home and its lush surroundings are simultaneously idyllic and unsettling. The lot is surrounded on all sides by commercial property. At night, the sounds and lights of commercialization infiltrate the home’s windows and walls. It’s during the night that Baysie begins to hear a radio she’s convinced is coming from the cellar. These nightly transmissions begin her descent into insomnia. The half-cellar below the house is described as “like a caving, or being buried alive” (22). The word “kill” has been carved into one of the cellar’s wooden beams, and a neighbor talks of bodies buried on the property. From a violent past that seems to seep from the cellar to the present-day commercial florescence that permeates the walls of the girls’ bedroom on the second floor each night, the house itself and the objects within—burnt grilled cheese sandwiches, a century-old toy sentry, the red car dealership balloon bobbing eerily in the dark—the house seems to absorb the world around it, as a conduit to communicate unfinished business. It seems to find a listener in Baysie, someone who can reconcile the consumptive stories that plague this land.

Not only does the house itself evoke the architectural uncanny; the natural structures on the property do as well—each of them communicating the land’s secrets. For example, the trees are described as sentient: “Trees swayed around me. Their leaves shook with a thousand hands rustling hello” (21). When Baysie is outside at night, the world around her feels alive:

The branches of an apple tree shook as though an animal had jumped from one to the next. A wind slid up my thighs, in the night, under my short nightgown.

Crickets and cicadas made a sound like distant laughing children, the laugh track to a sitcom that didn't end. It was like the grass was full of tiny giggling babies.

So beautiful, and creepy. (24)

Even though the story is set in Oregon, Drake draws on Southern gothic tropes like the dilapidated plantation house amid an overgrown landscape and a site of former slave graves. She's seemingly drawing on Poe and others: the once domesticated wilderness surrounding the house is alive, while the house itself embodies death, specifically the death of murdered children.

Communication itself is uncanny in the story, specifically the radio transmitted from parts unknown (22), and Baysie describing herself as a conduit (36). A mix of music and voices calls out to Baysie each night. One particular night, her weary husband, Colin, says the noise is the sound of the drive-thrus that surround their land. Baysie remains unconvinced. The house produces material evidence beyond the radio when Baysie burns grilled cheese only to have the discarded sandwiches turn up, twice, in odd places. When she confronts Colin about the sandwiches, he dismisses her. She persists, saying she knows these sandwiches: "This was my language. The house was talking to me. It was telling me about my own mistakes: they don't go away. The trash goes out, but it seeps back in tiny increments, like the backflow of blood, the rush that causes a heart murmur" (32). Baysie believes the house is speaking to her negligence as a mother. She connects the sandwiches, along with the ancient toy soldier that shows up in odd places, to the discovery that mail is being sent to the house from an organization called Parents of Murdered Children. These clues convince her to satiate the ghosts of the murdered children with food—cupcakes and macaroni and cheese—in order to help the spirits

move past their trauma and leave the house for good. She takes the food down to the cellar and lights a candle in each of the 36 cupcakes she's prepared and sings "Happy Birthday" to the ghosts. Her husband discovers her passed out in the cellar and admonishes her because she could have burned the house down had the wood not been so damp. Where Baysie feels uncanniness, Colin sees his wife as being irrational. Colin has cool-headed detachment while Baysie feels the land's past permeating into their present lives. For Baysie, the architectural uncanniness is the manifestation of some unfinished business the house has with the violence that has befallen its former inhabitants that won't relent until she intervenes.

In the end, Baysie acquiesces to therapy and medication at her husband's behest, yet she explains, "no matter what I took, at night, I saw the children, and the soldier, and the stories of families gone wrong" (39). The story's last paragraph shows that violence and trauma hold fast to the house and surrounding land—and more broadly, to all land:

Maybe we could've bought a new house somewhere, a house without its history detailed in the countertops and misdirected mail. Subdivisions kept pushing forward all around us powered with the optimism of the new. That optimism had us surrounded by surveyor's stakes with fluttering ribbons bright and ugly as crime scene tape. The whole country, maybe the whole planet, had been divided and subdivided, paved and covered in bark dust. But I heard the laughing field and knew the optimism was thin. Beneath the pavement, the siding, the new plaster and streetlights, ghosts searched for last meals. (40)

Baysie's supernatural connection to the house and surrounding landscape suggests there is no getting away from the past violence of a place. The final paragraph seems to

indicate that no matter what, at least for Baysie, the ghosts render the family's home and arboretum a liminal space, where both the living and dead cohabitate.

Like Coake and Drake, Charlotte Perkins Gilman employs the architectural uncanny throughout her 1892 short story "The Yellow Wallpaper," where architectural features, namely the wallpaper itself, personify the violent oppression consuming the story's protagonist. "The Yellow Wallpaper" uses architectural fixtures and materials to mirror the narrator's declining psychological state imperiled by external forces. In her essay "Haunted House/Haunted Heroine: Female Gothic Closets in 'The Yellow Wallpaper'" published in 2004, Carol Margaret Davison explains how Gilman's story functions as a "female gothic text," which Davison describes as, "a form that is generally distinguished from the traditional Gothic mode as it centers its lens on a young woman's rite of passage into womanhood and her ambivalent relationship to contemporary domestic ideology, especially the joint institutions of marriage and motherhood" (48). The narrator in Gilman's work has recently had a baby and she's developed a nervous condition for which her physician husband prescribed a rest cure. Really all the narrator wants to do to ease her mind is write and be engaged in meaningful work outside of the domestic sphere. Instead, she's ordered to the top floor of a rented estate where she becomes obsessed with the room's architectural fixtures and features to the point of an actual mental breakdown.

A central symbol in all gothic texts is the family estate in decline; in traditional gothic texts it was often the castle of a family of nobility in decline. Davison points out that in Gilman's text, "especially central is the leased estate, an Americanized domesticated format of the psychically charged contested castle" (57). Davison points out

that, “a type of psychomachia, or conflict of the soul, is symbolically played out [in the “Yellow Wallpaper”]. Rather notably, while the narrator complies with her husband’s advice not to dwell on her illness by turning her attention to the house, her true feelings about her marriage and illness are displaced onto the site.” (57). Setting and character become blurred as the room’s disrepair come to represent the narrator’s despair.

Gilman believed the architecture and the environment of the late nineteenth century were barriers in achieving equality for women. In her 1988 book, *Building Domestic Liberty*, Polly Wynn Allen says, “Charlotte Gilman believed that women would remain subservient to men as long as the architectural setting of family life required them to do large quantities of solitary domestic work” (5). In her essay “Crazed Nature: Ecology in the Yellow Wall-Paper” published in 2009, Heidi Smith discusses how Gilman viewed the modern, urban environment as inhibitive explaining that Gilman “uses an ecological conceit to explain how the modern working classes of her age are stressed by their ‘acromegalous’ (i.e. fearfully large and disproportionate) urban surroundings” (198). Smith points out that Gilman found these urban spaces alienating (199) noting that as “The Yellow Wallpaper” ends, “the real natural world outside the room becomes the strange, misfitting one in which [the narrator] feels like an alien” (202). Smith goes on to say, “Shirking the male-centered world outside, which places women in the wifely and motherly loci, the narrator divests the ill-fitting role prescribed to her in favor of the quasi freedom of a self-made environment” (202). This harkens back to Vidler’s claim that the architectural uncanny represents reflection on questions of social and individual alienation. In utter isolation, the narrator uses the only thing she has access to—the room in which she is confined—to reflect on the profound sense of

alienation she feels as a mother and wife who is not allowed to pursue meaningful work such as writing outside of the home. The wallpaper, as an architectural feature, comes to symbolize both the narrator's self and the system in which that self is repressed.

While Coake, Drake, and Gilman leverage the uncanniness of architectural and natural structures to demonstrate how characters respond to cases of violence or oppression, Benjamin Percy uses the uncanniness of natural structures to say something about loss. The natural structures in "The Caves of Oregon," a short story published in 2007, reveal something essential about the turmoil and unrest that befall a husband and wife as they grapple with a recent miscarriage. In Percy's story, the natural structure of a cave illuminates the wrecked landscape of a couple's marriage after the wife has suffered the miscarriage. The line between setting and character blurs, often with a violent undercurrent. The refrigerator is described as "bleeding" (21) because of the thawing, leaking meat inside and when it is opened there is a "sucking, sort of gasping noise" (23). The husband, Kevin, on the other hand, describes touching his wife, Becca, as "touching a banister, a rifle stock, something hard and unbending" (23). This juxtaposition at the beginning of the story evokes the architectural uncanny because the house is personified as a bleeding, breathing thing while Becca is described in inanimate architectural details. Percy is showing how the house, its contents, the cave beneath it, and the couple themselves are all part of one broken organism. The story opens with Kevin coming home to see the power out, an event that happens often in the couple's home, which has been built atop a cave. When Becca comes home, the mess makes her livid, but it's an anger that seems constantly to palpitate just beneath the surface, "All it takes is a dropped dish, the wrong word, heavy traffic, and a switch goes off inside her that sends blue

electricity sizzling through her veins” (22). Becca is unhappy in the home, saying, “I hate, hate, *hate* this house” (23). We learn about the cave and how, in the beginning, it was a source of adventure for the young couple until the bats came. We learn that Becca was pregnant and the couple was watching television when they heard noises coming from behind the steel door that serves as barrier between house and cave. When Kevin opens the door, a cloud of bats descends upon the room and an injured bat gets caught in Becca’s hair. She miscarries shortly thereafter and blames it on the bats, the house, and the cave.

In the story, the cave becomes a symbol for the loss that separates the couple. The passage forward out of the depths of grief seems easier for Kevin, in part because of his job in a foundry:

“His sledgehammer is like an extension of his body. When he leaves work his hands are still curled in the shape of it. All through the day he swings it again and again until the weight is nearly impossible to bear, until his face goes as red as the liquid metal glowing all around him and his veins rise jaggedly from his arms.
(29-30)

In his line of work, Kevin is an extension of his environment, and being physically connected to that violent, dirty place helps him overcome the miscarriage. Becca thinks it’s easier for Kevin: “He can lose himself in the rhythms of his hammer, can smash the frustration from his body. Every day at work he drinks a milk jug full of water and sweats out every last drop of it and it is more than a little like crying” (37). Conversely, Becca is a geologist at a community college and when the couple spent their weekends spelunking, “[Becca] would collect [the quartz] to take home and stack neatly across her bureau,

across bookshelves and windowsills, so that after a while their house seemed to glitter from every corner” (31). While both their jobs are of the earth, Kevin’s is an escape while Becca’s work and life serve as a constant reminder of the earth that took something away, as Kevin points out:

She cannot not remember. A playground busy with children. A dirty pacifier abandoned in the aisle at Wal-Mart. The purple teddy bear she bought and set among her rocks on the bureau. On a daily basis all of these things fly into her eyes and thump around inside of her skull, like bats, leaving the poisonous dust of their wings. (37)

Both Kevin and Becca become an extension of the earth through their respective jobs and this blurring of character and setting shows the difference between a man and woman experiencing the loss of an unborn child. Kevin isn’t bound by the earth or his body while Becca is. Her body is the cave that physically bore this loss.

While both Kevin’s and Becca’s relationship with the earth is demonstrated through their employment, it’s the ground beneath their home that serves as the site of reconciliation for the couple. One night, Kevin wakes up to find Becca in the cave wearing only his t-shirt, “He observes the steel door hanging open—and there, surrounded by blackness, palpable blackness, strange and horrible, that seems to ooze into the house, stands his wife” (38). He picks her up and carries her back to their bedroom and that’s when she decides to get dressed and go explore in an act that seems tied to her grief. He follows her lead and they spend an entire night lost in the darkness, playing Marco Polo and eventually having sex for the first time since the miscarriage on the cave’s floor. The return to the house is difficult because their flashlights have gone

out so they have to feel around in the dark to make it back. “But they aren’t afraid, so much as they are resigned to making it home” (40). When the couple finally makes it back, Kevin sees Becca in their kitchen at dawn, “her face in shadow, looking at Kevin as if wondering, in mystery, how they found their way back” (41). Every inch of the home’s structure radiates an unnatural uneasiness born of the cave. As readers, the structure itself unsettles us and we see how intricately the lives of the characters are connected to the structure below the house. Just as the cave disrupts the electricity within the house, it disrupts the lives of Kevin and Becca as the site and seeming cause of the miscarriage. Percy extends the metaphor employing the architectural uncanny within the couple’s home and the natural structure that lies beneath that home to blur character and setting and show us how the couple, and particularly Becca, mourns the cavernous loss of a miscarriage mentally, emotionally, and physically.

With the exception of “The Arboretum,” I was in conversation with all of the aforementioned works as I wrote my creative thesis, especially “All Through the House” and “The Yellow Wallpaper” in writing my story “Stand Watch.” I was reading “The Caves of Oregon” while I was writing “The Beekeeper’s Find” and “Bird and the Bees.” Even though I hadn’t read Drake’s “The Arboretum” prior to writing my own work, the architectural uncanny evident in that piece fit the theme of my thesis exactly and I am sure Drake’s fiction will inform my future work. In “Unhomely Houses,” an essay in *The Architectural Uncanny*, Vidler writes, “the uncanny would be sinister, disturbing, suspect, strange; it would be characterized better as ‘dread’ than terror, deriving its force from its very inexplicability, its sense of lurking unease...” (23). The architectural uncanny in each of these stories grapples with a confrontation of some ultimate kind of

dread. In my own stories, whether it's dealing with a violent act or a profound loss, I am seeking to further examine that sense of dread, using architectural and natural structures in the story as physical manifestations of that dread.

“Stand Watch” is a violent story I hesitated to write. For me, the story started with place. Shortly after moving to Mississippi, I learned about the Gulf Ordnance Plant in Prairie, Mississippi, where a third of all the bullets used in World War II were produced. At one time, 10,000 people worked at the plant, which was open for only three years during World War II. After that, the plant was abandoned. I was drawn to one of the warehouses that still stands on the land. I walked the site and felt like it was a place of forgotten violence and a place ripe for the right story. Separately, my husband, who spent 21 years in the Air National Guard, said he knew a female elementary school teacher who had been deployed to the Middle East three times. That conversation led me to discover that stories about female soldiers who have served and are serving in the Middle East are told less often than stories about male soldiers. I felt like the abandoned warehouse at the Gulf Ordnance Plant was the ideal place to tell the story of a fictional female soldier who had been attacked in the desert and didn't get the care and support she needed when she returned home. I wanted to write her as a veteran faced with perpetual homelessness who slips through the cracks and starves to death and the former munitions warehouse seemed like the right setting for her story.

The first challenge the story presented for me was its structure. My instinct was that the story couldn't be told chronologically, and after reading “All Through the House” the story arc for “Stand Watch” became accessible to me. Like Coake's story, “Stand Watch” is told in reverse chronology in sections delineated by time. While my story's

point of view doesn't shift between characters, it does shift between second and third person points of view. Also, like Coake's, my piece relies heavily on an architectural structure—a warehouse—to mirror the physical, mental, and emotional decline from trauma that my protagonist endures.

“Stand Watch” is also a loose retelling of “The Yellow Wallpaper.” Years ago, I read “The Yellow Wallpaper” and was drawn to what the architecture was doing in that story. When I started this graduate program nearly 15 years after I read “The Yellow Wallpaper,” the story and setting of the woman in the attic still struck me, and I knew “Stand Watch” had to bring in some of that iconic imagery and some of its classic tropes. In particular, the second section of “Stand Watch,” when Bridgette meets the crow and ultimately starves to death, draws on Gilman's work. Architecturally, my story is inverted, since Bridgette's attacker is the one who allegedly occupies the warehouse's top floor. Like Gilman, I try to use interiority, repetition, and fixation to demonstrate the main character's break from reality. Lastly, I am trying to use the crow in the same way that Gilman uses the woman in the wallpaper. While the crow is Bridgette's last companion in the world, it is also the reason for the noise she hears coming from the top floor of the warehouse that she ultimately attributes to her imagined attacker. Gilman does a similar thing: the woman in the wallpaper is a symbol for the narrator's oppression as well as the cause of further oppression.

Like Percy, I use natural structures in several of my stories. I focus on beehives instead of caves. Bees are fascinating. It's easy to anthropomorphize their behavior. The order of a hive is almost like a ritual so it's not surprising that people approach beekeeping with a kind of reverence. In two stories, I sought to see how a beehive, as a

natural structure, could evoke the uncanny when it comes to betrayal and loss. In the “Bird and the Bees,” I use a fraudulent hive to expose a marriage built on untruths. In “The Beekeeper’s Find,” I use beehives to illustrate a recent widower’s profound sense of loss.

Dorothy Allison writes about the importance of place as it situates characters in their home (or lack thereof in the case of the uncanny). Her 2009 essay “Place” discusses what happens when place is no place:

I grew up among truck drivers and waitresses, and, for me, the place where most stories take place is the place that is no place for most other people. The truck stop: no place. The diner: no place. The grocery store: an empty landscape that you do not ascribe as being a real place. But for me those places are real places, with a population I recognize and can describe. (6)

Allison points out that even when place isn’t immediately recognized as real place, it is still essential to the lives of the characters, in this case, a group Allison describes as, “a people I love even if they do not always love me” (6). Later in the essay, she writes, “Place is often something you don’t see because you’re so familiar with it that you devalue it or dismiss it or ignore it” (7). I think Allison is correct that we take place for granted because of its familiarity. I think that’s also a reason why place can have such a poignant impact in stories confronting a violent act or some kind of loss; when what is familiar becomes uncanny, the unsettling setting becomes another avenue to amplify a story’s tension. Violence and loss inscribed onto the structures and within landscapes of stories become more impactful.

Violence in a work of fiction should tell us something essential about ourselves and our world. Murder is a specter. When the life of a loved one ends in violence, wounds don't heal. Through the architectural uncanny, Coake and Drake work to show murder can't be undone and that a site of violence will remain poisoned and the soil will always bear blood. These authors, along with Gilman, seek to unsettle us through the architectural and environmental uncanny, leaving us uneasy as witnesses to these transgressions, always looking over our shoulder. What Coake and Drake say about murder and Gilman says about oppression, Percy says about profound loss. "The Caves of Oregon" communicates something essential about miscarriage that couldn't be conveyed another way. Miscarriage is a loss that's rarely discussed on the surface. It's an underground grief, and Percy does a beautiful job through the architectural uncanny of showing us how one couple tried to heal a profound and hidden wound. It is one thing to have an essential violent act occur in a work of fiction; it's quite another to have that act permeate the structures within the story. To have the violent act inscribed upon the walls like it is in "All Through the House" and "The Arboretum," to taste the acidity of oppression in the Sulphur-stained wallpaper in "The Yellow Wallpaper," and to be enmeshed in unending darkness in "The Caves of Oregon," creates an immersive experience that underscores the stakes of the story—something I hope I achieve in my own stories, using similar methods.

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CHAPTER II
STAND WATCH

Now

There is a roost of crows. Every evening at dusk, more than two hundred crows descend upon an abandoned warehouse on the prairie in Middle-of-Nowhere, Mississippi. They nest on the top floor of a three-story structure that's burned out and desecrated with walls that are caving in.

As fall becomes winter, the crows huddle close for warmth and protection as their numbers grow each night.

They scurry, skit, and caw, before finally a quiet overtakes the space.

Two stories below the nest, amidst the rubble, a woman's body decomposes.

This all began with a single crow. A steady knocking as she prepared her nest.

Last spring

Dead ladybugs litter the floor. You're tired, but you make your way to the bathroom. It's a burn barrel you've sawed in half and buried in the ground. The bodies crunch into concrete beneath your feet. Hard shells like candy. You bend down and crush a shell between your fingers. The body turns to dust.

You breathe in the cool morning. You're hazy. Hungry. But breathing.

He's soundless. Mornings are best. You almost forget. You think back to your last meal. The food gone last week. A week before? You've got birdseed. You think of what you'll eat next. You'll dig down to the black sunflower seeds. Hard like the bugs but the nourishment you need. The mark on the wall tells you: Wednesday. Yes, you ate last week. You drew a line the last day you had real food—the day of the fire at least. There's plenty of water. Thank God.

You're alone on the ground floor and hear your enemy moving above. Of course your attacker is long gone—7,000 miles away or more. Of course your attacker is right here. He arrived right after the fire and occupies the third floor. A second story—middle ground—separates you and him. Us. Them.

Trash from the fire surrounds you. The fire swallowed the drywall, ceiling, insulation, leaving bare bones.

You don't like the openness of the ground floor now. Before the fire, smaller rooms were in each corner and a common space was in the middle. The four corner rooms were bathed in the light of bay windows checkered by glass rectangles, so you kept the doors to those rooms open to let light into the larger space. Sometimes you opened the large double doors of the main space to let in even more light. The back left room was your bedroom. Next to the stairwell, at the back wall, was an old freight elevator that never worked.

Your first encounter with your attacker was in the desert in Mosul, Iraq, what feels like a lifetime ago. He followed you here, to this warehouse in this abandoned munitions plant in Moorland, Mississippi—to half a world away.

He was medium build but stocky. Shrouded by a hood. Smoking a cigarette. You were finishing your watch. Headed back to the barracks. The others had gone to take a piss. It was just you under the dim light of the guard post near the perimeter fence.

He walked slowly at first, but once he was seven yards in, he moved like lightning. Didn't have time even to lift your M16, much less take aim. He whipped the gun from your hand. Pressed against you and pushed your rifle's barrel into your right temple. Smashed the weapon across your face. Four teeth gone in an instant, you'd later learn. His hands were rough as he grabbed your arms and wrapped your wrists in wire. Expertly. Like he'd done it before. He pulled a dirty rag from his pocket, covered in something that smelled like paint thinner. You knew it was probably chloroform. You'd heard about the chemical during a training seminar—on a day when you were so tired you could barely keep your eyes open. He tied the gag around your bleeding mouth. Your mouth an aching canyon. You prayed he didn't have a match. He could light you on fire. You struggled to remember to breathe—your mind buzzing. He was on top now. Rhythmic. You remember the sound of his breathing—a steady cadence. Controlled. You mimicked his rhythm to try to remember to breathe. Another punch to the head before you blacked out. When you finally came to, you wished you had burned.

You fix your gaze upward. You don't climb. Won't climb. You don't have the position you need to take him. You think of him up there, on the top floor of the warehouse, breathing his fixed rhythm. You want to watch the tempo slow to a stop. You want to watch him exhale his final breath. You wait.

During the day you move. You stick to the ground floor exposed but in light. You keep still and stand watch. A crow sees you. She's perched on rebar. The metal is the corner of your former bedroom and reminds you of a cross. Is she Jesus? She's not bleeding. She's not Jesus. She flies and you jump. Later you feel something watching you, and you clutch your blowtorch. Your knife is heavy in your other hand. It's her. She sees the bag of birdseed. You toss hulls. She pecks at them and flitters away.

You're up against the wall, less than an inch from the stairwell in case you need to retreat. She is perched nearby, in a bed of debris. The floor is cluttered with building material—metal, trash, insulation, rock, concrete, and wood. There is beauty in the wreckage; you admire it when she's near. It feels good to have a visitor who can't hurt you.

At night, on your belly, you crawl into the stairwell. A blowtorch close by if a rat, possum, or snake decides to appear. Knife in hand. You don't sleep. You think of his feet as they approached you back then. Soft and swift in the sand. You try to shake his image from your mind. The nighttime spooks you and you count down until daylight. At some point near dawn, you drift asleep and dream about the bag of birdseed.

It's afternoon and you wait. The waning day quiet and hot. The fading light dances across the brick in pale yellow squares and reminds you of water. You think about the sea. Sunlight shimmering on blue water under a blue sky. The same sky followed you to the desert...to the prairie...to your post here. You grab a handful of seeds. Not the good ones. The pristine blue sky makes your stomach roil. It reminds you of the desert. Blazing sun. Endless sky. Beautiful blue. Blue skies lie.

Evening comes. The desert was bad. But here is worse. At least in the desert, you were part of us against them. Now it's just the two of you here—you and him. You remain vigilant so one day you can take him. You live so that one day he might die. In this way, *you are* because *he is*.

The sun sets and the knocking begins. Peaceful sky but the rhythmic knocking keeps you hunkered down. A sign he's still here, still alive. It comes and goes like the constant drip of a leaky faucet. You eat another handful of seeds. You should back off and save. You are thirsty and think about water but you will wait until morning to make your way to the well.

Then later, the steady knocking louder and constant through the night. You are crouched in the corner, looking up, always looking up. It's pitch black. You can't be seen.

It's the middle of the night and she's there. Black, silky, and shiny. She eats out of your hand. Her beak pecks at your palm. There's blood and a cord. You pull the cord. It's embedded into your wrist. Grows like skin or vein. Blood everywhere then suddenly clean, clear skin. Soft. You lick your wrist and it's salty. Then you feel something slither over your boot. You look down and you are barefoot. You know it's a water moccasin. Then you open your eyes. Black. Half out of the dream, you light the blowtorch and turn it full blast on your own foot.

You awake in pain. Your boot is charred and you know your foot is badly burned. When you put pressure on it, the pain is almost unbearable so you'll need to find a way to

treat and dress the wound. You think about the duct tape in your pack. The pack is hidden offsite away from the warehouse because you decided it was a risk. Too valuable and you can't manage all the assets at once. The seeds are more important so you hide them in your safe place and you leave to go unearthen your pack. You bring the gardening spade.

You walk out of the warehouse. Shotguns shells litter the ground but you don't remember gunfire.

You walk the length, 70 paces, to the telephone pole, and take a right. Tall prairie grass surrounds you. You walk to the tree line and start digging. Careful of snakes, because the rain's been hell this spring. You find your pack buried in the ground and wrapped in the only tarp you have left. You dig your hands into the earth and pull out the pack. It's wet and mildewed. You should have brought the blowtorch. You brush off the pack and find a place in the sun. You keep watch.

The pack dries a little. At least that's what you tell yourself. You pull out the duct tape, some gauze, and a plastic bag. You put the pack back where you found it. You don't have the energy to find a new hiding place. You return to the warehouse. Looking up. Always looking up. On a telephone wire, the crow stands watch.

Back at the warehouse. Exhausted from the trek. Starving. A meal. A full plate. A taste of something. Your mouth is dry. Water first. You go to the well. It's an artesian pump and like gold. Why is it here? How has he not found it yet? You look up. Then you drink water until you feel it in your feet. Burnt and aching. But there. You have your feet. You have duct tape. It will be okay. You think about the seed.

You go to get your birdseed. It's under the dead mulberry bush, hidden under bricks that have fallen in. You've hidden it well. You're sharp. Your instincts on point. You've hidden it too well. You don't have the energy to move the bricks. You look at the plants. Are they poison? Will they kill you? Are they food? Your head tingles in the heat.

When you come to, it's evening. It's not your fucking hiding place. You are a fucking amateur. You should have known and you've lost fucking daylight you motherfucker. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. You run blind and desperate and you don't look fucking up. You stupid motherfucker.

It's good. It's good. It's good. You find the seeds. It's the new spot. By the dead crepe myrtle at the edge of the prairie. You grab the bag. You head back to the stairwell as the sun sets over the top of the warehouse. It's a shell in the sunlight. The top floor open. Plants growing out of the windows. Your eyes rest on the corner of a broken window, and you know he's watching you.

You make it back to the ground floor cradling the bag like it's a baby. You rest. Duct tape and seeds. You eat first and then you pass out.

She's there by your feet. The duct tape at your side. She's eyeing your seed, but you're just happy to be alive. You grab a handful of seeds and scatter them in front of her; she pecks and stays. Stands watch beside you.

Later that afternoon, you remember the pain and sharpen your knife on a cinder block. The bird delivers you a part of a shotgun shell. You pick the seeds you don't like and toss them at her feet.

You cut off your boot. Your foot is red and raw. Pink toward the knee. You wash your feet with water from the well, make your way over to the edge of the warehouse, and dry your feet in the sun. Eyes fixed upward. You blink longer than you should and feel the warm sun on your face. You cover your foot in gauze, then plastic. You attach the old sole with duct tape, wrapping the tape around your foot, ankle, and up your leg. Loose enough so you won't cut off circulation, tight enough to keep out moisture. You rise and walk a little to try out the new shoe before settling into your post for the night. You're smart about your seeds this time and she doesn't visit you tonight.

Near dawn, a storm closes in. Lightning illuminates your little corner in the stairwell. You hear wind move debris across the ground floor. Glass breaks and bricks topple. You hug your knees and worry for her, pray the storm kills him.

You wake up sometime in the afternoon. A cold sweat as a breeze cuts through the ground floor. You blink and look around. Dust, decay, shrapnel, debris, glass, metal, and brick. All the same, just rearranged. The west edge of the second floor is now crumbling. You eat seeds and wait for the knocking.

It takes two days but the knocking returns. Louder this time. The space between you is closer, since the middle floor has begun its collapse. Your body is flush with the concrete. Keep low. Lie still. Stand watch. The weather has changed so you worry less about storms.

When she comes to visit you a week later, your bag of seed is almost gone. You're so happy to see her that you let her eat the good seeds from your palm. She returns later in the day with a shiny trinket. She drops it in front of you before skittering off.

You hold the shard of mirror and search your face. You look older. Pale. Bloodshot. Hair matted and dirty. Dirt all down your face. You walk the ground floor, where you rip wiring from an old window unit, shave off the PVC piping, and use the copper wire to fasten the mirror to your wrist. You wash your face with well water.

You don't know how long it's been because you can no longer trust the marks you've made on the wall. The days run together now. The heat seems here to stay. You have to remind yourself to drink. You ration. You've separated the seeds out. Your favorites are all gone. You've got sorghum, millet, and rapeseed in piles. The sorghum already up on the window sill away from the ants. You pick dead ants out of the millet and the rapeseed and move them to the sill too. You fear he'll come down the stairs and see the seeds. Or the wind will blow the seeds away. You think about eating the ants. You start listening for crickets. In the night, you could collect them to cook the next day. You stare up at the winding stairwell. Hunger. You await the knocking. The movement. Quiet except for him.

The seed is gone.

She's there the next day. You feel her. Like the spirit of a lover. You wish you had the energy to wash your hair. She makes herself known midafternoon. Stifling hot and you can smell your own stink. You glance into your bracelet. You're dirty. Worn.

She is coming toward you now as you struggle to stay awake. She has something large in her beak. The space between the two of you becomes less and less. She drops a small grape in front of your hand. You hold the grape between your fingers and squeeze. It's a ripe muscadine and a sliver of juice runs down your wrist. You put the grape in your mouth. A rupture of warmth. It tastes like smoke.

Tomorrow you'll wash your hair. Your face. You'll drink. You'll eat. You'll find the grape vine. You close your eyes and go to sleep.

Last winter

The blaze begins in the kitchen. The fire burns fast. The smell of burning metal swarms Bridgette for weeks. It clings to her clothes, permeates her sinus cavity, burns her eyes and the back of her throat. It is an angering discomfort. And there is no one to blame but herself.

It starts because she's cold. This is the South but still she's so fucking cold.

By now the food has dwindled down to a jar of green beans and a few jars of tomatoes. She's used to living without electricity, despite the brutal cold. At times, too brutal.

There is a fifty-dollar bill in her dresser drawer. She's already decided to return to her father's. Establish ground rules, stand up to him, get a job, hit reset. She'll have to walk awhile and hitch the rest of the way. But it's not impossible. She's saving the green

beans and the money for the walk. On a day when she has enough energy and it isn't so goddamn cold. Then the fire happens. The last of the food gone like her mother's scarf. The money gone, too.

It begins in the afternoon. Bridgette puts three burn barrels filled with wood scraps in the middle of the kitchen. By this point, the electricity has been out for three months. Nights are always the coldest and she's trying to get warm for the long night ahead. She douses each of the barrels with gasoline. The ceiling is thirty feet high. Bridgette thinks the flames will steer clear. She collects underbrush from outside. Dead leaves, pine cones, bits of trash that have blown in front of the warehouse. Later on, she figures there must have been something live in the understory. Some ammunition that hadn't been detonated. She tosses a match into the first barrel. Bridgette is bent down looking for a jar of tomatoes when the barrel explodes like an IED. She remembers that loud crack in the desert. Like someone busted open her skull like an egg. The burn barrel billows black and she knows the other two are next to go.

Flames consume the ceiling and dart across the floor. Bridgette jumps onto her bedroom windowsill. The window panes are a series of large blocks. She busts out as many as she can and jumps. The drop is maybe eight feet. She tucks and rolls and runs like hell across the prairie, the dead of winter now hot like July.

Bridgette makes it to a field of tall fescue by the time the whole place is blanketed in flames. The building burns orange. Flames gulp up brick, glass, and wood. Each story has immense windows made up of smaller rectangles of glass. Maybe two hundred rectangles for each floor. Every few seconds, she hears a pop and knows it's another

rectangle cracking under the pressure. She walks through the tall grass thankful it isn't snake season. The prairie ends in a small runnel.

The creek is maybe 10 feet across and a foot deep. She pulls her boots off and rolls up her fatigues. The water is frigid—a welcome break from the inferno at her back. She knows she'll be cold later so she does her best to stay dry. She crosses the creek to the safe side of the waterline as the warehouse burns. The sun begins to set and the fire of the building competes with the fire in the sky. It burns late into the night and kills all the nearby trees. It devours scrubs, slugs dogwoods, and laps at the trunk of a giant water oak.

Bridgette is no longer cold. She sits with her arms crossed over her hunched-up knees and begins to drift. When she dreams orange, she opens her eyes. The prairie grass two feet away is ablaze. The waterline has saved her. In the morning, the land is bare save the half-charred oak tree. Burnt earth surrounds the warehouse for a hundred feet on all sides. The warehouse itself is a forlorn shell of concrete and metal.

It's too cold to wash her clothes, but she washes her face in the creek and begins the two mile trek back to the home of her former landlord.

First, she tries the front door of their home, a former church. It's locked and emptied of its contents. Sullivan and Mary Abbott had been so good to her but the house and land was deeded to their son Andrew after they died. He lives only two hours north, but hasn't been down since clearing out the house nearly a year before. While he promised to keep the electricity and water on for her, both had been cut off in mid-winter. Before the fire, she had looked forward to Andrew's return—even thought about trying to find a phone to call him—beg him to turn the electricity back on. Barter that she'd keep

an eye on the place. Now she hopes he stays away. Bridgette feels like she let Mary down. Mary had wanted Bridgette to make the warehouse into a space of her own. That dream is over now. Reality is the mud on her boots, the smoke on her skin, and the consuming certainty that she is going this alone. Bridgette brushes off her boots and opens the door to Sullivan's old shed.

Inside, she finds a half-empty bag of bird seed, a blowtorch, a few blue tarps, and an old blanket Sullivan must have used to cover plants in the cold. She finds a dusty first aid kit in an old backpack. The kit has gauze, a few bandages, and some antiseptic cream that has dried up. Bridgette keeps the gauze and fills up the pack with anything she thinks might be useful. She grabs a gardening spade and a roll of duct tape on her way out the door. She starts back toward the warehouse.

As she approaches, she sees that the four rooms surrounding the main room on the bottom floor are mostly gone. Each bears a skeleton of metal beams. Her bedroom is obliterated, her prized possession—a red scarf her mother had given her before she died—is obviously gone. Bridgette walks through one of the front rooms into the warehouse's main space. The big room is structurally intact but the walls are black. The kitchen in shambles. The sink no longer. The refrigerator open and on its side. Sunlight shines through easily now. Nothing but debris and metal and setting sun. Later, she'll survey the damage on the floors above. Tonight she needs sleep. She lays a tarp out in the stairwell. It's the warmest place. She wraps herself in the old blanket and slides down the wall. Bridgette breaks down and wails like the coyotes she sometimes hears in the distance. Mary had wanted her to rebuild. To become something better. To heal. Bridgette let her down. She let it burn.

A new kind of loneliness sets in that first night. The open space unsettling. Bridgette can't help but feel a presence on the edge of the darkness. She hears a caw on the wind. A crow, a coyote, or something else entirely.

The next day she awakes to the sound of knocking.

Last fall

All the neighbors are gone. Doug is the last to leave. Mary and Sullivan have died. Their neighbor, Bird, has gone to jail. Bird's husband, Edgar, is in the hospital. It's a Saturday six months before the fire. Doug has driven Bridgette twenty miles to the Dollar Market and filled her cart.

"Doesn't it spook you being out here all by yourself?" he asks, as they unload groceries into the warehouse.

"No, I like the solitude," Bridgette replies.

"You said your dad will be down next week?"

"Yes," she lies. "He'll stop and get me on the way back to Tupelo from the Coast."

"I guess a week alone isn't terrible," he says.

"I know you guys are excited. Hannah must be beside herself," Bridgette says.

"She is. I think we are all looking forward to getting away, but this is a dream come true for her."

Doug and Fern are dropping off Hannah, the oldest girl, at college in Kansas before heading to Utah to be closer to Doug's ailing mother.

Fern bounds out of the RV. “The arch, Dad! We gotta go. I wanna see the arch at sunset.” She’s eating a peanut butter and jelly sandwich and peels off the crust and tosses it in the yard.

Hannah steps out of the RV just in time to chide her sister. “You’re too old to do that.”

Fern shrugs. “It’s what I like.”

A young crow swoops down and pecks at the discarded bread.

“Oh, look,” Fern says.

“You know they bring you stuff?” Hannah says.

“Who brings you stuff?” Fern asks.

“The crows. If you feed them, they’ll bring you gifts. I read about it. Some girl in England has a whole box of rocks that a crow brought her.”

“Cool,” Fern replies.

“You sure you’re going to be okay?” Doug asks Bridgette.

“Yeah, I’ll be fine. You guys have a safe trip,” Bridgette says, shielding her eyes from the sun.

Doug’s Hawaiian shirt is covered in wooden surfboards and Studebakers. Bridgette feels like he didn’t really know how to act around her. He’s always polite but seems a little nervous around her. Mary had been the one who understood her. Doug loved Mary and Sullivan, so he tried to pick up where they left off, but Bridgette knows Hannah and Fern, his own family, are the priority.

Doug pulls a fifty-dollar bill from his wallet. “It’s not much. I wish I had more to give you, but this might help out.”

“Are you sure? You bought me all that at the market?”

“I’m sure. Really, it’s no trouble,” he assures her.

She pockets the money. “This means a lot, Doug.”

“Take care.” He gives her a half hug.

After they drive away, she puts the money in her dresser next to her mother’s scarf.

In those early days by herself, she thinks about returning to her father but can’t quite work up the nerve so she stays, resolving to build a better life like Mary would have wanted. She has plenty of food. Jars of tomatoes, beets, pickles, and green beans that Bird had put up for her. The food from the Dollar Market. In the beginning, she eats well, even. She saves the fifty dollars for a time when she’ll absolutely need it. Every day she writes in a journal Mary gave her. It’s December 8th as Bridgette sits up in bed and runs her fingers across the smooth face of the black Moleskin notebook when the lights go out. It’s around eight o’clock in the evening when the place goes dark and the clock stops and the hum of the heater grinds to a halt. Bridgette closes her journal and goes to bed. She doesn’t know what else to do beyond burrowing under the covers to keep warm.

Two years ago

Bridgette’s happiest moments in years are spent with Mary. Bridgette’s mother died young. So did Mary’s. They talk about this sometimes. In Mary’s kitchen as she teaches Bridgette how to make bread.

One night, in particular, stands out. It’s the week before the Abbots learn that Sullivan has lung cancer. After that, everything changes. They will go on to fight through

months of his illness only for Mary to die unexpectedly shortly after he goes into remission. Then his cancer will come back a year later, and he'll be gone, too. But before all of this, Mary and Bridgette are in the couple's kitchen—a former altar since the home is a renovated church. The women work at the burlled pine island Sullivan made years ago.

“It's called pain d'epi,” Mary says. “It's just a fancy way to say pull-apart. The best thing is to make fresh pain d'epi and let it sit on the countertop overnight. Then the next morning, when it's crunchy and stale, you fry up some French toast.”

Mary mixes three cups of lukewarm water with a starter and kosher salt. She adds bread flour, one cup at a time, scraping excess flour off the top of each cup to keep the measurement exact. She stirs the mixture with a slated wooden spoon.

“My mom made the best French toast,” Bridgette says. “She'd sift powdered sugar on top, and when we had the money, add strawberries or blueberries, and whipped cream.”

Mary coats her hands in flour and kneads the dough. Her hands make quick, expert quarter-turns until the large mass is one smooth ball. She quarters the dough into sections and forms each section into a smaller ball.

“Tell me about your mom,” Mary says.

Bridgette tells Mary how her mom was the glue who held things together in a home where her father spend most of his time falling apart. “Mom did her best to take care of me while she was alive.”

“Same for me,” Mary replies. She tells Bridgette of a life in New Orleans. Her father worked as a pianist at the Dream Palace in the Garden District. Her mother sang in

jazz clubs until Mary and her siblings came along. “Knead each of these a few minutes,” Mary says, as she sets two dough sections in front of Bridgette before continuing her story. “So Dad did his best to scramble together an income to support us—he worked as a bouncer, washed dishes, did anything for that bar—but he always came up short, it seemed. He might’ve gambled. Mom made us feel like we didn’t have a want in the world.”

“This one’s a little sticky.” Bridgette struggles with the dough.

“You can use a little flour. Better yet...” She opens the butter dish on the island, cuts a few pads of soft butter and puts them on a plate. “Coat your hands in this. Mom taught me that. Now roll them each into a ball like I showed you before and elongate the ball into a baguette. Watch me,” Mary tugs at the dough. “What about your dad? He’s the reason for the cut above your eye, I presume?”

Bridgette nods.

“It makes you wonder why. You get mad and then you think, what would have happened if she’d lived?”

The dough is malleable and easy in Bridgette’s hands now. “Mom would’ve never let me enlist.”

“And I wouldn’t have ended up here,” Mary says and she tells Bridgette how she fell hard for the wrong man after she lost her mom, and planned to drive cross-country with him until he abandoned her in Tupelo. Pride took over and Mary didn’t go back home to her family, but got a job at a diner in Mississippi instead.

“What did you do?” Bridgette asks.

Mary finishes forming her baguettes and checks on Bridgette’s work.

“Nice job. You’re getting it. I was too embarrassed to go back home. I got a job waitressing. Rented a room. Met Sullivan, and now...” She holds up her hands and gestures toward the room around them. “Now, I don’t know what the hell I’d do without him. Your time will come, Bridgette. For me, it was this house, our land, and my husband. Andrew, too. For you, it could be anything. You’ve had a terrible go of it. Now’s the time to shelter in place. Rebuild. Then see where things take you.”

“I wish I could figure it out.”

“You will. You’ll get there.”

Mary pulls out kitchen scissors and makes several cuts at a 45-degree angle from the top to the bottom of each loaf. The cuts are made so that the baguettes resemble wheat stalks. Mary moves the loaves to the oven where they bake on a hot stone sprinkled with wheat flour.

“What was your favorite thing about your mom?” Mary says.

“I loved to sit on the floor and watch her put on her make-up for church every Sunday,” Bridgette says.

“Baptist?”

“Yes. She only had maybe three dresses. But Sunday, she’d dress to the nines and put on a smile no matter how bad Dad was the night before. She always tied a pretty red scarf around her neck as the finishing touch. I still have it.”

They talk until two in the morning, but when Mary asks Bridgette about having been in the desert, Bridgette says they should save that for another night. That she doesn’t have the energy.

Mary kisses Bridgette's forehead as she curls up on the couch next to the couple's basset hound, Waldo. Mary brings blankets and covers both Bridgette and the dog.

This is what it feels like to have a mom again, Bridgette thinks as she drifts to sleep.

The next morning, Mary takes her to the warehouse.

"We bought all this in the late 70s. All the land, the church, this warehouse were a steal. For a while, we thought of renovating the warehouse and renting it out. Then Sullivan thought about making this his wood shop. We never got around to doing anything but it has so much potential. Just the space alone." Mary pulls open the big metal double-doors. "Be sure to keep these doors closed at night. Birds will come in and roost in the attic."

They stand in the middle of the warehouse. Built in the 1940s, it's still in pretty good shape. Cobwebs in every corner and every inch covered in dust, stark, yes, but potential, too. They walk the ground floor.

"We'll put a kitchen here in the middle. It's already got the water so it will be easier," Mary says. "Do you know what room you'd like to make your bedroom?"

"Probably the back left room because it's got a shower," Bridgette replies.

"Yeah, that's best. Let's check out the other floors."

They walk up to the second floor.

"I don't even know if you need this space," Mary says. "But it's here if you ever get inspired. Let me show you the top floor. It's got the best view."

The top floor is a single room with windows all around. Light pours in from every direction and the women look out over miles of prairie.

“This room is my favorite,” Mary says. “I’d say have this be your bedroom but I know that’s a long way up and down each day. Maybe we can get the elevator working one day and this can be a bedroom. You could always make it into an office, too.”

Bridgette has two suitcases. Mary and Sullivan give her a twin bed, a dresser, and a few lamps. They set up the kitchen in the middle of the big room. Sullivan installs a stove with a hood because he says ventilation is critical.

He takes a broken refrigerator their neighbor, Edgar, gives him and gets it working again. Doug, another neighbor, gives Bridgette his old couch. He says he needs something that fits better in his RV. Mary buys her a coffeemaker, dishes, silverware, and pots and pans. She also gives Bridgette an area rug she finds on sale at an antique shop in Tupelo.

Mary comes over one day with an end table. By then Bridgette has scrubbed the windows and cleaned all the ledges. Sullivan and Bridgette have stained the concrete in her bedroom a reddish orange.

“It’s really coming together, Bridgette.”

It’s still bare but has begun to feel like home.

“I got this for you.” Mary sets the table down. “I have something else, too.”

Mary walks to the car and comes back with a mirror.

The mirror is set in an old white square picture frame.

“I love this,” Bridgette says.

“I had that frame sitting around and got a mirror put in it for less than twenty bucks.”

They hang it in the bedroom. Bridgette wraps her mother's scarf around the top of the mirror.

After Mary leaves, Bridgette looks at herself in the mirror.

She's sleeping better and the bags under her eyes aren't as bad as they've been. The cut above her eye has healed. Her bangs have grown out, her hair well past her shoulders now. The humidity has made compact ringlets of her strawberry blonde curls. Bridgette smiles.

Home.

Two and a half years ago

The truck door slams at 5:30 a.m. and the sound makes Bridgette jump even though she's been expecting it. Tallulah, curled up by the front door waiting for her master, lifts her head. Her tail begins to wag. Before deployment, Tallulah had been Bridgette's dog. They ran every afternoon along the beach watching the dunes fade from pink to orange to blue to gray. When she returned to the States, she found Tallulah had become Seth's dog.

Seth walks in and bends down.

"Hey, baby," he says. "How's my puppy? How's my sweet girl?"

The black and white Australian Shepard dances around his legs and puts her paws against his chest. He stands up and Tallulah stretches out in the foyer.

"Is there coffee?" he asks, as he comes into the living room.

Bridgette is on her third pot. She sits in the recliner. A woman on the television is trying to sell an all-purpose knife, kicking off the program dicing cilantro first, before moving on to onions and carrots, and then a side of beef, slicing right through the bone.

Bridgette looks up at Seth and musters a smile.

“He fixed my teeth,” she says, as she fiddles with the red scarf laid across her lap.

Seth looks directly at her for the first time in what seems like months. He furrows his brow.

“Oh, I forgot that was all happening this week.” He steps in a little closer examining the dentist’s handiwork. “Wow, so that’s what seven-thousand dollars looks like.”

“The Army paid for it,” she says, defensively.

“I know. You’ve told me a million times. It was meant to be a compliment, jeez.”

Bridgette lowers her eyes and turns up the volume on the television.

“The teeth are fine,” he says. “But the rest of you looks like hell. When was the last time you showered?” He frowns as his eyes narrow. “Did you even sleep last night?”

She blushes and instinctively holds the scarf up to her mouth, seemingly engrossed in the woman showing the world how Slice Magic™ cuts through aluminum cans, even.

Seth goes into the kitchen and returns with two fresh cups of coffee. Each one on a little saucer. He did this every morning when Bridgette taught middle school. Prior to deployment. Before she left for work and after he got off the boat, they would drink coffee. Sometimes they’d sit on the back porch and talk how they’d build a fire pit here

on the brick pavers or how they ought to plant gardenias there along the edge of the deck. They'd make lists, prioritize projects, and set important dates for when she returned.

He sits across from her now on the couch and asks her to mute the television. She clicks it off.

"I took a job in Oregon," he says.

"You what?" Her voice is a whisper.

"A guy Uncle Dan knows is a chief engineer in Astoria. He's getting me on as a pilot. I start the beginning of May."

Her head swirls with possibilities. Tallulah jumps on the couch.

"Down, Tallulah," Bridgette says, a little too harshly.

"She's fine." Seth reaches to pet her.

He's worked his whole life off the coast of Fernandina Beach, Florida. All the men on his mother's side were pilot boat captains. His dad had been one, too. They live in a beach house his mother purchased for less than sixty thousand dollars in the early 1960s. The concrete block home is worth a million now. Someone will tear it down and build a McMansion on the lot. Bridgette can't afford it and Seth's mother will surely list it the minute he leaves. Panic creeps in.

"I'll go with you," she says, trying to hide the desperation in her voice. She wishes she'd slept.

"I think we both know where this is going," Seth says. "We aren't us. We haven't been for a long time. I think you should consider moving back home."

She finishes her coffee. Tries not to shake as she sets the cup into the saucer.

"There is no home," she replies, cold.

By the afternoon, she notices a lightness in Seth she hasn't seen. He buzzes through the house, whistling low while he begins to pack the relics of their former life neatly into boxes. After he leaves for work early that evening, she walks the shoreline as a nor'easter blows in. The sea is a sweeping gray wall. The houses seem to hug the shoreline. The cobalt blue two-story A-frame cottage Seth and she dreamt of buying looks abandoned. The couple's own rental looks like a bunker hunkered down against the storm. The clouds feel like they're closing in.

She downs the better part of a fifth of Seth's whiskey and calls a cab. It's three-hundred dollars for a ride to Savannah so she takes the cash from Seth's safe. She sees the gun next to the money and picks it up. He keeps it loaded. She clicks the safety off. She thinks about that level of pain. Thinks about what happened in the desert. She locks the safety and returns the gun to its place. When the cab pulls into the driveway, she turns off the lights and locks the door to the house.

She's sobered up a little by the time she arrives at the hotel a little past 2 a.m. Two drunken girls in shorts and heels spill out of a car behind the parked cab as Bridgette gets out. One of the girls wears a cheap tiara with the word "bride" emblazoned in fake rhinestones. Her tight white t-shirt has a purple stain down the front.

"No, I swear. You'll be the best mom ever. Wife! I mean, wife. Look at me." The friend teeter-totters ten feet in front of Bridgette, the bride-to-be holds her friend's hand and stumbles.

“No. That’s not the plan.” The bride-to-be squints and tries to steady herself. “The plan’s...travel. Five years. We travel, get some jobs. Buy a house. Pay off this stupid wedding.”

“No, you’re gonna have babies. Like right fucking now. You’re gonna have babies tomorrow. A ton of babies.”

“Shut up! You sound like his mom.” The girl in white stands up straighter, facing her friend. She bursts into tears.

How wonderful, Bridgette thinks, to be a mess for just one night.

Once in the lobby, Bridgette approaches the counter.

“A single for the night.”

“All I have is a double. One-seventy-five.”

“That’s fine.”

The first two credit cards are declined.

“Let’s see.” The clerk looks at the computer and clicks away at the keys. “Let’s try this. Yep, I can get you a little bit off since it’s so late. I’ll give you the double but I can bring it down to \$129.”

The third card goes through.

In the bathtub later, Bridgette thinks about what might happen next for the bride-to-be. She thinks back to the time Seth proposed. It was at his sister’s wedding. They were outside on the pier of the fanciest resort on the island. Seth has blonde hair and a ruddy quality to his skin, like a perpetual windburn. He has nothing but t-shirts, jeans, waders, work boots, and flip-flops in his closet but that night he wore a dark, three-piece suit with a red pocket square. He’d borrowed the suit from his sister’s new husband.

Bridgette wore a pale blue dress. Seth said she reminded him of the sea. The dress's hem grazed her knees and it was the only thing she'd ever bought that wasn't on sale. She'd borrowed his mother's pearl earrings and wore the red scarf tied around her neck. She said yes. Of course she said yes. They were practically married anyway, together almost ten years.

After the bath, Bridgette dries off and climbs into bed. The plush pillows smell clean enough to suffocate her in their freshness. She clicks off the lamp and watches the thin yellow line beneath the door.

Two days later, Seth arrives.

"That was some stunt, Bridgette." He opens the truck's passenger door. "The credit card company called and I told them I was your husband. Said someone was using your card in Savannah. And you nowhere to be found. What the hell? Get in the truck."

The valet raises his eyebrows.

She makes eye contact with the valet and shakes her head. She does what she's told.

"You took my fucking money," he says, as he pulls out onto Highway 16. "You stole three-hundred dollars from me to do what? Go and stay in some goddamn hotel in another city? And then I had to pay another two-hundred dollars because you stayed another night? What the fuck, Bridgette?"

"You know you talk to me like a dog that just got into the garbage," she replies, her voice gravely and low.

"Well, this is garbage. It's fucking garbage, Bridgette. You're a goddamn child. I know you got beat up. I know that shit happened to you."

They ride silent along Interstate 95, low country marsh lulls into a fog on the east side; soybeans are planted in tight sturdy rows to the West; two worlds converge along this stretch of road. As Florida's blue reflective sign welcomes them, Seth finally speaks.

“You did this. You fucking joined. I told you not to, but you did.”

“Seth, I know I fucked up. But fuck you. I did not do this.”

The next day, they are on the road, again. He will drop her off at her father's in Mississippi, and then he'll drive to Oregon. There's no other place for Bridgette to go. Seth knows her father was abusive but offers, “Maybe he's mellowed in his old age. And besides, you've been in a war. You can handle some old drunk.” Bridgette, bone tired, doesn't argue. She packs two suitcases and Seth packs a bag. Ten years of their lives in boxes, labeled, and ready for the movers to come get the following week. His mother will let the movers in and supervise. Bridgette let Seth have it all. The last thing she wants is to set down roots at her father's.

Eleven hours later, Seth drops her off. They've barely said a word the entire way but Bridgette knows he'll be nice in front of her father.

Seth unloads her suitcases from the truck bed. Tallulah whines in the front seat.

“Go ahead and let her out before we get back on the road,” Seth says, nodding toward the dog.

“Hey.” Bridgette bends down and tries to hold the dog in her arms. To feel her warmth one last time. Tallulah wriggles away and cowers in the driver's seat.

“Out of the truck, Tallulah.” Bridgette stands there trying to be stoic. “Come.”

The dog doesn't budge.

Bridgette's eyes well up in frustration as she slams the door. It's the last time she'll see her dog. *Good riddance*, Tallulah seems to say. *This life isn't for you*.

Seth rolls his eyes and walks back to the truck. He opens the door. "Tallulah, girl, go potty for daddy."

The dog does as she's told.

"Goddamn dog," mutters Bridgette.

Seth glares but keeps his mouth shut because her father walks out of his trailer.

"How's it going, guys? Seth." Her father staggers a little when he reaches to shake Seth's hand.

"Roy, take good care of her." Seth returns the man's grip.

A week later Bridgette goes to the Dollar Market with an infected cut above her right eye. She should've gotten stitches. At first, her father had been on his best behavior until he came home one night in a blind rage and hurled what felt like the contents of the entire kitchen at her. Said he was tired of her drinking all of his booze when she hadn't touched a single drop. The cut had come from a broken plate when she hadn't ducked quickly enough. The next day, after he slept off his hangover in the trailer's only bedroom, he acted as if nothing happened.

In the Dollar Market, she keeps her eyes down and tries to get to the checkout line as fast as she can. Even though her father's trailer is unbearable, being in public is somehow even worse for Bridgette, like walking a tightrope with no net. Anxiety bubbles inside of her as she feels the stare of strangers. Everyone seems to know each other. They've heard her story no doubt: her father was out every night, likely spilling his guts

to any warm body in the barstool next to him. She couldn't hear them, but she knew what they were saying.

Went off to Iraq. Come back nuts now. Nobody wants her.

Bridgette stands in the frozen food section. Her palms sweaty. Her head warm.

Finally she makes it to the checkout line where a girl around sixteen holds her hand out for payment. Bridgette hands her a twenty, which isn't enough, so she fumbles through her bag even though she knows there isn't any money in there. She begins to tremble.

"Here." The woman behind Bridgette in line hands the cashier two dollars. "She's good."

Bridgette realizes she's been holding her breath.

"Thank you." She fights back tears.

The woman reaches for Bridgette's hand. "I'm Mary."

Three years ago

It's a sixteen hour flight back to the States. After the medic cleaned her up, a field dentist fitted her with a temporary bridge to cover up the missing teeth. The bridge feels bulky and foreign. Her mouth hasn't completely healed so it's painful to keep it in. The bridge shifts when she speaks so she keeps her mouth shut. Seth picks her up at the base and takes her to their house. He makes her a can of soup.

Her own bed feels as foreign as the bridge. Her face aches and her mouth throbs, but she goes to sleep with the bridge in even though she knows she's not supposed to do. She isn't ready to show Seth the damage.

Sometime in the night, while dreaming of ice cream and the desert wind, she feels Seth's hand move across her stomach. He pulls at her underwear and kisses her neck. Her tears start to flow lightly at first and then turn into a full sob. He moves away from her and falls back asleep facing the wall.

They sleep like this in these first weeks. He moves around her as though she's a planet and he's her moon, within a scripted orbit, careful not to let their trajectories collide. One night a squall moves across the ocean, and he unexpectedly gets the night off. He asks her to join him in the garage. They drink beer and throw darts. It's what they used to do on the rare nights he was off before she had been deployed.

"I miss this," he says. "I missed you. It was hell over there, wasn't it?"

"Yes," she replies.

"Told you not to go."

"Please don't start."

"I'm only kidding." He nails a bulls-eye.

She's on her second beer. She hasn't drank alcohol in months and she feels lightheaded.

"So what's your plan now?" he asks. "You going to try to teach again?"

"I'd like to. I need to get my teeth fixed. I don't feel ready to go back to work."

"Well, you got a little money with the hazard pay so you could probably take some time. You need a new car, though." They've always kept their finances separate and Seth doesn't offer to help.

He's brought out Tallulah's bed; the dog lets out a sleepy groan.

“What happened that night, Bridgette?” Seth asks, as he takes a pull off of his beer.

“They don’t know who he was. Never caught him. Don’t know if he jumped the fence or if he was a soldier in the unit. It’s like he vanished into thin air,” she says.

“Do they have DNA?” he asks.

Her answer will tell him. Yes, she’s been raped. Yes, she’s had the tests. They’ve come back clean. There’s no risk to him but she imagines his reaction will be terrible. She remembers a night years ago when a bunch of Seth’s buddies—none of the wives or girlfriends—had all been in this same garage throwing darts and one of the guys said a girl he was dating had been raped in college. Bridgette overheard the conversation as she walked by the door with a basket of laundry. “Nah, man. You can’t go there. Damaged goods,” Seth had said at the time. Back then, she hadn’t thought much of it. With the shoe on her foot now, the long ago conversation reverberates uncertainty inside of her. She understand the man Seth is—the man he’s always been.

When she tells him, he lets out a low whistle. “Right. Last round.” And he hands her the darts.

The air conditioner kicks on just as Bridgette throws. The sound scares the shit out of her. Takes her back to the night in the desert. The crack of the M-16 across her face before the attacker rips off her fatigues. His goddamn breathing on top of her as he keeps her pinned. After the chloroform. After he’d knocks out the teeth. He comes with indifference just before she passes out.

Bridgette’s dart bounces off the wall and hits Tallulah, who yelps and runs to Seth, tail between her legs.

“What the fuck?” Seth’s eyes flash with anger.

Bridgette begins to shake. “I’m so sorry, Tallulah girl, I’m so sorry.”

The dog cowers and sticks close to Seth.

After this, Seth is a planet all of his own.

An earthquake in Bridgette’s head.

“We’ll make your smile pretty again.” The dentist grins at Bridgette. His teeth are bright white, gorgeous, and capped. He smells like sandalwood. He bends over her. Her mind is thick with gas and the Vicodin she stole from Seth this morning.

Bridgette thinks about the word *smile*. S like Superman and then mile—a distance—a place to go—terrain to traverse. Derrick hates Superman. She begins to doze. She’s back in the desert.

“I think it’s a bunch of bullshit.” Derrick drives the truck. Bridgette’s along for the ride. They scout the perimeter for pipe bombs.

Derrick is a six-foot-five farmer from Goodland, Kansas who races motorcycles and enlisted for the thrill.

“I can’t stand superheroes,” he continues. “You’re told this story as a kid about how these guys save the world. They’re invincible. It’s crap. Because you go to fight and what happens? You die.”

“Who are the real heroes?” she asks.

He smiles with a far off look in his eyes.

“Pancho? Maybe Lefty?”

“I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

“Once we get out of this shithole, I’m gonna teach you about country music. And none of that Luke Bryan bullshit. You’re going to learn about Willie and Merle and Waylon. Highwaymen. The real outlaws.”

“And I’m getting you wasted so we can get matching Superman tattoos,” she teases.

“That will never happen. Run along, little girl. Run along.”

There’s an explosion ten feet away. The Humvee goes up on two wheels. Derrick corrects and hauls ass back to base.

She comes to in the dentist’s office. Dr. Patel stands over her. Her mouth numb. She doesn’t know how long she had been in the chair.

“That didn’t go well, Bridgette.” He seems displeased.

Bridgette feels guilty even though she didn’t do anything wrong. *Was it the pill? Did that fuck something up?*

Dr. Patel keeps speaking. “You’ve had trauma recently, yes, but it’s the past trauma that is getting in my way. You had an accident as a child.”

“Yeah, BMX bike and a tree,” she says, through numb lips.

“A bike wreck when you were three?” She can tell he’s irritated.

Why do they always ask you questions when your mouth is numb? “No. A tree. I hit a tree when I was a teenager. Knocked out my two front teeth.”

“Yeah, that’s what I figured. And you had braces later on and your orthodontist didn’t do that right so now you’ve got no root and barely any bone up there.”

Why does he say it like it’s my fault? “What do we do?” Feeling is returning to her face.

“We’re going to need to do some bone grafting. I insert bone into your gum line here.” He lifts her upper lip and runs his pinky finger along her gums. She can feel his fingernail through the glove. “We do that and it takes nine months to heal. After that, we drill abutments into your gums. Then we screw the implants into the abutments. You’ve lost four teeth but in the end, it will be an eight-tooth bridge. I’ll begin by pulling these and these.” He touches the teeth that have to go.

“When do we begin?” She swallows hard.

“How’s tomorrow?”

The next day, she’s back in the chair. He packs a mixture of bone and something like epoxy into her open gums. She smells bone and tastes blood. The constant whirring of the drill pulsates her entire being. Head: drill. Heart: drill. Hand: drill. Bones: drill.

Derrick holds her in his arms. “That stupid fuck. I will get that stupid fuck, Bridgette. I will slaughter that motherfucking animal.”

Both are covered in her blood.

He carries her to the medic tent.

Then

In the desert, there’s no moisture to hold in the heat. The warmth evaporates into the atmosphere. It’s hot during the day but it is the night chill that seeps in, enters your bones, and knocks on the weathered corners of your soul until finally—biting, chattering, surrendering—you let it in.

You stand in the lamplight of the guard tower near the perimeter fence. Everyone else has gone to take a piss. You see a man in a hood.

CHAPTER III

BIRD AND THE BEES

All told, Bird Woods considered her twenty-three-year marriage to Edgar a success. While the union hadn't necessarily been a quarter century of wedded bliss, Bird still had a certain security. They had been married only half a year when, while hunting, Edgar had accidentally shot Bird in the stomach. They were in a johnboat approaching an island known for nice-sized deer. Edgar thought he saw an eight-point buck and fired toward the shore. Even with his new 9x scope, even when he was sober—which he wasn't, though he'd claimed he was before setting out—Edgar was a lousy shot. That January day in 1978 led to Bird's infertility and two promises. One, Edgar would never drink more than two beers in one sitting. The second a pact they made: unbridled honesty always.

Now, on a sunny day in May 2001, Bird sat on the back porch working a crossword puzzle and watching Edgar tend to his single beehive at the property's edge. As she was trying to figure out a five letter word for hog, the telephone in the kitchen rang. She left her crossword on the patio table and went inside to answer the phone.

“Bird. He's a son-of-a-bitch. A goddamn son-of-a-bitch.” Bird's best friend, Danette, was on the other end of the line. “He's seeing her. I know he's seeing that damn Louise Mollier.”

Bird had never heard Danette so upset. “Wait, I'm confused. What about Louise?”

“Russell. He’s gone off the deep end. Lost his ever-loving mind. He’s having an affair with that damn woman who works down at the bowling alley.” Danette and Russell had been together longer than Edgar and Bird.

“Wait. What? One of the twins? Those old women who wear those hideous matching Hawaiian dresses?”

“Exactly. Who does that? A Hawaiian dress in a bowling alley?”

“I can’t stand those women,” Bird said, as she pulled meat out of the freezer and set it in the sink. “You remember the other one, Maura, used to live across the street from us? Years ago. Every Saturday morning she mowed the lawn in her bikini. Just hanging it all out there for God and everybody to see.”

“Those two are nothing but trouble.”

“But still. Russell? Are you sure?” The twins were both bean pole skinny and ugly as sin. They were in their early fifties but could have passed for seventy. Both of them smoked incessantly and were too tan, with skin like worn leather. Danette, on the other hand, was one of the prettiest women Bird had ever known. Both she and Bird were fifty-eight. While Bird had always been short and stocky with spiked red hair, Danette was tall and athletic with long, wavy black hair and a bright, youthful smile. Danette was also the kindest person Bird had ever known. Russell would’ve been a fool to screw around on her with someone like Louise.

“Something’s going on with him. He’s a damn fool.”

“I just can’t see it.” Not that Bird had any great love for Russell. The handful of times Edgar had been drunk in the last twenty years, all roads usually led back to a night out with Danette’s other half.

Danette began to sob uncontrollably.

“I’m coming over,” Bird said and hung up the phone. She put the meat in the refrigerator and grabbed her handbag.

Edgar was walking back from the hive as Bird headed toward the Cadillac. They met under the carport. He carried frames from the hive.

“Get those things away from me.” Bird was allergic to bees. Very. Two months prior, Edgar had come home with the hive and insisted they keep it in the backyard.

“A bee frame ain’t gonna hurt you,” Edgar said. Just then a robin dive bombed him. “Goddamn bird.”

“Watch it!” Bird was already on edge.

“Not you. I ought to kick down that robin’s nest. They roost here every spring and you and I both know it’s too close to the house and they get bird shit all over the damn vehicles.”

“Don’t you dare touch that nest.” Bird drilled her finger into Edgar’s chest.

“What’s got into you?” He took off his gloves and jacket.

“Long story. I’m headed to Danette’s. I don’t know how long I’ll be. Can you fend for yourself for dinner?”

Edgar stacked the frames under the carport to put in the deep freeze later. “Damn wax moths again. Sure. I’ll stop off at the bait shop on the way into the mill this evening. It’s burger night.”

“You’re working tonight? It’s Saturday?”

“League game tomorrow. Gotta bank the time,” he said.

“I thought league play was last night?”

“Nah, that was just me and Rusty rolling a little. And if we do good tomorrow, we go to the regionals. We’ll have to stay down in Jackson a few days. I went ahead and packed a bag. I feel lucky.”

“That no good SOB.”

“Who, Rusty? Seriously, Bird. What’s he done to you?”

“I’m sorry. I’d just like a little heads up next time, all right?” Bird said. “I’ll try to make us a big breakfast in the morning.”

“Love you, Birdie.” He pecked her on the cheek and went inside the house.

“You too,” she replied, as the screen door swung shut behind him.

Bird opened Danette’s screen door to a house in disarray. The loveseat was overturned. Throw pillows were slashed. White down feathers littered the small sunlit front room like a flock of massacred birds. Danette sat stone-faced on the floor staring at the wall and clutching one of the torn pillows. Eye makeup streaked her face.

“What the hell happened?” Bird said.

“We had a fight.”

Bird held Danette for a long time. She lifted her up and walked her to the back porch where they could sit in the iron rocking chairs and look out onto Bear Lake.

“It’s paradise.” Bird had always wanted to live on this lake. She and Edgar lived just five miles down the road but there was something about looking out onto the water that righted Bird’s soul.

“It’s hell,” Danette replied.

“This isn’t about you, honey.” Bird rocked in the chair. “It’s about a man who doesn’t know what the hell he’s doing. Like a goddamn teenager driving too goddamn fast.”

“I feel completely empty,” Danette said, her voice small. “Russell is all I have.”

“Now, you don’t mean that. You’ve got your boys.” Russell and Danette had two grown sons – Max, who lived one town over and Dale, who spent most of his time on an oil rig in the Gulf.

“I know, but none of this works without Russell,” Danette replied.

“I mean, do you know for sure? You really know he’s cheating?”

“I’m almost a hundred percent sure.” Danette looked out across the lake.

“Danette, you’ve been married thirty-five years. Almost isn’t good enough.”

Danette pulled a slip of paper out of her pocket and handed it to Bird. It was a receipt for two whisky sours. On the back, scrawled in a woman’s handwriting were the words: “One week till nothing but endless sky and open sea.”

“What the hell does that mean?” Bird asked. The receipt was dated the previous Sunday.

“I guess they’re planning on going away together?”

Bird’s stomach was uneasy. She wondered if she had been too abrupt with Edgar earlier. Were there other times she could have been nicer? “Where’s Russell now?”

“Where the hell do you think?”

“Wash your face. We’re going down there.”

Danette and Bird sat at the lacquered horseshoe bar. Danette ordered whiskey on the rocks. Bird ordered a club soda with lime. Bird hadn’t had a drink since the late

1970s, since Edgar had promised to scale back. An act of solidarity. A blinking Pabst Blue Ribbon sign hung over the bay window that led out onto the lanes. The bar lights were turned low even in the middle of the afternoon. Bird and Danette could look out onto the lanes but still be obscured in darkness. Bright florescent lights shone down on the bowlers like they were on a stage.

Sure enough, Russell was with the twins. He had a tall, broad build but had begun to stoop with age. He pulled his bowling ball from its case and set it on the conveyor, then pulled a cigarette from his pocket.

“That son-of-a-bitch told me he quit,” Danette said.

“Looks like the least of your worries.”

Louise leaned in for a light. He lit her cigarette and then his own. She tousled what little hair he had.

Danette coughed a sob and Bird squeezed her best friend’s hand. Bird felt superior. Beautifully so. Her marriage felt solid like an engine that always cranked. Sure, it was flawed. What marriage wasn’t? But Bird could sleep soundly each night comforted by the fact that she knew Edgar would never hide anything from her. All of the lake houses in the world, she decided, wouldn’t be worth a minute in Danette’s shoes. She made a vow in that moment to be kinder to Edgar. To be a better wife.

The waitress was over by Russell. She went and got them a bourbon, a beer, and a couple of cosmos.

“I guess they’re planning on getting tight tonight.” Danette sounded resigned.

Bird was silent. Russell was a bourbon drinker. She saw him lift the highball and take a sip.

Edgar emerged from the men's room and walked toward Russell and the twins. All of a sudden Bird couldn't breathe. Her husband looked unfamiliar under the alley lights. The same short stature he'd always had. Had the same beer gut he'd had since his late thirties. Still had the same full head of hair that had gone cotton white the year he turned forty-three. But the man that stood talking to Maura Mollier may as well have a complete stranger off of the street.

"You know what," Bird said. "He did say he was coming up tonight. God, do you think he knows what's going on? He wouldn't dare be a part of this knowingly." She tried to control the pitch of her voice, a tinny echo in her head.

"Certainly not your perfect, honest Edgar," Danette said. "I just don't know who to believe anymore."

Bird quit listening. Maura rested her hand on Edgar's shoulder. He guided her toward the lane. Showed her how to hold the ball and aim. Held her wrist. Edgar was a proud left-handed bowler. Felt like he shared a lineage with so many of the southpaw bowling greats, including his idol Earl Anthony. Was never ashamed when someone cracked that lefties had an easier lane. Now though, he guided Maura on the right. Held her hips a moment too long as they looked down in the direction of the pins. Then Edgar backed away to watch her. Took a swig of beer. The air conditioning vent kicked on above Bird's head, blowing down freezing air that smelled like mold. She watched as Maura's ball wobbled down the lane, bounced along the gutter, and ricocheted left at the last minute.

Four pins teetered as the ball skidded into the gutter. Maura squealed when two pins finally fell.

Bird wanted to down Danette's whiskey right there. She sipped her club soda instead. "Let's go. I've seen all I can stomach."

It was dark by the time Bird got home. She'd waited until Danette had fallen asleep on the couch before slipping out. Reiterated the lie that she knew Edgar had gone to the alley. Promised Danette she'd ask Edgar how long he'd known about Russell's affair. Once home, Bird stood for a while under the soft blue light of the carport. Cicadas pulsed in the night. She walked closer to the frames and saw that there wasn't any comb. Had even that been a lie?

That night, Bird tossed and turned in bed. She heard Edgar come in after midnight. Thought she heard the wheezing of his recliner's cushions. Heard him click on the television and then the sound of Ted Koppel's voice. Edgar turned the volume down. With that, she knew he'd doze in the chair and stumble into the bedroom at some point in the early morning hours. She wasn't ready to confront him. She was too tired for a fight tonight.

Bird whiled away the hours of insomnia and her mind wandered to the morning on the boat. The stillness of the crisp air. A fluid sky. A lake smoother than glass.

Bird thought back to the only other time she had seen Edgar holding the gun with the scope. A memory beneath all of the other moments. Two years after the accident. Lying in bed together on a Saturday. Bird barely awake. Then he was no longer in bed. She heard the mower over at Maura's house and sat up on her elbows. Edgar perched in the window with his rifle, his eye on the scope. He was using the scope to watch Maura mow the lawn in her bikini. Watching him point that gun at Maura felt like an untruth.

Edgar sheepish when he saw Bird looking at him. “Thought I saw a dove,” he had said at the time. “She got in my line of sight.”

Bird awoke the next morning around five in the quiet light of predawn. Edgar was asleep beside her. She blinked her eyes, got up quietly, and went outside. The robin’s nest was kicked over, the eggs in the yard, one split open down the middle. Bird scooped the eggs back into the nest and then set it next to a sapling at the edge of the wood line. She went into the shop and pulled Edgar’s veil over her head. Wound duct tape around her ankles, securing the space between her sneakers and jeans, just in case.

She put on Edgar’s thick white bee gloves and jacket, careful to zip and snap the garment as securely as possible. She left the shop and made her way slowly across the wood line. Folded herself into the trees like a fugitive or insane person. She was within ten feet of the hive when she heard a buzz behind her left ear. She let out a screech and ran back into the shop.

She sat on a bench to catch her breath. Anxiety droned in her ears. The back of her neck hot with fear. The day warmed quickly. In less than an hour the dawn would turn into the brightness of a late spring day. She willed herself to go back to the hive and finish what Edgar had started. She had to know if this, too, had been a lie.

Bird ran across the yard and ripped open the top of the hive. Her head reeling. She threw the lid on the ground. Peered inside the box and then ripped off the veil. No bees, only mites and beetles crawling across rotten comb. And plastic bag covered in a rancid, sticky fluid. She opened the bag.

Inside were two letters from Maura. A photograph of a much younger version of the woman posed in a bikini on some random beach. And the thing that set Bird’s heart

on fire. Two glossy tickets for a starboard cabin on the Norwegian Sun leaving out of New Orleans the next day. The name Maura Mollier embossed in thick black lettering alongside Edgar's name. Bird ran back to the shop. Tore off the bee suit and threw the bag and its contents in the garbage.

The telephone was ringing when she walked back into the house. She grabbed the receiver.

"He's leaving me." Danette's voice sounded dry like the embers of a fire that had burned through the night. "He came in after midnight and asked for a divorce. Said he's in love with her. They're headed to New Orleans."

"Danette, I understand." Bird spoke in a whisper, held back a sob, felt hollowness in her chest.

"You don't. You said yourself. You trust completely Edgar. You can't possibly imagine what this feels like."

Bird longed to leap into Danette's misery. Tell her she was in the same place. The same boat exactly. But Bird held back.

"Not this time," she said.

"What?" Danette sounded puzzled on the other end of line.

"I have to go." Bird hung up the phone.

Bird slipped into the front bathroom as she heard Edgar coming out of the bedroom.

He knocked lightly on the bathroom door. "Going to check the bees."

A few minutes later, Bird came outside, the screen door slamming behind her. Head down, Edgar was removing the hive's lid, peering into the empty langstroth box.

Bird held the rifle with the 9x scope trained on her husband's left hand. She always had been the better shot.

CHAPTER IV
THE BEEKEEPER'S FIND

Brandishing a single-shot 20-gauge rifle, Frank Morris wanted nothing more than to shoot the bird. He'd felt that ever since his wife's Parkinson's had left her bedridden; the red-cockaded woodpecker seemed to be taunting him. Its titter-tat-tat mocked him as he scanned the tree line until his eyes fell on the red glint. He took aim, though it was illegal to shoot the bird and Frank was a law-abiding man. The woodpecker alighted out of a towering pine just as the telephone in Frank's shop rang. So he rested his gun against the side of the house and went to answer it.

"Damn woodpecker won't get off my property," Frank told him just as the red speck circled back and landed on a nearby utility pole.

"One of those sons-of-bitches cost a thousand bucks damage to the roof of one of my rentals last year." Gus, who owned most of the town's rental houses and at least half of its timberland, was always working a deal, it seemed. "Ain't nothin' you can do but shoot 'em and you better watch out who sees you do that."

"What do you need, Gus?"

"Picked up a new place off the highway last week. Bunch a bees up in a tree. It's pretty grown up. How soon can you come? I plan on bush-hogging the whole place on Monday."

"If the weather holds I can be up this evening," Frank replied.

It was swarm season and Gus was Frank's seventh call in a week.

The forecasted rain never fell, so at four that afternoon Frank dialed their neighbor, Eva Jacobs, to come sit with Maggie.

"I'll be gone a couple hours," he said when she arrived. "Stephen's coming in from Birmingham tonight." Stephen was Frank and Maggie's only son. Frank went to tell Maggie good-bye. "I'm going after a swarm," he said, kneeling over his wife. He kissed her forehead. She nodded and gave a half smile.

"Be careful," she mouthed in a slight whisper.

"Will do. Gus bought a new place. Up where the tornado two years ago tore all them trees down. I love you, baby."

"You too." She closed her eyes.

Maggie had lost the ability to walk in early January. Now it was late March. Swarm season would last until mid-June. Frank wondered how Maggie would be by then. Talking was becoming harder for her by the day. Not just the slurring. She'd lost the power to control the volume of her voice—at times it was whisper-thin like a feather; other times it was loud and jarring like a whinnying colt. Maggie's energy had dwindled, too. She spent most of her days and nights in bed, sleeping on and off like a newborn. This weekend, though, with Stephen up from Birmingham, Frank could make it back to the farmer's market. A chance to get out and connect and talk with friends. Sell some honey. See the folks who sold their homemade goods: their neighbor Eva, who made candles and balms from Frank's beeswax; Gus's son, Jason, who carved wood sculptures with his father's chainsaw; and Mary and Sullivan, who were the best truck farmers across three counties. Maggie had been the talker in the marriage and now beyond the

Bible passage he read to his wife each morning over coffee, most of Frank's days were spent in silence.

He loaded his supplies and whistled to Gypsy.

"Load up." Frank opened the passenger door of his pickup and the lanky hound leapt into the cab. Gypsy was a brown mutt. Long spaniel ears. Pleading eyes. She'd wandered into the yard a few weeks ago and he let her stay. He rolled the windows down and Gypsy hung her head and torso outside of the truck.

Thirty minutes later, Frank pulled off the highway. A wrecked Airstream stood nearby, its only window busted out. Old clothes and other debris were strewn across the yard. He spotted the swarm of bees in a hollow sycamore tree, the tree itself long dead. The thick log with its flaky, white bark stood five feet high. The bees had burrowed their hive inside the log.

Before the truck was in park, Gypsy jumped out of the window and went to investigate the contents of the yard. Frank put on his bee jacket, pulled his veil over his head, and duct-taped his pant legs to his boots. He removed his chainsaw and smoker from the truck's bed.

The wind moved a dirty plastic grocery bag across his foot. Frank looked up. The sky had turned overcast. He could smell the coming rain so he worked fast. He put pine straw in the smoker, lit a match, and squeezed the bellows into the tree. The smoke calmed the insects. The bees surrounded their queen at the top of the hollow. He fired up the chainsaw and cut out a section of the tree's middle in order to get closer to the hive. He swept the bees into a red bucket. Closed the lid with small holes poked through. He

took his hive tool and a deep frame brood box, and then carefully cut the comb out of the tree and set it down in the box.

As he cut away at the honeycomb inside of the log, something shimmered. He looked closer. It didn't look like brood.

“Insect larvae?” he asked himself. The last thing he needed was a diseased hive. He cut more comb. He examined the egg—harder and larger than a larva. He lifted his veil and rubbed the egg across his teeth. It was gritty like a pearl. More pearls lined the inside of the log.

He scooped the bees from the bucket into the brood box, sweeping stragglers with a bee brush. As he worked, fat rain drops began to splash. One of the bees stung him in the knuckle. His ring finger swelled instantly. The bees balled around the queen in the box, around brood, honey, and pollen Frank had cut from the tree. Frank slipped an industrial-sized rubber band around the box and heaved the pearl-filled log into his truck bed. The box of bees bounced and he fastened everything down tight.

He called Gypsy, who came back with a stuffed animal between her teeth.

“Drop it,” he said.

She didn't. He reached for the toy—a small gray rabbit with big eyes—and Gypsy growled. He didn't really know her temperament yet and he had a bed full of bees he had to get back to the house so he let it go. He opened the truck door and Gypsy settled into the passenger seat focused on her find. Driving rain fell all the way home, and the truck cab smelled like mildew because of the sopping wet bunny steered between the dog's jaws. By the time Frank pulled into his gravel drive, the rain had stopped and the sunset was the fiery red-orange of early spring. Stephen had arrived; his SUV was parked

behind Maggie's Corolla, a car he'd have to sell now that Maggie was no longer driving. Frank parked the pickup and Gypsy jumped out, carrying the bunny to her muddy dog bed under the carport. Frank set the bee box in the backyard with the other hives.

Frank pulled open the bay door of the shop and flipped on the lights. After he unloaded his tools and chainsaw, he heaved the log into a wheelbarrow and wheeled it into the building, struggling as he set the log on his workbench. He pulled up a stool and cleaned his glasses.

The pearls were attached to a layer of fabric. As he pulled the fabric, a section tore off in his hands. The fabric and pearls were caked with honey. He went into the house and came back with dishtowels and a pot of steaming water. Stephen was probably in the back bedroom watching a movie with Maggie. Back in the shop, Frank removed as much of the fabric as he could and soaked it in the water.

Frank sat in his shop. He'd been filled with a sense of dread these last months. An impending doom of what would happen if and when Maggie should go. The log was a small distraction that sparked a glimmer of hope in man without much to look forward to, who didn't quite know how to help his wife. The dress was something he could share with Maggie that might brighten her day. He listened to the night: crickets and the occasional frog, the tin roof whining in the breeze, and the sound of distant thunder. He could smell the wild onion of his neighbor's freshly mowed lawn.

An hour later, Stephen walked into the shop.

"How is she?" Frank looked up from his task.

"She hasn't been awake since I got here."

"I was hoping y'all were watching a movie. I'll be on up in a few."

Stephen pulled two beers from the shop's small refrigerator.

By this time, Frank had lit a burner and turned it on low. A pot of hot water rested above the burner. Frank used the water to melt the wax and separate the honey from the cloth.

Frank pulled a piece of fabric from the water.

Stephen handed his dad a beer. "Whatcha got there?" he asked.

"I caught a swarm and then saw something else in the log. It's got a bunch of pearls and some lace. The comb preserved it. I think it's a wedding dress."

Frank ran his fingers across the freshly cleaned fabric of white satin covered in tiers of lace and pearls. The pattern was a row of small white daisies flanked by leaves. The head of each flower was accented by a circle of ten tiny pearls. Pearls were sewn into the leaves as well.

"That's incredible." Stephen took a section of fabric. "Mom's really bad off. I'm sorry I haven't been here."

"You're busy with your own family. I remember those days. This was a pretty fast turn, too."

Maggie was diagnosed two years prior. The doctor put her on several medications and enrolled her in a research trial in Memphis. The disease had seemed manageable until just after Christmas.

"I should have come sooner is all," Stephen said.

"You're here now."

The men finished their beers hunched over in silence. They salvaged three sections of the dress that night, carefully removing wax without tearing the fabric. At the

end of the night, Frank cut off the lights and left the rest of the dress in the tree trunk. They walked up to the house and checked in on Maggie. Frank looked on as Stephen laid the three pieces of the dress they had salvaged on his mother's nightstand for her to see the next day.

The outdoor market was in full swing by midmorning. It was a bright spring day when the air felt light and a breeze made it a little cool in the shade of the magnolias. Eva was almost sold out of candles; Frank had sold eight jars of honey. Mary and Sullivan had shown up with crates of lettuce, asparagus, and radishes, most of which were gone. Even Jason sold a \$200 sculpture of a bald eagle with its wings spread in mid-flight.

Frank got the text at 10:34, as he returned the change of two twenties from a man who had just purchased four jars.

In the E.R. Come now. The doctors are saying pulmonary embolism. Frank left the table and tent, the jars lined in a row. Eva would take care of everything. She said, *Just go.* The cash box still open, he flew to the county hospital three miles north of the market. Ran the red lights. Didn't make it in time. Didn't get to say good-bye.

Stephen drove them home. They sat in silence for the eternity of the evening. A raging storm rolled in around nine, and Frank fell asleep upright in his easy chair and jolted awake at the sound of tornado sirens sometime around 3 a.m. Stephen was horizontal on the couch. Father and son blinked at one another over the sirens in the soft light. Neither made a move. Pine limbs plummeted onto the roof, but the house held.

The next morning, Frank went to the bee yard. A cold front had moved in. A breeze flowed through the trees. Birds soared at high altitudes. A distant echo of a woodpecker in a pine. Frank had no fight. The day felt foreign, like cotton against his tongue. Stephen did all the work, called the relatives, and friends, called the funeral home and made the arrangements. He even made the bed. Folded towels. Frank went into the house—Maggie’s house—and felt out of place.

“Do you want me to wash the sheets?” Stephen asked over the din of the dryer.

Frank shook his head and returned to the bee yard. It was the only place on earth that made sense. Gypsy abandoned her bunny under the carport to lie in the morning sun near Frank while he tended to the bees.

Hives lined the north end of the property on two acres across four lots. Behind the boxes buzzing with life, two dozen trees had grown up. Mostly oak and pine, a few cypresses, mimosa sprinkled in, a wisteria vine and honeysuckle that competed for sunlight across three seasons. Behind the trees, a creek wound its way back out beyond the neighborhood into larger tributaries Frank would never see.

There were 20 langstroth boxes in all. The boxes from this season’s swarms were glaring white. Maggie had painted all of the other boxes in years past. Sunflowers, pansies, hibiscus: bright floral scenes of eternal spring.

Frank collected his hive tool and smoker from the shop. Saw the dress on the shop’s massive center worktable he’d constructed himself. Half built bee frames were stacked across it next to layers of embossed wax and craft sticks.

The bay door to the shop was open and bees were already headed in to find honey. Five or six had found the honeycomb inside the log. Worker bees wriggled against

the backdrop of pearls. The round soft bodies collected honey quickly. Frank admired the sense of purpose in the insects. Every bee knew just what to do and when to do it, all of them living and dying for the queen.

He closed the shop door and walked out to the yard to inspect the hives. He found queen cells in his strongest hive, which meant the existing queen was nearing the end of her life.

He loaded his equipment in a wheelbarrow, carted it back to the shop, and set it on the worktable. Then he loaded the log into the wheelbarrow and brought it out to the bee yard so that the bees would clean the remaining honey out of the tree.

The morning of Maggie's wake, Frank ate his breakfast on the front porch and watched the woodpecker whittle away at the dead pine tree in his front yard. On such a peaceful morning, the titter-tat-tat was profane. The world still waking up. The temperature would top ninety—a precursor to what Frank imagined would be an unbearable summer. But now it was cool, before the heat of day would set in and lick up all semblance of motivation. Frank just wanted to drink his coffee and eat his honeyed biscuit. Instead, the bird unleashed its rhythmic assault. Frank stomped to the shop and came back to the tree wielding a chainsaw. He yanked the cord.

Across the street, Eva Jacobs flew out of her front door in her worn-blue bathrobe and dirty house slippers.

She walked to Frank's front porch, holding a cup of coffee and a copy of the Mississippi Marketplace Bulletin.

Frank cut the chainsaw off and looked across the street to the wood line. The bird disappeared into a sea of loblolly pine.

“Frank Morris.” She took a seat in Frank’s rocker. “What are you doing with a chainsaw this early in the morning?”

Frank set the chainsaw down and sat down in Maggie’s chair. “I hear him all the time. Damn bird. When I’m in the shop, I hear him across the yard, up against the chimney. I’m sure there’s damage up there. I just haven’t gotten to it yet.”

“Frank, I’m sorry. I know what you’re going through.” Eva sipped her coffee. “Well, not really. You actually liked Maggie.” Eva’s husband, Joe, had died the previous year.

“I ought to just shoot the son-of-a-bitch.”

“How about we keep you out of jail?” Eva said. “When do Lauren and the girls get here?”

“They left Birmingham early this morning so they should be here by noon.”

“That’s good. Here, I brought you this.” She handed him the newspaper. “A guy in Horn Lake’s selling a honey extractor for half price.”

“Thanks, I’ll give him a call.” He set the newspaper down. “Listen, Eva. Joe wasn’t all bad, was he?” Frank remembered how Eva and Joe fought all the time when he was alive, how she seemed happier now that he was gone. Frank couldn’t imagine himself ever being happy again without Maggie.

“There were some good times. Few and far between, I guess. You know, when we were going through all our stuff about a decade ago? I was so mad at Maggie. And at

you. You both had something good. And I just knew Joe and I would never get there. Anyhow, I shouldn't be telling you this. I'm sorry. We're all going to miss her."

Frank picked up the paper and flipped through the pages. "For the record, it wasn't all roses. Every couple has their thing."

"Thanks for that. I'm here if you need anything. I have some casseroles I'll walk over later."

"Thanks, Eva." Frank picked up the chainsaw to walk back down to the shop. She rose and walked back across the road.

After the funeral, Frank immediately changed into his work clothes and began spraying new bee boxes in front of the shop in a light green. Frank couldn't stand the white. His granddaughters, Sarah and Courtney, played hide and seek in the garden, still dressed in their Sunday best. Sarah came by to check on Frank every few minutes. The little girl was like a moon in his orbit.

"Grandpa, you want me to help?"

"No, honey. You play with your sister. I don't think your mama wants you getting those clothes messed up. Y'all be careful in that dirt."

Sarah ran off to find Courtney. Shrieks of laughter drifted toward Frank until Lauren called the girls inside.

He set the sprayer in water and was touching up the edge of one of the boxes with a paintbrush when the titter-tat-tat pierced the dearth of the afternoon. He walked to the bee yard. The pearls inside the log shimmered.

The woodpecker dove down and drilled into the log.

Frank dropped the paintbrush and slipped into the shop. He pulled his rifle from the top shelf and slithered against the lattice. The woodpecker bored into the wood's wound. Frank paused hidden behind the lattice of the lean-to that butted up against the shop. The bird looked small now. Minnow even. Delicate bones. Its black and white tuxedoed breast and signature red streak running along its cockade. Its tail—a wisp of golden down—was unlike anything he'd seen on a woodpecker. The color reminded him of Maggie's hair. He put the gun away and walked to the bee yard. As he did, the woodpecker took flight and he saw Sarah standing there peering into the log.

“Look Grandpa.” The girl pointed inside the log.

Concave holes were drilled in a pattern along its inside. They looked like pearls.

CHAPTER V
FOR THE LOVE OF DOG

I meet Marcus at a minor league game: Jacksonville Jumbo Shrimp versus Kissimmee Cobras. The brightly-lit stadium a stone's throw from the St. Johns River has been renovated to the old-timey feel of a Northern ballpark, but its faux brick and imitation gas lanterns make it more theme park than Fenway. The craft beer is nice and Marcus is excited about the tapas. He drones on about meats-on-sticks while I watch his arm and salivate. Nearly a dozen Tinder dates in half as many months and they have all ended deliciously. I expect Marcus will be more of the same.

“Seriously, the flavors really pop.” Marcus brandishes a Thai curry chicken skewer. “Try a bite.”

He waves the meat in my face and I want to attack him right there.

“I’m a vegetarian,” I reply.

“Oh,” he says. “I didn’t mean to offend you. I’ll go back. I think they have tofu.”

I tell him I’m not actually hungry, though I’m ravenous. Marcus buys us beer and we sit down to watch the game. My stomach growls and I feel lightheaded. I’ve spent the last week sneaking into an abandoned school on my way home from work. Bats have roosted in the rafters and I’ve been picking them off one by one, but all the bats in the world would never equal the satiation of a single human being.

On the field, number five has more meat than the others. He'd be a meal you'd have on a Saturday with not much to do and nowhere to be.

The first base coach is in his fifties. Plenty of meat. How would that work? I haven't dated a guy beyond thirty since the turn last year. How would my appetite change in the coming decades? Would I get older? Would I even live to transition to older men?

"Grace? You okay?" Marcus finishes his beer and stands up.

"I'm good. I'm sorry." I smile and try to pay attention. "I'm not much company tonight. It's been a long week. Here, let me get this round." I take his empty cup and head toward the concession.

After the game, a bubblegum country duo butchers a rendition of "This Land is Your Land," complete with red, white, and blue pyrotechnics. Then Marcus suggests we walk along the river. I'm a few inches taller than him so I'm glad I didn't wear heels. He's not a bad-looking guy. Sandy brown hair, glasses, slumps a little when he stands. A nor'easter has moved in so we take the ferry to the Southbank to stay out of the wind.

"You're near the river, right?" he asks.

"Yes, it's a cluster of townhouses right by the old church."

"The church with the chimney swifts that come back each year?" he asks.

I nod in reply. In just a few weeks, the small birds will make their annual return there.

"I love that area. Great tapas at that Middle Eastern place on the square."

"What's with you and the appetizers?" I ask, and he looks wounded so I change the subject. "Where do you live?"

"At the beach."

Of course he does. Now he'll start talking about how much he loves to paddleboard.

“So what do you do when you aren't building websites?” I ask.

“I'm a glassblower. And I have a German shepherd named T-Bone. I taught him to pick up trash off the beach.”

“How old is T-Bone?”

“Seven. Do you have pets?”

I tell him I've been thinking about getting a dog. “I just worry that maybe I work too much.” I am an editorial assistant at a regional publishing house. The pay is crap, the hours are long, and we're always on deadline. But something about the translucent, eager eyes of the receptionist reminds me of a half-brother from a life that's long dead. That and there's always a plate of fresh scones. They were my absolute favorite before the turn and while they do nothing for my appetite now, I still love the taste.

“Couldn't you bring the pup to work?”

“Our art director brings her dogs. I guess she has to since we work like 12-hour days.”

“Take the leap.” He grabs my hand. “I couldn't imagine life without T-Bone.”

An hour later, Marcus is on top of me. We're in his dingy beach flat above a garage. It smells like patchouli and wet dog. A knock-off Navajo rug hangs on the wall. Fleet Foxes play in the background and T-Bone stares at us through the screen door.

Marcus runs his hands down my back. It would feel nice if I weren't so famished. I'm tired enough to have sex without the whole murder thing. But I'm hungry. It's why I suffered through nine innings, a walk along the river, and a 45-minute drive out to the

beach. Marcus kisses my neck. I'm ready to gnaw off his ear. He takes off his clothes. He has a long torso like a flank steak and crazy large calves. He hadn't seemed this solid in his khakis and button-down. Now's my chance, but T-Bone is whimpering from the porch.

"You too." Marcus laughs.

"What?" I say.

"Strip," he says.

I pull off my sundress.

Marcus is close enough to taste. Salty skin. Citrus shampoo. A faint smell of smoke.

The dog scratches at the screen.

"No, T-Bone. Stay." Marcus's eyes meet mine. "T-Bone's jealous. Let's go to the bedroom."

I grab my wadded-up dress. My knife is concealed in a pocket in the folds of loose fabric.

In the bedroom, Marcus turns on a lava lamp. We both get in bed. He takes a glass pipe from the nightstand drawer, loads a bowl, lights it, and takes a pull.

"You want a little?" he asks, as he breathes out the smoke.

"I'm good."

He inches toward me. "Makes the sex better. And we can take a shower after. It lasts forever when you're stoned."

My stomach lets out a volcanic rumble and I pull the sheet tight around me.

"Trust me, the last thing I need is the munchies," I say.

“Don’t tell me you’re one of those girls who doesn’t eat. I like a woman with an appetite.”

I can feel the weight of the knife in the dress bunched up on the floor.

He sets the bowl back on the dresser. “You shouldn’t be self-conscious. You have nothing to worry about. I knew you were out of my league the minute you showed up at the ballpark.”

“I’m good with my body,” I say, a little irritated, though I feel like I’m all knees and elbows as I fold into myself. “I just don’t feel like getting stoned.”

“You hear that?” he asks.

All I can hear is my stomach. “Hear what?”

T-Bone comes into the room.

“How’d you get in, bud?” Marcus asks.

Marcus gets out of bed and walks into the living room.

“Damn dog just chewed a giant hole through the screen door. Landlord’s gonna kill me,” he calls from the other room.

The bedroom, which is covered in an inch of dust and littered with a week’s work of laundry, leads me to believe Marcus won’t do much about the door.

“I’m ordering a pizza,” he says. “Just veggie, right? And maybe some chocolate chip cookies. You’re not vegan, are you?”

“Not vegan,” I say. T-Bone plops down on my lap and heaves a sigh. I pet him.

Marcus comes back. “I’m sorry I got distracted.” He crawls back in bed. “T-Bone, get down.”

T-Bone growls low and settles in against my legs. The dog is a warm pile of fur and his heart races against my thigh. He nuzzles then nips my hand.

“T-Bone, what’s gotten into you?” Marcus asks. “He’s never this clingy.”

“He’s fine.” I’m becoming resigned to an evening that probably won’t end in a feeding other than pizza.

“Well, we were in the middle of something?” Marcus moves a little closer.

“Do you mind?” I ask. “I feel like maybe the moment’s gone.” Things feel complicated. I can’t kill Marcus. Not tonight. Not in front of his dog.

Marcus looks disappointed as he flips on the television and smokes another bowl. I take a hit. My mind is fuzzy and I need food. Two weeks ago, I ravaged a telemarketer and left him in the shallows near Reena’s Redneck Yacht Club, a desolate dive bar on a nameless Northside inlet. Reena’s mean as a snake but for some reason has taken a liking to me. Maybe it’s because I tip well. Either way, the place is far enough out in the sticks so no one notices when the crabs finish off whatever’s left of my dates.

We go to bed after the pizza. Marcus falls asleep in less than five minutes. He’s on his back snoring and I think about how easy things would be if it weren’t for T-Bone. I’ll eat Marcus in the morning, when the damn dog is outside. I snuggle close to the German shepherd between us and drift off.

The next morning, I awake in a haze. The dog, still asleep beside me, kicks and I wonder at his dreams. Is his appetite for squirrels the same as my appetite for men? I have a type: single, no family in the near vicinity, in tech or telecom. Marcus is my third web developer. Will I move on to older men or to women, even, if the world runs out of Marcuses? I could never eat a child. Or a dog. I hug T-Bone and he jolts awake.

“Don’t worry.” I scratch behind his ears. “I didn’t eat your owner.”

I pick up my dress, fold it neatly, and then decide not to worry about it and put it back on. I pull my knife out my pocket. It’s a bowie knife with a polished silver handle. A gift from my grandmother. I brush my teeth with Marcus’s toothbrush and head downstairs. T-Bone follows me.

Marcus is in the garage below, its door open like a cavity. He wears gloves and safety glasses in front of a furnace. T-Bone wags his tail when he sees his owner.

I wave a little and Marcus glances up from his work.

“You want to try?” he asks.

I shake my head.

“What do you make?” I ask.

“Mostly pipes for head shops and stuff. I’m making these globes for my mom. She’ll hang them all around her yard.”

I wince at the mention of a mom who will surely miss her son.

He holds one end of a steel pipe. There is a ball of molten glass on the pipe’s other end. He moves the pipe into what looks like a furnace.

“The furnace is actually called a crucible,” he says. “It keeps it soft so I can shape it.” He pulls out the pipe and dips the glass into a steel bowl full of crushed colored glass and returns it to the crucible. Next he rolls it on a graphite surface, which he says is a marver that distributes the heat evenly. “It’s all about symmetry,” he says without looking up.

After that he places the pipe on a stand, and rolls and blows into the pipe’s end simultaneously. Once the glass takes the shape of a small globe, he cuts off the end with

what looks like a long pair of tweezers and ribbons the glass's edge at the tip. He taps the end of the blowing pipe to remove the excess glass and then sets the globe in an industrial oven. He works with such confidence, a part of me wants to shatter every piece he's ever made.

"It'll cool down over the next couple hours," he says. "Come on. Let's take T-Bone for a walk."

"I can't," I say. "I have some weekend work I need to get ahead of."

"But you can watch T-Bone do his trick and then we'll get breakfast. There's a great vegetarian spot up the road. Seriously, the best quinoa you've had in your life."

I've never tasted quinoa and have no plans to start now.

"A quick walk," I say. "But I have to skip out on breakfast."

We walk along the beach; my red dress fluid in the breeze. We talk while T-Bone fetches empty water bottles, a discarded bag of Cheetos, and a broken Frisbee, depositing each find into a nearby trashcan. Every time, Marcus gives him a treat. We make tentative plans to watch the chimney swifts the following weekend.

That night I head to Reena's alone. The place began as a double-wide. Reena's second husband welded shipping containers onto each end so now it's three awkward rooms, the left room nearly consumed by a pool table, the right filled with tattered vinyl barstools. A place that's been operating without a liquor license since the 1960s. The Jell-O shots are a dollar and you can drink domestics all night and still leave with a twenty dollar bar tab. Reena's washing glasses at the bar in the center when I belly up. She used to be pretty but life has worn her down like a used penny. Now, she has acne-scarred skin, brittle gray hair, and yellowed lines along her mouth.

“Whiskey,” I say.

She pours a double without asking.

“Thanks.”

“How’s Brandon?” she asks.

“Who’s Brandon?”

“Your boyfriend? The telemarketer who told me I need to put all my stock in bitcoin? Like I got any money around here?”

“Moved back to Indiana. Homesick, I guess,” I say.

“That’s a shame. You two seemed to have a spark,” she replies.

“How’s business?”

“Slow. Jerrold and Bunny had a fight and she pulled a gun. Scared off the regulars for a few days. I swear this place would be fine if people just left their damn weapons at home.”

“You should put up a sign.”

“I don’t need a sign. I got a pistol behind the bar. Next person that pulls any shit gets it from me.”

“I’ll be on my best behavior,” I say.

Reena smiles but it fades as Jerrold and Clive, Reena’s boyfriend, walk in. Jerrold with his tail between his legs and Clive somber as a peacemaker. The three begin chatting after Jerrold apologizes, swearing on Bunny’s life that the couple won’t fight in the bar again.

I don’t have to worry about messy relationship drama. Not after that night, hammered at Crocodiles in Nassau, when I made out with a firefighter and woke up the

next morning all pukey and achy, with a large gash on my thigh. I figured it was just me being clumsy. For a while, I worried I might be pregnant. I never got his number and lost track of him the minute I boarded the ship the next morning. But then when I got home, I couldn't shake feeling bad. It felt like the flu. All fever and ache. The wound on my thigh was slow to heal. I worried it was infected so I got a tetanus shot. Then I had what felt like mono. The doctors couldn't diagnose me. I scoured the internet, convinced myself it was lupus. Something autoimmune.

When I started eating raw meat and then picking off small mammals and birds, I knew it probably wasn't lupus. After I felt the irrevocable craving for human flesh, I thought back to the firefighter. A memory buried so deep. We had been kissing on the bathroom floor of some hotel room. The dirty shower curtain. The white towel hanging on the back of the door. My blood spilled across the yellow tile. I went down a rabbit hole on the internet one night and discovered I was a part of a growing class. Apparently, zombies were using dating apps to pick off people in countries like Turkey and Brazil. Big cities, usually. Ankara. São Paulo. I was so hungry I downloaded Tinder that night. Now, I'm closing in on my eleventh kill.

Marcus texts me midway through the week.

Coming to your neck of the woods Saturday. See the chimney swifts with me.

Sounds good. Pack a bag. Maybe you can crash at my place. I doubt myself for a minute and press send.

Sounds great. 😊. Can I bring T-Bone?

My landlord isn't crazy about dogs. I text this even though Sarah has four boxers and occasionally tags me on Facebook when she sees a rescue.

Please? He's been acting strange all week and I don't want to leave him alone. Besides, I think he misses you.

Crap. Maybe just this once. See you Saturday. ;)

It's a damn date. I don't want a date. I want dinner.

Every year, hundreds of chimney swifts return to a particular church a half a block from my house. They fly in at dusk and this year we watch while the black-bellied birds make their descent. The church was built in the 1880s. Who knows how long the birds have migrated here? What primal instinct brings them home again and again? I shudder at my own instincts. I smell Marcus's new shampoo. Tea tree oil. I smell T-Bone's damp fur. He dances in circles as the birds fly high above. Later, he wanders off into my neighbor's overgrown side yard as we walk back to my place. He returns calmer now that the birds are gone as I unlock the door. Marcus and I climb the stairs to my bedroom. T-Bone follows.

"Not this time." Marcus leads T-Bone into my black and white tiled kitchen and blocks a way out with dining room chairs. T-Bone pants and paces. Marcus returns to the stairwell and we ascend.

In the bedroom, he pulls a box from his pocket. "I have something for you."

It's a pendant necklace.

"You made this?" I ask.

"The pendant is Pyrex. You can shower with it. Beat it up and it shouldn't break."

He fastens the clasp and the small cylindrical burst of yellows, blues, and reds glitter like a geode cold against my skin. We get undressed. I draw the blinds, click off the nightstand light, and pull back the chartreuse green quilt. We get into bed.

Ten minutes later, Marcus is telling me I'm the most beautiful woman he's even been with. The entire time, T-Bone has been barking in the kitchen. I hear the dog trying to knock over the chairs. Soon he'll be clicking his nails up the hardwood stairs.

"Get behind me," I say. I have to move fast.

We change positions. When Marcus begins to climax, I grip the cold silver handle of my blade under the mattress, but as I'm about to make my move, T-Bone bursts through the door. Light from the hallway spills into the room. In less than a second, I'm face to face with the dog's baring teeth as he lunges toward me. I nick the dog's leg enough that he backs away.

"What the hell?" Marcus's voice is pocked with anger.

I realize Marcus hasn't seen the knife so I slip it back under the mattress.

"Seriously, get out." Marcus jumps up and flips on the light. He grabs the dog's collar and puts him outside then closes the door. Back in bed, he reaches for me. "Did he hurt you?"

"I'm fine," I say. "He's just protective."

"What's he protecting me from?"

I'm so hungry I can't think straight.

"Next date's my choice," I say. "I know a little bar near the marsh. You can't bring T-Bone, though. No dogs."

Later, when Marcus is asleep, I get dressed and walk downstairs. I open the front door and T-Bone follows. On the porch, we sit together in the chilly October midnight. T-Bone cowers a little when I reach out to pet him. After a while, I manage to rest my hand on a tuft of fur along his spine. A few minutes later, he rustles into the bushes, returns with a dead chimney swift, and drops it at my feet. I pick up the bird. It's beautiful and delicate with a small head shaped like an owl's. I tear into the bird's face and its rawness runs through me like a tendril of electricity.

It's karaoke night at Reena's Redneck Yacht Club and Clive is the evening's DJ. He plays a revolving door of Skynyrd and CCR with the occasional Zeppelin or Cream peppered in. Clive hates country. I finish my second beer as Jerrold finishes "Gimme Three Steps" when a frazzled-looking Marcus walks through the door.

"I need to take that dog to a shrink," he says as he takes a seat next to me.

"They have Prozac for dogs," I say. "You didn't bring him, did you?"

"Of course not. He's just been tearing up my furniture all week. Who knows what I'll come home to tonight?"

"*If* you go home tonight." I smile. "Can somebody check in on him if you stay at my place?"

"Yeah, I'll figure something out. You're wearing the pendant." He reaches out and touches the glass around my neck. "It looks good on you."

I lean over and kiss him. "Let's get you a drink."

Reena comes in from taking out the trash. She lights a cigarette. "Who's the fresh meat, Grace?"

I shoot Reena a look and smile so my voice brightens. “Reena, meet Marcus.”

“Good to meet you?” Marcus says. He’s out of place here.

In my old life, I would have been out of place, too. Somehow, though, everyone here senses my brokenness and considers me one of their own.

Several beers and a couple of shots later, Marcus is telling me a story about one Fourth of July at his grandparents’ house.

“Gramps was in Korea. He had this homemade firecracker he called the widow-maker and he let me light the fuse,” Marcus says. “Something went wrong and it burned off my eyebrows and some of my hair.”

“That’s insane,” I say. “We were never allowed to play with fireworks growing up.”

“How many brothers and sisters did you have?” he asks.

I take a drink and ignore his question. “So the fireworks. Did you go to the hospital?”

“Nah, but it was hard spending the summer as the bald kid with no eyebrows. Like being thirteen isn’t hard enough. But it got me into glassblowing. And the hair eventually grew back.”

“So nearly burning your face off made you want to play with fire more?” I ask.

“Absolutely,” he says. “It became an element I needed to harness.” Marcus stands up and cracks his knuckles. “Let’s do this.” He reaches for my hand.

“Do what?” I ask.

“Motherfucking karaoke.”

“I’m too drunk for karaoke,” I say. I’m too drunk for anything. My knife is in my pocket. My plan had been to wait until last call and then take Marcus behind Clive’s van while he and Reena screwed in her RV up near the road but it’s too much to think about at this point. I follow Marcus to the microphone and then he trips over Clive’s steel-toed boot.

“Watch it, you little fucker.” Clive, who is six four, covered in tattoos, and works as a bouncer at the roughest strip club in town, is never in the mood for drunks. “Grace, I never have seen you with a guy who can hold his liquor.” He stares down Marcus as I stay quiet.

“I was second chair cello in high school.” Marcus tries to look Clive in the eyes and the effort seems to make him sway. “I’ve got this, man.”

“You don’t,” Clive replies.

“C’mon, buddy.” Marcus sounds like he’s begging.

“I’m not your fuckin’ buddy.” Clive crosses his arms. “You gonna get this guy off my back, Grace?”

“Just one song,” I say as I hand Clive a five-dollar bill.

“What song, asshole?”

“The Gambler.”

“You’ve got to be kidding me. You’re liable to get your ass kicked with a song like that.”

“Trust me, stage presence, I promise.” Marcus winks at Clive.

But Marcus is off pitch and off beat. People are paying attention, and not in a good way.

“You sound like a cat caught in a fan belt.” Clive reaches to cut the song.

“It’s time to go,” I say, as I pull at Marcus’s arm. My knife open in my other hand.

“Gracie,” Marcus brushes my hand away. “I’m just having a little fun.”

My knife breaks his skin. A gash begins to gush.

“Oh shit. She’s got a knife!” Clive yells toward the bar.

“Not here, Grace. Get out and don’t come back,” Reena’s voice is steady and low. I know her next move will be to reach for the pistol. Clive pushes us out of the bar before that happens.

Outside, I look down and see the blade in my hand. What did I do? Marcus’s arm trails blood in the pale blue light.

Marcus holds his arm in shock. “What the fuck, Grace? I need stitches. Why would you...” Even though he’s livid, he avoids looking at me before he turns to walk back to his truck.

I smell the copper. My mind clears with the same peace that happens after a car accident when you’re mired in chaos but you know you’re alive. I follow him and stab him in the side. He turns back and stares at me stone-faced before falling to the ground. I devour him at the edge of the salt marsh. Something inside me shifts. It’s subtle at first then raging like a current. A rush seeps in and takes over as my senses heighten. I feel the rhythm of the marsh: skittering invertebrate, the occasional flick of a redfish tail, the slow reedy lull of the thick cord grass that surrounds me. The sounds pulsate like a heartbeat. I lick Marcus’s bones almost clean. It takes until sunrise when the crabs will clean up most

of what's left. The salt and tide will take care of the rest. A bright red sunrise burns across the horizon.

When I'm finished, I leave a twenty-dollar bill on Clive's windshield and walk back to my car. As I reach for the handle, a quiet click stops me in my tracks. It's the sound of a fingernail on glass. I shudder and think for a moment I've been caught. But the click is too familiar and not quite human. I follow the sound to Marcus's truck. T-Bone paws against the passenger side window. Guilt shivers down my spine at the sight of the dog. I take Marcus's keys and open the door. T-Bone won't make eye contact. He just jumps out of the cab and follows me to my car. We get in and drive northwest toward another coast. Maybe Homer, Alaska where the sand is black and the nights are long.

CHAPTER VI

ANNA'S SONG

The wedding is an opulent affair with goose liver and an open bar. Somehow the couple has convinced their parents to spring for hotel rooms for all of us. I finger the hole of my cardigan's cuff and hope no one notices. One night at this historic inn on the Georgia coast is a whole month's rent for me. As our parting gift, each guests has been instructed to take the half-moon betta fish swimming in the crystal bowls that adorn each table.

I sit transfixed by the shimmer of figures figure-eighting in crystalline orbs. My temples pound from too many Moscow mules.

Evan finishes his chocolate soufflé and flicks his fork against one of the fish bowls. An iridescent red half-moon propels off the side and settles into the rocks.

"Let's take two," he says. He knows we can. By now, we're pros. It's our fourth wedding in three weeks.

But I don't want a fish. "Won't they kill each other?"

"They'll be in separate bowls," he replies. "You keep yours at your place."

"But I don't have heat at my place." I've practically lived at Evan's all winter.

"It'll warm up soon enough." He wipes his mouth and throws the linen on his empty plate. "Besides, you need something to keep you company when I'm out of town." Evan's a newly minted regional sales director at his father's real estate firm.

“So I take care of your fish when you’re out of town, too?”

“Well, yeah. It’s just a fish, Kate.”

“Two, actually.” I fidget with the snap on my clutch, its fake leather worn and beginning to peel. “And I don’t need another thing.”

“Another thing? You work like 25 hours a week.”

“Thirty. And you know I’m going back next semester.” I’m flushed so I take off the cardigan.

“Oh, have you enrolled?”

“For Chrissakes, she hasn’t been gone six months.”

“Lower your voice, Kaitlyn.” He squares his jaws and his eyes indicate the conversation is over.

I grab my things and leave. Outside, I take off my flats and walk barefooted across the frigid grass. In the room, I change into my swimsuit and then sneak into the pool farthest from the party.

I dive into needle-cold water and swim for as long as I can stand it. Then I lower myself into the whirlpool. I alternate between the bodies of water and each time I slip into hot, then cold and then stand soaking wet, I tingle with a rightness I haven’t felt in a long while.

In high school, my sister, Jenna, and I would sneak into the apartment complex pool down the street from our house in Starke, Florida. Over winter break even, we’d steal Mom’s wine coolers, hop the fence, and swim no matter how cold it got. We’d see our breath in the night air and nearly freeze. I remember how good a warm bed felt after a swim like that.

Now, I can hear the din of partiers in the distance—their laughter reminds me of children chattering in a cafeteria. I submerge. If I angle my head just right I can pretend the underwater blue light is bioluminescent algae and Jenna and I are back to another night on the beach, when the algae bloomed and the ocean was as glass smooth as a lake. We dipped our fingers under the glow and felt small in the darkness of a new-mooned night.

I hold my breath underwater and count out the seconds. When I get to 60 I feel pressure and touch the bottom of the pool to distract myself. At 90 seconds, the pressure pins me down. I could black out so I count slower now. Up to a hundred though I know I'll stop soon. Her record was three minutes and I can't let myself get close to it. I break the surface just shy of two minutes and drink deep gulping breaths of air. The back of my head tingles and I blink through the starbursts that cloud my vision. I step out of the pool and walk to the diving board. The misty night pinpricks against my skin as I ping off the board and back into the cold. Fifty laps later, I take a break in time to see a screech-owl descend onto the roof of one of the cabanas. He scans the ground for prey. Our eyes meet and he flies away.

By now, the sounds of the party have long since died. Either everyone has gone to bed or they've moved indoors. The mist has turned to fog that blurs the lights of the resort. I jump back into the hot tub one last time before getting out and wrapping myself in a towel. Then I head to the beach where I hear the ocean's lull a hundred feet away.

On the beach, rain and wind bite my skin as gray waves lap a tumbled warning against the shore. I drop my towel and plunge into darkness. The surf immediately pulls me under. I immediately regret my decision to come here. Why do I fuck things up? Why

can't I just get drunk on someone else's dime at a fancy wedding and sleep till noon the next day? I paddle like hell and try to calm the panic of being out here alone. After a while, I'm afloat. My eyes stay fixed on the lights of the resort distant now in the rain. In shallow water, I grab handfuls of sand and hang on to nothing. The surf churns and I let it roll over me. In time, I break free of it and swim ashore. My towel is fifty feet down the shoreline. I wrap myself in wet grainy cold and walk back to the room. My nose and skin burn from salt and I know I'll have a sore throat in the morning. I hold my breath and count.

When I return, Evan is sprawled across our king size bed. The sky is shining the first signs of light as I peel off my suit, rinse it, and hang it to dry. I shower off the sand and pull on my pajamas, folding into the bed's only unoccupied corner; my wet hair spread across a tempur-pedic pillow.

I wake up to his random whistling. He never follows a tune.

Two bowls rest atop the lacquered dresser. The red half-moon in one and a bright blue one in the other.

"What time did you get in last night?" His voice has softened a little.

"Late."

"Did you party with the girls?"

"Nah, I went for a swim."

"Last night? It was freezing."

"Hot tub."

“Sorry I missed it. Can you believe we’ll be doing this in a few months?” Evan asks. We’re lying in bed on our backs while he absentmindedly raps his knuckles against my thigh. After every fight, he always pretends nothing has happened.

“Our wedding favors won’t be fish,” I say.

“The red one is mine, if that’s okay. I named her Anna,” he replies.

I want to tell him to name the other one too since I won’t be taking either but decide to roll toward the wall and fall back asleep.

Two days later, two fish bowls sit on my coffee table. Evan doted on Anna after the wedding. Tried to teach her to swim in a circle for a treat. When something is new, he’s all in. The first week we were dating he flew me to the Bahamas. Two years in, every date is a ballgame, whether it’s watching the Pirates or Steelers at Stingrays, a rundown oyster bar that reeks of shellfish and cigarettes. The owner’s from Pittsburgh and always gives us a free plate of wings.

My apartment is a converted garage, the wood rotten in places. My windows have screwdrivers for locks. Evan jokes the place is nothing more than termites holding hands, since we’ve been through a swarm here. We were lying in bed a week after she died. The walls vibrated with movement and I thought I was hallucinating from lack of sleep. Evan put me in his car and packed my bag and let me stay at his place while he dealt with my landlord. The condition of the place is why Evan asked me to stay at his house to watch Anna. But I decide not to because my best friend Beth and I are going to see Tabernacle Rising at a beach bar after our shifts at the restaurant. So she picks me up, both fish in tow, and drives to my place.

Later that night, the band is on break and droves of hippies line the bar's balcony and floor. Some sit in clusters on the floor. There's even an impromptu drum circle. A layer of smoke stagnates near eye level. I wedge myself up to the service bar and order us whiskies. I lean into the wall, trying to position myself as far from the smell of feet as possible. By the end of the show, I'm actually having a good time. They aren't a great band. Just a holdover from another failed relationship. My high school boyfriend was a huge fan and got me into the band before he moved. The lead singer, Sean, is in his mid-thirties while the rest of the band is a whole new cast of characters from his college days. Even so, I feel myself smile and it feels real. It might be whisky but more likely it's the fact that I had a big party at work that left me a great tip. Because of them, I've made rent two days before I even have to pay it.

Beth has been flirting with the guitarist Derek all night. Since she's currently crashing at her grandmother's, she asks if we can invite the band back to my place. I'm in a good enough mood to acquiesce so we all pile into her Nissan Sentra, folding the six-foot-seven drummer into the trunk. A hippie who calls himself Ferret tries to get in the car, too, but I slam the trunk before he climbs in.

At the house, the bassist, Diamond Joe, sits on my loveseat and communes with Evan's fish.

"Hey, Kaitlyn, this one? She used to be a teacher in a former life?" He has a pensive look.

"The fish?"

He nods severely. "She's an old soul. Her aura is green. What's her name?"

"Anna."

“I can sense her peace. We’re speaking to each other right now.” He taps the blue betta’s bowl. “What’s this little guy’s name?”

“Not sure.”

“You have to name him.” He sticks his face to the glass. “He has a lot of learning ahead of him.”

“Do you have any nail polish?” Pete, the violinist, stumbles into the living room and heads for my bathroom. I hear him opening cabinets.

I find him a bottle of cherry red. He plops down next to Diamond Joe and starts painting his toenails. He finishes the right foot and flips on the television to *Naked and Afraid*. Diamond Joe watches the fish like it’s the one lost in a forest. They’re an odd couple on my loveseat. Diamond Joe with his shaved head and hipster mustache. Pete with his Hawaiian shirt and straggly blonde hair. The television is set to a diabolical decibel as two contestants try to trap piranhas in a Brazilian stream. At that moment, Sean tries to ride my bicycle through the living room. I steady the coffee table so the fish bowls won’t topple, but a ceramic plate Jenna painted falls to the floor. Somehow it doesn’t break.

“Easy, Sean,” I say.

He takes the bicycle outside.

I stash the plate safe in my nightstand drawer and walk outside where Sean reaches into the cooler and throws a can in my direction. It lands five feet to the left of me.

“Where did Beth and Derek go?” I pick up the beer and open it away from me. Foam fizzes out onto the gravel.

“They walked down to the beach,” he says.

The drummer is passed out in my hammock a few feet away.

“Is he okay?”

“Tree? He’s fine. He does this.”

“His name is Tree?”

“It’s the height thing.”

“So he just randomly falls asleep?”

“He can’t hold his booze. We always leave a window of the bus unlocked because he’ll get like this at least a couple times a week.”

“Your bassist is weird.”

“Joe’s a free spirit,” Sean says. “Though every now and again, I think he’s trying to push me out.”

“He’s in love with my boyfriend’s fish,” I say.

“Where’s the boyfriend?” Sean leans back a little and pulls out a joint and lights it. He passes it to me.

“Charlotte,” I reply. I take a hit and give it back to him.

“Long distance?” He blows smoke rings.

“Business trip.” I’m light-headed and my heart beats faster.

“What’s he do?” Sean asks.

“Sells condominiums with his dad.” The idea sounds absurd. I picture Evan in a suit and tie at Sean’s age. See the minivan with the soccer decal flash before my eyes. Two tow-headed kids in cleats. Guilt shivers down my spine. Its roots split in two—half for Evan and half for Jenna.

“That sounds awful,” Sean says.

“What sounds awful?” I ask.

“The boyfriend’s gig. Fucking condos.” He offers me another hit.

“He’s into it. All of it. Wants the job, the house, the wife. Kids.” I hold up my ring finger. “We’re engaged.” It’s a half carat princess cut diamond Evan gave me at Stingrays watching the Steelers beat out the Ravens to win the AFC North. Even though I wasn’t ready. Even though I had hinted at wanting to wear my grandmother’s antique ring when I eventually got engaged. Even though I didn’t like football. I notice that a hole is starting to wear through one of Sean’s sneakers. I think about sleeping with him. Think about what tomorrow might look like with Sean instead of Evan.

Beth comes back from the beach with Derek. They grab beer and Derek asks me if I have any food. They head inside to put a frozen pizza in the oven, leaving Sean and me on the porch.

“Why do you think Joe’s trying to kick you out?” I ask.

“It’s a feeling. That and he keeps posting pictures of the band on Facebook without me in them. And now his brother’s our manager. We can’t afford a manager but their dad bankrolled the new bus so there wasn’t much I could say.” He pulls the tab off his beer and flicks it at Tree, who doesn’t move. “Why don’t you call the boyfriend your fiancé?” he asks.

“I was kind of in a fog when we got engaged,” I say. “My sister died.”

“Jesus,” he says. “I’m sorry. Has it been long? Since she?”

I shake my head. “A few months. Half a year almost.”

“This is the part you won’t remember.”

“How so?”

“It’s that first year after. Everything runs together. My mom died when I was in college and we were really close. I lost whole months, it felt like. Entire weeks, for sure.”

I think about how the days have folded in on themselves in a dizzying way since Jenna’s been gone. “Does it get easier?”

“Most days, yeah.”

“Evan—the fiancé—asked right after Christmas and I’d been so down. I didn’t want to let him down, too. We needed some good news.”

Sean is quiet. It’s a mild night and I can just make out the sound of the surf.

“Evan’s kind of been there since everything fell apart,” I continue. “I’m just now able to make through the night on my own.”

“Maybe it’ll be a long engagement,” Sean says. “Give yourself a little more time.”

I sigh. “Evan doesn’t want it to happen during football season. It’ll be a small ceremony this summer at his mom’s place.” I’m flustered thinking about the wedding. Knowing that the plan is to wear Jenna’s wedding dress. I feel like I can hardly breathe. Sean sets his hand on my shoulder and I calm down a little.

We sit in silence. The moon is to the west and partially blocked by my neighbor’s overgrown bamboo. The bike is on its side in the gravel.

“How did she die?” Sean asks.

I want to tell him that Jenna wasn’t a drug addict. That she was a competitive swimmer. That her drive is what got us both on the swim team in high school, and what landed me a scholarship at a Division One school. I want him to know that things fell apart after her car wreck. She had already quit swimming. Married her high school

sweetheart and became a stay-at-home mom. A collision at 45 miles an hour that resulted in a busted up knee and a prescription for pain meds that she just kept getting refilled. I don't want to tell him I'm the first one who got her high. Smoked a joint in the apartment complex pool after my high school boyfriend moved to New Mexico.

Inside, someone's cell phone rings.

"Kaitlyn, it's for you." Beth hands me a phone.

"This is Kaitlyn," I say, thinking for a moment it might be Evan.

"Where's your house?" Whoever it is sounds angry. The guilt rises again. Evan wouldn't be happy I've brought a band home.

"Who is this?" I ask.

"Dave. The goddamn manager. What's your address?"

"It's Dave," I mouth to Sean, who pulls out his cellphone.

"Dead." He holds up the phone.

"Sean says his phone died."

"I don't give a shit what Sean says. We were supposed to be on the road an hour ago."

"What time is it?" I ask.

Sean wakes up Tree while I go inside to get the others. Last to leave is Diamond Joe, who still has his face pressed up against Anna's bowl.

"Bus is leaving, Joe," I say.

"I need a little time." He looks like a little boy.

"I need to crash," I tell him. The sun's almost up and I have to go to work in a few hours. "You can let yourself out."

I walk into the bedroom and click the light off. When the screen door crashes shut a while later I rise and lock the door. I crawl back in bed and dream termites swarm Evan and me and cover our faces until we can't see or breathe. I awake in terror ten minutes before my shift begins.

I am out the door and on my bicycle when I remember to feed the fish. I run back inside and toss flakes in the blue fish's bowl but Anna is gone. I look around the apartment but can't find the bowl anywhere. By this time I'm already fifteen minutes late to work, so I lock up the house and ride to the restaurant. I tamp down anxiety when my phone vibrates on the ride in. After I lock up my bike, I peek at my phone and see it's a text from Sean.

It was nice talking to you last night.

I have two tables seated in my section when I arrive. I take their drink orders and text back. *Have you seen my fish? The red one. Anna.* I fight back tears.

Of course, it's all over our Instagram.

I open the app and search the band's feed.

The first caption I see: "Made a lifelong friend in Florida. See you tonight Atlanta." Anna's bowl is wedged on the windowsill of the tour bus between a full ashtray and a weathered copy of *The Dharma Bums*.

I text back. *Are you fucking kidding me?*

I watch Sean's thought bubbles until finally, *Whoa, Diamond Joe said you gave him the fish.*

Not at all.

The phone rings. Evan this time. I send it to voicemail.

After my section clears out, I choke down a sandwich upstairs and scroll through Facebook and click on the band's page. There's another photo of Anna with the caption: "The strings on our bass, the fish in our bowl, the fans at our show are all stardust."

I message the band. *Hey hippie, you stole my fucking fish.*

Immediately, a notification pops up. *Fuck you. You stole my band.*

When Evan calls I let it go to voicemail again. I have a full section but between drink and food orders, I google flights. This totally sucks but there's no way I'm doing anything about it. Let's face it. I fucked up again and this time I lost Evan's fish. Why on earth would I go to Atlanta for the stupid thing? Evan doesn't even need to know. I can go to the pet store and get the exact same fish. He won't be the wiser. Besides, it's the first time I've made rent early in I don't know how long and I'm not blowing it on some fucking fish.

The tour bus is parked outside Fox Theatre. It's beginning to rain. I bang on the door but the show has already started and no one is inside the bus.

I find a bucket in a nearby alley and stand on it to reach each of the windows until I find one unlocked. It's a full downpour by the time I pull myself up and into the window. I dry off with a dirty towel and wipe water off the window and floor. I leave the towel on the floor where I found it. Inside, the tour bus reminds me of an RV. The single bedroom is covered in wood paneling and a wall of beads divides the space from the rest of the bus. The double bed has two sleeping bags on it. One sleeping bag is in disarray with clothes and magazines tossed on top of it. Next to the messy side rests a mountain of men's shoes. On the other side, the sleeping bag is neatly rolled. I recognize the shirt

Sean wore the night before. It's freshly washed and folded next to pair of clean cargo shorts. I walk through the beads.

Anna's still on the window sill. The couch below the sill is a thick beige fabric and reminds me of my aunt's house. In the corner are two bunks littered with clothes and a small disco ball hangs in the kitchen. Someone has left a half-eaten pot of macaroni and cheese on the stove. I grab Anna's bowl and I am about to open the bus door when Dave steps outside of the theatre and lights a cigarette under the venue's awning. He doesn't seem to see me.

I duck down, pull an accordion door, and slip into the closet stuffed full of gear and backpacks. I'm still holding Anna's bowl. There's a half-empty bag of potato chips near my foot. After a few minutes, Dave comes in with a girl. He walks past the closet to the back and I hold my breath. I try not to crinkle the bag. I can see the woman's macramé top through the slats of the door. Her hair is soaking wet and falls past her shoulders. Dave returns wearing a new shirt and tosses a dry t-shirt to the girl. She changes and grabs beer from the fridge. He cranks the bus and joins her on the couch. I know I have to walk right by them to leave. I need to act now because the band will be done soon. Dave kisses the girl and I take my chance. I bolt out of the closet with Anna pressed close to my chest.

"What the fuck?" Dave takes off after me.

It's raining sheets outside and I am immediately soaked again. I haul ass down the sidewalk, water sloshing from Anna's bowl the whole time. There's a bolt of lightning followed by thunder so loud it feels like it's going to split me in two. I cross a thoroughfare and almost get hit by an SUV.

The rain has turned to sleet by the time I finally make it back to public transit to return to the airport. It's the middle of the night now and I ride crouched in the back corner holding the fish bowl. An old woman with stringy hair and a missing front tooth boards. As she makes her way to the back, she gives me a sideways glance and clutches her handbag. My clothes are starting to dry but I'm still freezing. I try to keep Anna's bowl warm with my hands but it's no use, I'm just a bigger version of the same bowl. Three drunk guys board in Buckhead and I realize I'm going the wrong way. One of them winks and tosses me a five dollar bill. I let the bill fall to the floor and sit stone-faced until we loop back around to Hartsfield-Jackson.

In the airport, I spend ten dollars on five Ziploc bags, four of which I don't need.

I go to the restroom. Inside, I see my reflection. It feels like weeks since I've slept. I have dark circles under my eyes and my make-up is gone. Family used to call Jenna and me clones saying that despite the 18 month age difference we were identical in both features and character. I've never agreed. Jenna was far prettier and lived fully. Her swimming, her family, she always seemed to be more invested than me. Everything I've ever cared about has always felt like it's hung precariously by a line. Ready to submerge into an abyss at any given moment. Now, especially now, nothing feels solid, and I feel myself being pulled down by some unknowable, unbearable weight.

I slip Anna into a bag and dump the rest of the water out of the bowl. I'll put her in my jacket pocket and return her to the bowl once we get past security.

It's five in the morning and the slinking TSA line already seems to zigzag to infinity. I am in line ten minutes when I hear my name.

"Kaitlyn, where did you come from?"

I'm holding his fish. A black ribbon of line separates us. My heart races at the sight of him. The back of my neck feels hot.

"Why are you in Atlanta?" I ask.

"Dad sent me to see a couple of properties in Lawrenceville," Evan says. "Is that my fish?"

"It's a long story," I say.

Evan glances toward the thirty people in line in front of us. "We've got time. What are you doing here? And why haven't you answered my calls?"

"I went to a bar at the beach two nights ago. Tabernacle Rising. You know that band I love?"

"Yeah? And?"

"I didn't want to have to get a ride all the way back to your place so I brought both fish back to my place."

"I'm so confused. What are you even saying?"

The line moves up so we aren't face to face anymore and for a minute I feel like I might be out of the woods but the line moves again so we're right next to each other once more. He looks tired but I know I look worse.

"I bring the band home," I explain. "Hippie bassist steals your fish. I fly to Atlanta to get her back." I hold up the bag. "Ta-da." I should have put more water in it.

"Wait—you fucked a band?" His ears always turn bright red when he's mad.

"What? No. God no. We just. Went back to my place for beer. With Beth." Now my ears are red.

The line moves quickly and I find myself at the front of it still holding Anna.

“Ma’am, that fish can’t fly.” The TSA clerk is motioning for me to leave the line.

“It’s less than three ounces,” I try.

“Please step out of line, ma’am.”

Evan is five people behind me and I feel his eyes burning into the back of me.

“Jesus, Kaitlyn. We’re supposed to be getting married.” Evan leaves his place and grabs my arm. He steers me out of line.

“Nothing happened,” I say.

“Give me the fish,” he says.

“No, Evan.” I know what I have to do. “It’s over. We’re over. I’m taking the fish.” I pull off my engagement ring and hand it to him. I walk toward the tram that will eventually take me to a rental car counter where I’ll drive home with Anna. Evan and I will end up cordial when we divvy up the artifacts of our lives together. He’ll never press when it comes to either fish.

Six months later, I’m driving my mom’s minivan when it comes on satellite radio. The DJ describes the breakout tune by Tabernacle Rising as a sweeping narrative about a fish that’s lived several past lives. I’d just finished my shift at the pet store and up until now, it hadn’t been a bad day. My manager recommended a new brand of pellets because Anna hasn’t been eating well. I’m excited to go home and try them out. That and my nieces are spending the weekend with Mom and me. My Saturday shift’s covered so I can take them to the park. I suffer through the entire song only to realize by its end that I haven’t heard a single word.

CHAPTER VII
RUN FROM COVER

Three sleeping bags lay in a row: Dylan's is yellow; Reeve's, a burnt orange. Cali, the baby, will sleep with Lev in camo. She's promised a hike to a waterfall tomorrow though she doesn't know if they'll stay. They're only an hour north and Nick will be out searching.

Two UT professors, Denise and Gloria, help Lev erect Nick's dry-rotted tent, replacing a broken pole with a bamboo shoot.

"That should hold." Denise pulls the fabric taut. "Small, but cozy."

"I can already smell snow," says Gloria. "You guys come stay in the RV if you get too cold, okay?"

"I appreciate that," Lev replies. "The boys really want the full experience, though."

After the professors turn in, Lev leaves her phone to die in the tent. Spotty service up here. No charger. Dylan might flip when he realizes he can't play on the iPad Nick gave him. The one they couldn't afford. She's left that. She's left almost everything. The kind of leaving you can't plan.

The boys toss a football while Cali toddles close to Lev who starts a fire in the waning light and considers her options. They have enough to stay in a roadside motel where the carpet smells like smoke. Where a thin metal door would separate them from

the world. Lev longs for a Hampton Inn ecosystem: monitored entryways, double locks; she and the kids could sleep unencumbered there.

It's been three weeks of almost leaving since the night Nick yelled at Reeve for crying at the table. Then a thud. Then Lev coming after Nick with a chair, Lev shielding Reeve from more. Nick punching drywall, Cali wailing. Sirens screamed in the distance until light filled the front windows. Lev said what she needed to make the officers go away again.

As the sun dips, Reeve asks for s'mores, looking up at Lev with those blue eyes. Her eyes. Eyes you can't trust, Nick says. Lev corrals her children into the tent, entices them into silence with promises of tomorrow. They'll need a solid sleep.

At home, the sink is stacked with dishes. Lev knows Nick will walk in, grab a beer, ignore the mess, and not think of them until the quiet rises. With elbows perched on the sticky counter, he'll reach for Dylan's iPad where he'll check their account and see money spent at a gas station north of town. He'll go to the garage, find the tent gone, toss on his coat, lace up his boots. Go out into the cold.

This isn't safe at all. They should go. Even a thin metal door would be better. Yet, the promise of snow makes the world feel insular. Lev feels the blanket of sleep. Maybe she'll rest a minute. The wind kicks up and becomes a dream of a cold hike to a waterfall that's frozen over.

Lev jolts awake to a steady beating of snowflakes. She checks her phone: two a.m., nine percent battery, and fifteen missed calls. She thinks she hears crunching footsteps and hopes for an animal's grunt—not the quiet thud of steel-toed boots. The baby coughs, and Lev covers her mouth. Her car is twenty yards away, red and obvious

with its dented door. The boys burrow inches from her. She pulls them all close. Holds her breath and listens.