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Workers of iniquity: Stories

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Workers of iniquity: Stories

By

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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 College of Arts and Sciences

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In her essay, “The Grotesque in Southern Fiction,” Flannery O’Connor notes, “Whenever I’m asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for writing about freaks, I say it is because we are still able to recognize one” (44). In the introduction to this collection, I investigate the importance of the grotesque, gothic, and surreal elements that tend to make up the depictions of the South in the works of authors such as Flannery O’Connor and Brad Watson and several horror writers, such as Stephen King, Edgar Allan Poe, and H.P. Lovecraft, exploring how horror can be used to emphasize the stranger elements of Southern fiction. In my own stories, I present both realistic depictions of suffering and sin in the South, as well as the strange and surreal, presenting the South not just as a world for freaks, but as a freakish world in and of itself.

DEDICATION

To the memory of John and Sue Huckaby

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Thank you to my mentors and professors, Professor Becky Hagenston, Dr. Michael Kardos, and Dr. Shalyn Claggett. Without their guidance and encouragement, this thesis wouldn't have been possible.

I would also like to thank my wife, Kinsey, for supporting me and believing in me even when I didn't believe in myself. Additionally, I would like to thank Anthony Coffman, Meghan Reed, and Chris Keeton for being consistent readers of my work and for providing feedback that made my stories the best they could be.

I would also like to thank my late grandparents, John and Sue Huckaby. Their lives and souls inspired these stories.

EPIGRAPH

And then I will profess unto them, I never knew you: depart from me ye that work iniquity.

-Matthew 7:23 (KJV)

Ah, I'd love to wear a rainbow every day
And tell the world that everything's okay
But I'll try to carry off a little darkness on my back
'Til things are brighter, I'm the Man in Black

-Johnny Cash, "Man in Black"

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CHAPTER I

CRITICAL INTRODUCTION

While the South had been linked to elements of Gothicism and the macabre before Flannery O'Connor, such as in some works of Edgar Allan Poe, who O'Connor often cited as her biggest influence (Bacon 89), it was O'Connor who forever linked the decaying South to the decrepit scenes of the Gothic, and thus created a genre appropriate to portray the strange characters that populate the South. In her 1969 essay "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," she notes, "The Southern writer is forced from all sides to make his gaze extend beyond the surface, beyond mere problems, until it touches that realm which is the concern of prophets and poets" (44). For her own part, O'Connor achieves this end through her masterful use of the Southern Gothic genre, creating a world populated by screaming atheist street preachers, one-armed con-men, and Bible salesmen with less than Christian intentions. O'Connor understands that this genre is fundamentally distinct from strict realism:

I have found that no matter for what purpose peculiar to your special dramatic needs you use the Southern scene, you are still thought by the general reader to be writing about the [S]outh and are judged by the fidelity your fiction has to typical Southern life.

I am constantly having it pointed out to me that life in Georgia is not at all the way I picture it, that escaped criminals do not roam the roads exterminating families, nor Bible salesmen prowl about looking for girls with wooden legs. (38)

O'Connor is fully aware of the ability of the Gothic and the grotesque to bring a story beyond the limitations of the realism. She states, "realism of fact...may, in the end, limit rather than broaden the novel's scope" (39). Writers like O'Connor, William Faulkner, and Brad Watson use the conventions of the Southern Gothic genre in order to create surreal pictures of the South that, while not "realistic," present a pointedly accurate picture of the South's culture and values. In my own work, I seek to follow in this Southern Gothic tradition, amplifying the grotesque and surreal events by incorporating elements of supernatural horror. In what follows, I will connect works of authors like O'Connor and Watson to those of Stephen King, Edgar Allan Poe, and H.P. Lovecraft in order to present a surreal, sometimes terrifying image of the South.

The Southern Gothic genre, much like the preceding Gothic genre from which it sprang, has a somewhat nebulous definition. In "Defining Southern Gothic," Bridget M. Marshall writes, "The term 'Southern Gothic' has long been used to refer to a particular subspecies of American Gothic, which itself is a subspecies of the Gothic, a genre of much-contested boundaries" (3). She goes on to describe Southern Gothic's relationship with its British ancestor, the Gothic:

Southern Gothic is perhaps a distant cousin of its British ancestor, but it still nonetheless shows a family resemblance...changes in the setting, the villain, and the victim all allow for transportation of an iconic British Gothic genre to the American South. Southern gothic also evinces a particular focus on the South's history of slavery, a fixation with the grotesque, and a tension between realistic and supernatural elements. (5)

Similarly, Rachel Hawley's "Vile Humor" discusses the importance of the grotesque or darkly humorous elements of Southern Gothic fiction:

The American South is a rich source of literature that combines the humorous and the horrific in its attempts to explain and expose the region's deep-seated social turmoil. One

of the most prolific genres to come out of the South is southern gothic literature that, though not always humorous, is known for its use of grotesque imagery and reliance on highly charged melodramatic narratives. (i)

O'Connor's work is especially invested in the grotesque. She notes, "our grotesque characters, comic though they may be, are not primarily so. They seem to carry an invisible burden; their fanaticism is a reproach, not merely an eccentricity" (44). O'Connor perhaps most famously exemplifies this in her own fiction through the Misfit, a character appearing in "A Good Man is Hard to Find." O'Connor describes the Misfit as a psychopathic but philosophical killer, "an older man....His hair was just beginning to gray and he wore silver-rimmed spectacles that gave him a scholarly look. He...didn't have on any shirt or undershirt. He had on blue jeans that were too tight for him and was holding a black hat and a gun" (126). The Misfit is a collection of contradictions that form a grotesque whole: he is scholarly but criminal, philosophical but psychopathic, well-spoken but underdressed. Brad Watson's work follows in this tradition. Daniel Torday of *Esquire* describes Watson as "breath[ing] the same gothic, aesthetically precise breaths as the finest southern writing." In the titular story of Watson's collection *Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives*, Watson describes a mental patient, a man who is constantly hunting a lion, with the narrator of the story stating, "He wore a pale blue robe over pink pajamas, torn paper slippers, and a broad-brimmed tan cowboy hat. He held an imaginary rifle in his hand" (196). Here, Watson creates a grotesque character not through physical deformities, but through mental ones, with the elements of the grotesque coming from the character's warped mind rather than his warped body, much like O'Connor's Misfit. The Misfit and Watson's lion hunter are freaks, an element of the Southern Gothic that O'Connor notes in "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction," stating, "Whenever I'm asked why Southern writers particularly have a penchant for freaks, I say

it is because we are still able to recognize one” (3). Freaks inspired by the O’Connor’s Misfit and Watson’s mental patient populate my own work, such as the old man in “Cernunnos,” whose body is a disturbing amalgamation of human and animal:

He turned to face the deer, but in its place stood a short, bony old man with wild hair and eyes. On his head were two antlers that looked as if they had been jammed in, the area around the base of them being red and infected...The old man picked at the red, inflamed skin around his antlers once again, peeling off a piece of it and placing it gently into his mouth, then swallowing and licking his lips.

While the Southern writer operating within the Southern Gothic definitely has a penchant for freaks, the root of the freak within the overarching Gothic genre can be traced back further, into British and American Gothic traditions.

Nathaniel Hawthorne’s “Young Goodman Brown,” initially published in 1835, features its titular character meeting a strange, philosophically folksy, sinister man in the woods who takes on the appearance of an older version of himself. Brown observes, “What if the Devil himself should be at my elbow” (25), at which time the older man appears before him:

[He was] about fifty years old, apparently in the same rank of life as Goodman Brown, and bearing a considerable resemblance to him...they might have been taken for father and son...the only thing that could be fixed upon as remarkable was his staff, which bore the likeness of a great black snake, so curiously wrote that it might almost be seen to twist and wriggle itself like a living serpent. (25)

This figure, Hawthorne’s conception of the Devil, goes on to become type within supernatural horror. H. P. Lovecraft’s “Nyarlathotep,” published in 1920, features a similar figure, the eponymous Nyaralthotep, who Lovecraft’s narrator describes: “Who he was, none could tell, but

he was of the old native blood and looked like a Pharaoh...swarthy, slender, and sinister...He spoke much of the sciences--of electricity and psychology--and gave exhibition of power which set his spectators away speechless” (21-22). More recently, and more directly related to Hawthorne’s initial figure, is Stephen King’s “The Man in the Black Suit,” in which this figure is identified as the Devil. As King’s narrator describes him, “His face was very long and pale. His black hair was combed tight against his skull and parted with rigorous care on the left side of his narrow head. He was very tall. He was wearing a black three-piece suit...his eyes were the orangey-red of flames in a woodstove...he had no irises” (53). The man goes on to tell the narrator that his mother has died, which is later revealed to be a lie. In the afterword to the story featured in *Everything’s Eventual*, King compares his Devil to the figure in Hawthorne’s story, stating, “My favorite Hawthorne story is ‘Young Goodman Brown’...’The Man in the Black Suit is my homage to it” (69). The American Gothic genre Hawthorne was working in can thus be connected to the more contemporary conception of the supernatural horror genre through the works of Lovecraft and King, and in my own work, I draw another line to the works of Flannery O’Connor by presenting strange, folksy gentlemen who appear as philosophically musing freaks in the Deep South, spouting philosophy and ideas deeply connected to the culture of the South. My most direct connection to this figure is Jack Scratch, antagonist of “Hit or Stand,” who I conceived after desiring to write a story about a poker game with the Devil. Jack Scratch is clean shaven, sports a red and black suit, and, rather like how the Misfit waxes philosophically and Lovecraft’s Nyaralothep presents a keen interest and knowledge in the sciences, speaks at length about Egyptian myth and its connection with the heritage of the city of Memphis, Tennessee. His “LOVE” and “HATE” tattoos across his hands also reference Reverend Powell from Charles Laughton’s classic film *The Night of the Hunter*, a masterpiece of Southern Gothic storytelling

brought to the cinema through the use of expressionist visuals. Like Powell, Jack Scratch is a criminal with a strange moral code who speaks in folksy aphorisms that twist his immoral actions into something more justifiable (at least to himself). Traits of this folksy freak can also be seen in the aforementioned “Cernunnos,” with the strange old man with antlers who the hunter meets in the woods, and with Jim in “Sunday Morning,” a seemingly normal Southern family man hiding a deep psychopathy and murderous intent. Through these characters, I connect O’Connor’s Southern Gothic sensibilities to the supernatural horror genre in order to present the South as authentically as I see it: a strange, surreal place where reality occupies a liminal space between the real and the grotesque.

Setting is an important aspect of Southern Gothic work, but this is also the case for the supernatural horror genre, as well. Comparing Southern Gothic’s setting to its British and other American counterparts, Marshall states, “What the American South lacks in medieval castles, it makes up for with plantations, often sprawling and in varying degrees of decrepitude” (7). In a W. W. Norton Q&A, Brad Watson comments on his use of setting, stating, “I wrote thinking about southern things, which is to say southern problems like race, class, history. *The Heaven of Mercury* became a southern gothic by default: the story I had to tell, the characters, could dictate nothing else.” Just as the writer of British Gothic places its action in medieval castles with dark history, so, too, does the Southern Gothic writer use the darkness in Southern history to comment upon the South as a region haunted by its past. William Faulkner’s “A Rose For Emily” is an excellent example of this, with Emily’s house metaphorically “haunted” by its history and the fallen state of the family that exists within it: “It was a big, squarish frame house that had once been white, decorated with cupolas and spires and scrolled balconies in the heavily lightsome style of the seventies, set on what had once been pour most select street. But garages and cotton

gins had encroached and obliterated even the august names of the neighborhood” (119). Emily’s house and the town it inhabits mirrors the crumbling castles and manors that can be seen in the works of the English Walpole or the American Poe. Poe’s “The Fall of the House of Usher” provides a notable counterpart to Faulkner’s Southern Gothic description of a house, with the narrator of the tale commenting on the titular house: “with the first glimpse of the building, a sense of insufferable gloom pervaded my spirit...I looked upon...the bleak walls-upon the vacant eye-like windows-upon a few rank sedges” (532). Like Emily’s house in Faulkner’s story, the House of Usher is a building that holds a dark history that is conveyed through the setting itself. It’s worth mentioning Poe’s influence on Lovecraft, for, as Lovecraft himself writes in his essay “Supernatural Horror in Literature,” “Poe did that which no one else ever did or could have done; and to him we owe the modern supernatural horror-story in its final and perfected state.” Supernatural horror writers make use of very particular settings (in the case of both Lovecraft and King, often small towns in New England). In an introduction to Lovecraft’s “The Colour Out of Space,” S.T. Joshi comments on Lovecraft’s use of setting, observing that he “richly develops his imaginary New England topography, this time in a rural setting” (220). In the story, Lovecraft uses the quiet, rural setting of New England in order to introduce elements of the supernatural that upend the normality of that time and place and transform it into something surreal. Lovecraft begins to set the small town as an evil presence in and of itself when he has the narrator comment, “When I went into the hills and vales to survey for the new reservoir they told me the place was evil”; though this is subverted when he describes “little hillside farms; sometimes with only a lone chimney and fast-filling cellar” (221). Small, New England towns with hidden darkness also make up the settings for much of Stephen King’s work. *Salem’s Lot’s* setting, for example, features so heavily, that in his 1991 intro to the novel, Clive Barker

commented, “The skill at evoking the physical and psychological geography of a small community has of course become one of Mr. King's trademarks, and he is seldom more pithy, insightful, or humane than here....The novel, after all, is not named after the vampire, but after the meat on which the vampire feasts.” King himself comments on how he views the importance of setting in *On Writing*, stating, “I think locale and texture are much more important to the reader's sense of actually being *in* the story than any physical description of the players” (172). Brad Watson applies King’s sentiment to Southern writing specifically, stating, “We should try even harder to write honestly and not cheaply about place and people in the South.” In my own work, I connect the dilapidated buildings and other history-laden elements of the Southern Gothic with the small towns with lurking darkness of the works of writers like Lovecraft and King. This is most prominently seen in “Sons of God, Daughters of Men,” which features Jaybird, Mississippi, a fictitious small town based on my own hometown of Hernando, Mississippi. This small Southern town setting is also the setting of “Sunday Morning,” in which the picturesque scene of a Sunday morning boating trip, familiar in a Southern small town, turns horrific when a perfect, God-fearing, Southern father murders his son in the lake. In “Sons of God, Daughters of Men,” I once again portray Jaybird as a typical Southern small town, with a local pastor, sheriff, and drunk with whom everyone in town is familiar and comfortable. The town itself, however, is becoming a space of strange events: throughout the course of the story, it becomes clear that Jaybird is being visited by indescribable beings that resemble the angels described by the Biblical book of Ezekiel. In this instance, I was inspired by Brad Watson’s “Aliens in the Prime of Their Lives,” in which he introduces aliens into the lives of a young Mississippi couple. These aliens drift into a strange, surreal area, jumping into different bodies throughout the course of the work, ranging from mental patients to doctors delivering a baby.

Similar to my story, the aliens have a desire to acquire the infants of humans, with one of the aliens asking the narrator, “May we have [your baby] when it’s born...you could let us have it *now*.... We could take it, and it would be like it was never there” (221). By moving the aliens from simply desiring a baby to them having an active role in the conception of the child, I amplify the grotesque elements found in Watson’s work to more explicitly horrific ones.

Through this use of setting, combining the elements of both the Southern Gothic genre and the supernatural horror genre, I seek to present the South as a place of duality — strikingly familiar, yet fundamentally strange and uncanny at the same time.

In “Gory Stories: O’Connor and American Horror,” Jon L. Bacon discusses the link between the works of Flannery O’Connor and Golden Age American horror comics, stating, “O’Connor shares a key structural element with horror comics: the ‘shock’ ending. In the typical horror story, the writer and the artist save the most gruesome image for the last page, where everyday reality is shattered” (94). O’Connor’s use of the shock ending is frequent, from the family annihilation in “A Good Man is Hard to Find” to Hazel Motes blinding himself with lye at the end of the novel *Wise Blood*. These endings often correlate to O’Connor’s penchant for the grotesque (especially true for Hazel Motes, who is deformed by his manic act). These “shock” endings, however, are never inherently supernatural, which separates them from the supernatural horror comics to which Bacon compares them. In *On Writing*, Stephen King describes his early fascination with the EC Horror comics, stating, “certainly I have recounted my early love affair with the EC horror comics until the tale has gone stale” (154), and this love can be seen in King’s stories like “Gray Matter,” where, at the end of the story, a man thought to simply be sick from drinking a bad beer is revealed to have changed into a monster:

What we saw in that one or two seconds will last me a lifetime....It was like a huge gray wave of jelly, jelly that looked like a man, and leaving a trail of slime behind it. But that wasn't the worst. Its eyes were flat and yellow and wild, with no human soul in 'em.

Only there wasn't two. There were four, an' right down the center of the thing, betwixt the two pairs of eyes, was a white, fibrous line with a kind of pulsing pink flesh showing through like a slit in a hog's belly. It was dividing...in two (100-101)

While the story does create fear by describing strange habits that Richie develops after drinking the tainted beer, no confirmation of a supernatural presence is given until this "shock" ending, revealing this creature that was once a man. Similarly, my story "Sons of God, Daughters of Men" hints at strange happenings in the town, but nothing is solidly confirmed until the ending, where beings, either angelic or alien in nature, are revealed to have been abducting girls from the small town of Jaybird. In this shock ending, I use the Southern Gothic setting and "shock" ending structure of Flannery O'Connor coupled with King's similar usage of the "shock" ending featuring a supernatural element in order to create supernatural horror that is uniquely Southern.

Dark humor also plays a key role in the tone and feel of Southern Gothic literature.

Hawley defines dark humor or black comedy in "Vile Humor," stating, "I agree with Wilson and Heller who argue that black humor is a combination of humor and horror" (2). She goes on to express the importance of dark humor in the works of writers such as Flannery O'Connor:

The American South is a rich source of literature that combines the humorous and the horrific in its attempts to explain and expose the region's deep-seated social turmoil...southern gothic writers Beth Henley, Fannie Flagg and Flannery O'Connor use dark comedy in their works as defiant acts designed to question the status quo and reform

the southern landscape by creating ruptures where marginalized people can assert themselves into the norms of American culture. (i)

O'Connor's own penchant for dark comedy appears in the ending of "A Good Man is Hard to Find," with the Misfit making the witty observation that the grandmother "would have been a good woman...if it had been somebody there to shoot her every minute of her life" (133), right after murdering her in cold blood. The combination of horror and comedy here creates a darkly humorous moment between the Misfit and his cronies, with Bobby Lee commenting, "Some fun," and the Misfit retorting, "Shut up, Bobby Lee...It's no real pleasure in life" (citation needed). Hawley comments upon this scene in "Vile Humor," stating, "This story, in and of itself, epitomizes the need to join laughter and death" (35). I emulate this in my own work, and work to integrate explicitly horrific and supernatural elements into the dark humor I present. In "Hit or Stand," I present Jack Scratch as a witty and observant criminal, making folksy observations about life in Memphis as well as musing on incidents in Egyptian myth, but also present him as a ruthless criminal with an incomprehensibly huge network that seems to be inescapable for the protagonist, Sam Jacobs. In a moment of dark humor, Jack Scratch threatens to "cut [Sam] into little pieces and spread you out all over Memphis like Osiris," referencing the mythical story of Osiris and Set that he had previously been comparing to the city of Memphis, Tennessee. The humor here comes from the instantaneous turn towards threats that the previously cordial Jack Scratch takes, presenting a figure similar to the Misfit. I also portray the old man in "Cernunnos" as a darkly humorous figure, with moments of body horror doubling as darkly humorous, such as the old man picking and eating bits of skin from around his antlers while the hunter looks on and hopping about in the trees like a strange animal on the hunter's land. The use of humor in my stories takes the humor from the works of Southern Gothic writers

like Flannery O'Connor and pushes it into explicitly supernatural territory with characters like the old man in "Cernunnos," presenting a move from Southern Gothic to Southern Supernatural Horror.

As I have no doubt made clear throughout the course of this introduction, Flannery O'Connor stands as my single biggest influence as a writer, but the genre of supernatural horror remains close to my heart, as well. Ultimately, my desire is to create horror fiction that captures the spirit of Flannery O'Connor's conception of the Southern Gothic. In my attempt to solidify the journey from Southern Gothic to "Southern Horror," I have carefully arranged the sequence in which these stories are presented in this collection. "Rayber" is a tale of the challenges of the Southern standard of masculinity, with no inherent supernatural horror elements besides the supernatural horror of dealing with an estranged relative. "Sunday Morning" begins as an everyday boating trip for suburban Southern neighbors Gabe and the Bible-thumping, folksy waxing Jim, who, by the end of the story, is revealed to be a psychopath, with the collection moving into more directly horrific territory. "Hit or Stand" features a poker game with Jack Scratch, who, as I've mentioned before, is implied to be the Devil himself, introducing my take on the "Man in the Black Suit" or Nyarlathotep in its full glory. I utilize this figure again in "Cernunnos," where it is now explicitly supernatural. Finally, in "Sons of God, Daughters of Men," I present a small, Southern town in an explicitly supernatural situation, bridging the fully realistic depiction of the South featured in "Rayber" to a supernatural horror story that still seeks to observe the culture and the people of the American South in their natural habitat.

CHAPTER II

RAYBER

Dan sat silently in the parking lot holding his phone to his ear. A soft hum of the car's air conditioner filled the vehicle. His father was on the other end of the phone.

"I know you don't want to talk to him," John said.

"Why would I?" Dan said, fiddling with his thumbs. He moved his hands slowly around each other, rubbing skin to skin, trying to move into his own palms and hide. He stared out at the hospice then looked back at the steering wheel of his car.

"Do it for your son. Darrel's in there with him right now," John said. "Darrel doesn't need to be affected by our relationship with him." He paused, waiting for Dan to say something. He didn't. John continued, "He loves Darrel. That's something."

"That's fine. That's all well and good," Dan said, pressing his head into his hands.

"I think it would be good for you two to talk. I just think maybe you'll get something out of it. Find something you've been looking for. He's not going to last much longer. I think you'll regret not talking to him now if you don't. He's your grandfather."

"Not really," said Dan.

"Okay, not really, but he's definitely something."

Dan sighed and opened the door.

Dan's grandfather was Lieutenant Rayber Jacobs and he'd been a soldier in World War II. He broke a German soldier's neck with his bare hands, then came back to the States and got

his Bachelor's, Master's, and Doctorate in quick succession. American History was his specialty. He especially loved the Civil War. He hated the bloodshed, the chaos of the battlefield, but he loved the complete nature of it, of the Reconstruction. Rayber and John didn't know each other very well. Rayber was John's stepfather, and John was raised by his grandparents. By the time the war was over John was already seventeen and had never even met his own father (who was shot down in the Pacific). He decided to finish high school while living with his grandparents and then go to college, which Rayber helped him pay for. There was nothing more esteemed in Rayber's mind than an educated man. John flunked out and sold jeans at the mall.

When he had to be admitted into the nursing home, Dan hadn't seen him in some years. His own son, Darrel, was just five the last time Dan had visited him. As Dan now entered the room, Rayber was telling the nursing home's chaplain to "fuck off" because he "didn't have anything to be forgiven for." Dan touched the chaplain's arm in apology while he walked out of the room with his eyes on the floor. Rayber scowled at Dan. Darrel stood outside the room waiting on his father.

"Let me go in first. Just in case he's not looking so good," Dan said, whispering outside the room.

"All right, Dad, but I think I can handle it."

"I know *you* can."

"Ah," Darrel said. "I gotcha." He wandered away to the front desk.

Dan walked into the sanitized room. It was bright. The fluorescent lights irritated his eyes and the blinds were open, filtering natural light into the room. The brightness took him by surprise. Then again, Rayber had never liked the nighttime.

“Don’t you have boxes to sling, Daniel?” said Rayber, seeing his grandson enter the room.

“I took off to come see you,” Dan said. “How’s your hip?”

“Like a damn jigsaw puzzle,” he said. “I can’t stand up.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.”

“I don’t need your pity,” he said. His face softened. “Is Darrel in school?”

“Yessir, President’s List scholar. Loves engineering, robotics, that sort of thing.”

“Good, good. Only sort of engineering I ever saw was on tanks. He got my letters, yeah?”

“Yessir. He wrote you back before you fell. He said thank you.”

“Good. He’s a smart kid,” he said. He paused, scratched his head. He was bald. He had thick, silvery gray hair the last time Dan had seen him.

~

He was mowing his lawn just three days after Hurricane Katrina had obliterated the coast. Small droplets of sweat went down his reddish forehead and a toothy smile crossed his face. He looked like the cover of a men’s magazine from the fifties or a piece of US military propaganda from some lost war. His yard was immaculate, accentuated by the fact that the houses around him had downed trees and lost branches dotting their yards. The warzone that was Katrina was too scared to take on Lieutenant Rayber Jacobs the Kraut Slayer or Dr. Rayber Jacobs the Historian, it had seemed. John, Darrel, and Dan had driven down to help him clean up after Katrina, and to check on Grandmother, but they didn’t seem to be needed.

“Your place doesn’t look too bad,” John said, getting out of the car.

“That’s because I cleaned it already, John. It took you too damn long to get down here. Where’s the kid?”

Darrel jumped out of the car. He started running towards his great-grandfather but tripped and fell into the ditch next to the driveway.

“Oh, good Lord,” said Rayber, jumping into the ditch and picking Darrel up. “You okay, kid?” Darrel had a stream of hot tears flowing from his eyes. “Let’s get you to the medic,” Rayber said. “Iowna!” he called.

Dan’s grandmother slowly opened the door. She was a beautiful, graceful woman. Her hair was stark-white, her face wrinkled but lovely. Her mind was beginning to slip, but there was still the spark of intelligence and grace that had attracted Rayber to his World War II paramedic in the first place. She was still healthy then, something that wouldn’t last long. Her decline was fast, a flower wilting in the winter of her life. He didn’t change much during her decline. Only his voice grew dimmer, a cracking in the firmness of the intellectuality that he spoke with throughout his life.

“What’s happened?” she asked.

“We got a man down!” Rayber said, picking up Darrel and putting him on his shoulders. He was strong for his age.

“Poor baby,” Iowna said. “Let’s get you fixed up.”

The one compliment Dan could give Rayber is that he loved his wife, and she loved him. Through years of marriage he never once directed a hand other than one of love towards his wife, and she returned the favor, delicately, every moment of her life.

Iowna patched up Darrel’s leg while Rayber regaled him with war stories. Rayber talked about fighting one-on-one with Nazi colonels and wandering through Europe with enemies around every corner. Darrel listened with ears and eyes wide and a huge dopey smile on his face.

“I’m sorry, I should’ve been paying more attention,” Dan said to Rayber, picking Darrel up.

“Yeah, you should have,” Rayber said. “Sam had his kids here on Christmas without incident. How about one more war story?” he asked Darrel, who smiled and nodded. They were never able to get any stories out of the old man, so Dan turned his attention, curiously, on his grandfather. The most he would talk about were tanks and guns and war technology. Dan imagined him walking through the ruins of European cities with a cigar hanging from his smiling mouth, laughing at the absurdity of it, the barbarity of it. Causing the present catastrophes, but above it at the same time.

“I was in a little village in Hungary, scaring out some of the Nazi forces, when we came upon a beggar. Now this beggar had no eyes, so I asked him, ‘What happened to your eyes?’ He said, ‘My father was a beggar, and his father was a beggar, and his father before him was a beggar, so the village elders gouged my eyes out, because all I’ll ever be is a beggar.’” Darrel waited for more, but Rayber didn’t say anything else, he just looked at John and then at Dan with a half-cocked smile.

“That story sucked,” Darrel said.

On the drive back to Memphis, Darrel fell asleep and John and Dan were left in silence for a while through a sea of other cars and chaotic debris left over from the hurricane. Dan finally let go of his teeth’s grip on his tongue.

“Why the hell did he have to say that?”

“Say what?” John said. He scratched his head, a scattering of hair on top of a cue-ball. Rayber had more hair than his stepson at the time, something that disturbed Dan for some reason.

“You know, that shit about the beggar. You know exactly what he was trying to say.”

John frowned. "It was just a war story."

"Rayber doesn't just tell war stories. That shit was meant to imply something."

"What was it meant to imply?" John said, not taking his eyes off the traffic jammed road.

"I think you know damn well." He didn't respond. Dan looked out the window at the cars desperate for fuel and the pathetic downed trees. He wished one of them had hit Rayber.

"Don't cuss so much around your kid, Dan."

"He's asleep," Dan said, still leaning his head against the window. "Who cares?"

"You should," John said. "You should care."

Dan was raising Darrel alone. Darrel's mother had passed away sometime after the child was born. He never blamed Darrel for that, but, at that time, something gnawed at him, something that made him feel there was a wall between him and his child.

"I know you weren't ready to be a dad, especially a single one," John said. "But sometimes life creates a destiny for you that you can't ignore. You're all that kid has."

"Rayber seems to like him." Dan looked back to make sure Darrel was still asleep.

"Maybe Rayber can raise him. Make the ideal son from the grandson and son of the shitty ones."

John said nothing.

~

"Get that nurse to bring me some more orange juice," Rayber said. Darrel knocked on the door. He poked his head in and sat down at the chair next to Rayber's bed. Darrel had a laptop in his lap and he sat studying equations that Dan knew he could never hope to understand. "What are you doing on that thing, boy?" Rayber asked.

"Calculus homework. I'm almost done. I just wanted to finish it before we got home. Glad they have wi-fi here."

“I don’t know what wi-fi is but I’m glad you’re doing homework,” Rayber said. He gestured towards Dan. “This one never did any homework,” he said, laughing.

Darrel uncomfortably laughed. He was the perfect son for Rayber in all but attitude. That he took from Dan.

“If you had homework why didn’t you tell me? I wouldn’t have made you come,” Dan said to him.

“It’s cool, I wanted to come see Grandpa Rayber,” Darrel said, not looking up from his laptop. “I’m going to bounce early though. A friend’s picking me up. That cool?” Dan nodded.

“Love you, Grandpa Rayber,” Darrel said, waving. He gave Dan a hug. “Love you, Dad.”

“I love you, too, son,” Dan said. He meant it. And yet, seeing the boy, looking like him years before, being smiled upon kindly by Rayber made him shudder.

A nurse came in as Darrel left and Rayber demanded another cup of orange juice.

“I’d rather be drinking a screwdriver, especially after that pathetic sight, but this’ll do.”

“How was that pathetic?”

“I figured that kid would be too smart to have any respect for you.”

“Grandpa, the nurse is still here,” Dan said. She was awkwardly making her way out of the room. Rayber sat up in the bed as much as his frailty would allow him.

“Don’t call me Grandpa. I’m not your grandfather. I don’t even know why you’re here.”

“You married my grandmother. That’s why you’re my grandfather.”

“That doesn’t make me your grandfather as much as it doesn’t make your father my son. Darrel’s smart. He’ll figure it out one day, hopefully.” He lay back down, exhausted. He started to cough.

The beeping electronics of drips pumping life into geriatric patients filled Dan's ears. Darrel, who looked so much like Dan, but was not, was gone. Now Dan had to deal with Rayber alone. Dan had to try to be an educated man.

~

The last time Dan had been with Rayber alone was those years ago after Katrina. John and Darrel had gone to sleep. Iona was at the kitchen table and Rayber sat up sipping whiskey and reading a soggy newspaper. Dan sat in the den, unable to sleep, thinking about Darrel starting school and all that he needed to get ready for that. Rayber didn't say much to Dan, just asked him about Darrel, how he did in school, how his grades were. Good, good, good, Dan replied.

"Looks like the apple has fallen very far from the tree," Rayber said. Good, apparently, was not the response expected of a man worthy of Rayber Jacobs's time.

Dan decided instead to talk to his grandmother. She sat at the kitchen table reading Flannery O'Connor.

"*Wise Blood* again?"

"It is my favorite," she said. Warmth flowed from her voice.

"I love it, too."

"You know, Rayber introduced me to it." Dan was surprised. Rayber didn't seem like the type to like O'Connor. He rarely read fiction. Politics and history were more his speed.

"Really, now?" Dan asked, sitting down at the table next to her. It was dimly lit. In Dan's memory, the lights seemed to come from the table itself, making a soft glow around his grandmother, that soft light-darkness that permeates the dreams of children.

"Yes. He loves all sorts of books, you know," she said.

“I wouldn’t expect any different from a professor.”

Iowna paused, setting the book face down on the table as not to lose her place. “I know he’s...I know he doesn’t understand you, or your father. But he seems to love that son of yours.”

“He does,” Dan said.

“Maybe one day he’ll realize that it took a man of integrity to raise such a good child.”

“A man of integrity? I wouldn’t call myself that.”

“I would call you many things, Dan.”

“Rayber’s more interested in a man of education than a man of integrity.”

“That’s what he thinks he’s more interested in. But I wouldn’t have married him if that’s all he thought was important. I think he’ll see one day.”

“I hope so,” said Dan.

“Can I make you some tea, baby?”

“No, I’m probably going to go to sleep soon.”

Iowna cocked her head at her grandson, her blue eyes lightly fluttering upon him. She scooted closer to him, clasping her hands around Dan’s. They were rough, the hands of someone who had seen the best and worst the world had to offer.

“You are the reason your grandfather loves your son so much, whether he realizes that or not. We’re all just reflections of those who came before us. We all carry that torch into the darkness. I want you to know that.”

Dan said nothing, slightly confused by his grandmother’s sudden philosophizing. He decided against correcting her that Rayber wasn’t really his grandfather as Iowna kissed him on the head and went to her bedroom.

~

Now, Rayber looked pathetic. Dan tried to remember the stern war hero that called him a beggar. He couldn't picture him there anymore. All he saw was an old man at the end of the line. Maybe, he thought, maybe I can finally get something from him. Something he had always wanted. He wasn't sure what that was, but maybe in his last moments Rayber would show him. He tried to picture himself gliding next to Rayber like a hawk swooping towards a hard-earned meal.

"What do you do now, Daniel? Postman? Help me to recollect," Rayber said.

"I work at UPS."

"You sling boxes."

"It's a little more complicated than that."

"Tell yourself that all you want. I'm glad that kid of yours is doing something with his life."

He pictured Iowna carrying the torch in his mind. He tried to follow her.

"He's certainly shaping up to be an educated man. Following in your footsteps."

"Ha, maybe. Not in yours. Or your father's. Hard to believe he's your kid."

Dan felt the vessels in his eyes rise to the surface like red seaweed. This was the last time he would probably ever speak to this man, and he felt his tongue recoiling back in his mouth, a snake fleeing from the mongoose that was Rayber Jacobs. He stared down at the old man lying shattered like glass in the bed beneath him. His tree-trunk legs reduced to broken sticks, his barrel-chest sinking into his torso, his smooth head lined with blue veins carrying his cold blood. The air smelled like piss and medicine. Through gritted teeth, his cobra tongue broke free. He finally responded.

“Maybe if you hadn’t treated my dad like shit all these years he would’ve been better off.”

“Don’t blame me for your father being a fuck-up,” Rayber said, sitting up slightly. “He doesn’t have my blood.”

“That doesn’t matter, Rayber. When you married his mother you were supposed to take responsibility for him.”

“I paid for your father’s college. What else could he want? Money? He’ll get plenty of that when I’m dead.”

“He’s Iowna’s daughter, Rayber. Did you not love her? Because she loved you. And she loved her son. Like how you love my son.”

Rayber stared at Dan, trying to slide into his soul as he had always done before. He couldn’t find it this time.

“Do you have nothing left to say to me, Rayber?”

Rayber was silent. His lips were dry and cracked as he pressed them harder together. Dan finally turned to the door.

“Goodbye, Rayber. Hope your last few days are okay.”

“Did I ever tell you about the Hungarian beggar?” Rayber said. “They gouged his eyes out because—”

“Because his father was a beggar and his grandfather was a beggar so he would be a beggar, too. I know.” With Dan’s back to him, Rayber coughed.

“I didn’t tell you the end of the story. Do you know what I did to that beggar?” Dan didn’t respond. Rayber continued. “I pressed my gun, a M1917 revolver, against his head, and I blew his brains against the wall.”

Dan stopped. His body felt cold. “Why did you do that?” he asked.

“Because that poor bastard was better off dead,” Rayber said, and laughed. His laughter turned quickly into coughing. “It’s better to be dead than to be a goddamn beggar,” he said through his cough.

Had Rayber said this to Dan when he was younger, when his chest heaved with hot air and his legs were like thick tree trunks that rooted him to the ground, he would’ve cowered before him. Now, he felt nothing. Not even sadness. The coldness dissipated, and all Dan could see was Iowna, carrying the warm torch out into the dark that lay beyond the hospice. Dan followed.

Rayber died a few hours later. Dan didn’t attend the funeral. Darrel had a robotics competition that day. He and his team won first place. That day the sun was shining and the wind was warm. It was a good day. Dan imagined the Earth opening up and swallowing Lieutenant Rayber Jacobs. The maggots tried to pick the bones clean.

CHAPTER III

SUNDAY MORNING

After a few months, Gabe was released from the mental hospital of his own volition out of nothing but boredom and a perceived failure of treatment. On his first suicide attempt, which he had commenced a few days after his divorce finalized, the knot wasn't tight enough and Gabe's overweight body snapped the belt in half. He now had in his possession some rope, used to pack and ship furniture, tight and black, a fibrous snake, which he kept in case the notion should strike him again.

It had only been a few weeks since his release, and he had settled into a muted routine. He loved Sundays, especially now, with no one telling him to get ready for service, or brunch, or exercise; he could sleep until noon, one PM, two PM, it didn't matter. He would make himself pancakes, fry up some bacon, turn on the TV, and not move for hours. Sometimes he would only stay awake for a few hours before heading back to bed.

Unfortunately, on this particular Sunday, the doorbell woke him at five in the morning. Gabe thought he was imagining it at first, and let himself sink back into sleep, but the ringing persisted.

"Goddammit," Gabe mumbled, tumbling out of bed and slipping on shorts. He made his way to the door to see Jim, equipped with a steaming cup of coffee and a toothy, mustached grin.

"What the hell are you doing waking me up at five in the morning, Jim?"

“Good mornin’ neighbor! Ain’t it a doozy of a day out here?” Jim asked. Gabe attempted to frown but a yawn interrupted him.

“I was just about to take ol’ Kev here fishin’ and maybe even skiin’ out on Arkabutla and I was hoping you could tag along.”

Gabe stared at his neighbor, expressionless. He looked at his neighbor’s son, Kev, who stood behind his father. Kev was skinny and clumsily constructed. He looked about sixteen, maybe seventeen. Gabe hadn’t thought to ask how old he was. The kid was staring intently at his phone.

“No,” Gabe said, and began to close his door.

“Now hold on a minute,” Jim said, catching the door, “It’s a nice boat, and I haven’t seen ya outside much lately. I was hopin’ to cheer ya up, and like the boy to see how a couple of men handle the lake.” He gave Gabe a playful punch on the arm. Gabe looked at him for a moment, and then continued to close the door.

“C’mon, Gabe, it’ll be fun!” Jim said, continuing to stop Gabe’s desperate attempts to close the door.

“Don’t you have church on Sundays?”

“I’m sure the Lord will understand the need for a little male bonding. Would you believe that this is the first I’ve been able to hang out with Kev since he got out of school for the summer? The pharmacy keeps me mighty busy! So many sick people in this town with who-knows-what.” Kev still hadn’t looked up from his phone.

“Yeah, I’d believe that,” said Gabe.

“Gabe, if ya go with me, I’ll grill us some burgers and dogs at one of the campsites by the lake. It’ll be a great time.”

Gabe stared at his neighbor, a frown still plastered across his face. Jim still wore an equally prominent grin. He knew that if he didn't go Jim would potentially ruin his date with the rope hanging from his doorknob. Gabe sighed. "Give me a few minutes to get ready."

"Great, we'll be waiting in the truck!" Jim enthusiastically grabbed his son's arm and dragged him to his truck, which he had parked in front of his large, porcelain-white boat. Gabe watched his neighbor as he hitched the boat to the truck. He whistled and moved around the boat as he checked every component of it, talking in excited bursts to Kev, who either stared blankly at his father or rummaged through his pockets. Gabe rolled his eyes and went inside.

He lathered his arms, legs, and face in sunscreen. He didn't bother to lather his body because he knew he wouldn't take his shirt off or even get in the water while on the lake. He dug in his drawers to find a comfortable shirt that fit. Since his divorce, he had only needed button ups during the week and didn't really bother to wear a shirt on the weekend, since he rarely left his house. Gabe worked at the phone company, plugging and unplugging cables at different houses throughout the day, and all of his button ups were the same shade of navy blue that matched the company logo. He used to wear a pair of brown loafers but had recently started wearing a more comfortable pair of tennis shoes on the job, despite it technically being against the company's dress code.

He finally settled on an ill-fitting, white t-shirt. He slipped the shirt on and tried to keep it pulled over his gut, which protruded out, revealing a fat, hairy roll. He grunted angrily and pulled the shirt over his knees to stretch it out. Though not fully satisfied, he gave up, looked at the rope tied to his door, and walked back outside to see Jim and Kev already sitting in the truck. Kev was in the back seat of the vehicle and Jim motioned for Gabe to sit down next to him in the front.

Gabe had lived next to Jim for ten years. In those ten years, Jim had invited Gabe and his wife, Coretta, to every birthday, cook-out, yard sale, and Halloween party that he put on. Gabe usually just sat in the back of Jim and his wife's house, sipping on a beer while Coretta chatted up the other guests and laughed along with every stupid joke that Jim told. He didn't know whether it was his absurdly perfect, magazine-like marriage, or his constant attempts at comradery, but something about Jim made Gabe nauseous.

Earlier in the year, on the same day that Gabe's divorced was finalized, Jim had a huge party celebrating his own wedding anniversary. As with the boat trip, Gabe only agreed to attend after intense insistence from Jim. Jim's house looked like a Barbie doll house, inside and out. The front yard was greener and better-maintained than Gabe's, the house was bigger and decorated to look like an issue of *Better Homes and Gardens* by Jim's wife, Laura, and the backyard was complete with a pool and a yellow Labrador. At the party, the picturesque house was filled with people whom Gabe didn't know or actively avoided. He stood in the back of the living room and sipped a beer for most of the party. Towards the end of the night, Jim tapped on a glass and gave a speech. By then, Gabe was too drunk to remember exactly what Jim said, but he knew it had to be the usual disgusting spiel about twenty long years together and how the two of them had built the perfect home. All he remembered specifically was the last line of the monologue.

“Without my beautiful wife, without my family, I'm not even a man.”

All the neighbors clapped and whistled. Gabe quietly escaped to his own house.

It took about forty-five minutes to get from Gabe and Jim's homes to Arkabutla. Gabe and Kev both dozed on and off, despite Jim's ceaseless attempts at conversation. At one point, Jim said, “Since we're skipping church, we'd better sing some hymns!” He then discordantly

belted the chorus of “Power in the Blood,” eliciting a disgruntled grunt from Gabe, who promptly fell back asleep. As Jim backed the boat trailer into the water, Gabe and Kev both awoke. Gabe looked at Kev and chuckled, and Kev smiled. He felt a kind of comradery with the kid, partially due to their mutual annoyance at Jim.

Arkabutla Lake was not a natural body of water. The Corp of Engineers had constructed it along with a dam after destructive floods ravaged the northeastern part of Mississippi year after year. The water was almost never clear. It always had a murky brown color that gave it the appearance of light coffee. The fish, too, reflected the artificial hostility of the lake. While there were bass and other fisherman favorites, alligator gar, with their sharp teeth and sleek, scaly bodies, were also a common sight. Gabe thought that gar looked like some kind of primordial throwback, a thing that should’ve died long ago with the dinosaurs but somehow stuck around to cause problems.

“You two seem excited to get on that water!” Jim said.

“Sure, Dad,” Kev said, hopping out of the truck to unhitch the boat from its trailer.

“Kev’s a natural on the water, Gabe. He’s a better skier than me. Caught bigger fish, too.”

“Oh yeah?” said Gabe, watching Kev unhitch the boat.

“Yeah, he can drive the boat too. He’s gonna handle it while I park the truck.”

Kev gestured to his father, and Gabe got out of the truck and attempted to clamber into the boat, his heavy frame struggling to lift itself into the large boat from the water. Kev grabbed his arm and helped pull him in. As he did, he noticed a red ring around Kev’s arm. He was about to ask the kid about the injury when Jim’s nasal voice invaded Gabe’s earspace.

“Maybe you should lay off those beers I see you drinkin’,” Jim called from his truck, laughing.

“Yeah, yeah,” Gabe called back, plopping his half-wet body into one of the boat’s seats. Kev sighed and moved to the driver’s seat of the boat, cranking it and moving it away from the ramp.

Jim, having parked the truck, sprinted down the ramp and into the lake. With one fluid push, he hoisted himself into the boat. His athletic body didn’t break a sweat, and he seemed more energized than before.

“All right, boy, give your old man the wheel,” he said, putting his hand on Kev’s shoulder.

“I was thinking I could drive for a while. If that’s cool, ya know,” Kev said.

“Later, Kev. I’m itchin’ to get behind that wheel right now,” Jim said, practically lifting Kev from the seat as he did. Kev made an animalistic grunt as he obeyed his father.

“Kids, huh, Gabe?” Jim laughed.

“I wouldn’t know,” said Gabe. During their marriage, Coretta had wanted children. Gabe wanted to wait until he could get some land far from the suburbs of Southaven and Hernando. As the years went by, it became more and more clear that wasn’t going to happen.

“You’ll learn one day,” Jim said, “Now get your life jackets on!”

Kev grunted and obeyed. Gabe attempted to fit one of Jim’s lifejackets on but struggled to close the straps, which uncomfortably constricted his body, causing him to imitate Kev’s animal noises. Kev noticed him struggling and loosened the straps for him.

“Thanks,” said Gabe.

“No prob,” Kev started to say as Jim took the boat to full speed. Kev and Gabe both fell back into their seats.

“Shit,” Gabe muttered.

“Whoa, whoa, Gabe! Watch that language around my kid,” Jim yelled from the front of the boat, his voice partially obscured by the splashing of the boat’s motor.

“I’m sixteen, Dad. I hear worse than that at school,” Kev yelled, louder than necessary.

Jim chuckled. “Like I said, Gabe. Kids!”

Jim drove the boat around the lake, leading a one-sided conversation about people at his job and Kev’s wrestling competition and his wife’s brownies.

“Laura just makes the best brownies. I don’t know if you’ve ever had them, Gabe. I can tell by looking at you that you love brownies!” As he said this, he looked back at Gabe, patted his belly, and laughed. Gabe forced a laugh, but his ability to feign levity was wearing thin.

“Aren’t Mom’s brownies just the best?”

“Mmhmm,” Kev murmured, running his hand along the wake of the boat.

Jim drove the boat near a bank and opened his cooler. It was filled with beers and sodas, and a loaf of bread and a jar of peanut butter sat in a bag to the side of it. Jim opened one of the sodas and pulled the boat in close enough to wade on to the bank.

“Gabe, can ya take our supplies out onto that bank and set up shop? I’m gonna take the boy out for some boating lessons and I don’t want you to be too scared of him,” Jim said, chuckling. Kev rolled his eyes. *How the fuck is a grown man this giggly all the time?* Gabe thought.

“I thought you said he was a natural on the water?”

“Even a natural has room to learn.” Jim threw a folding lawn chair onto the bank and gestured for Gabe to leave the boat. “It’ll only be for fifteen minutes or so. You’re free to have anything in the cooler.”

Gabe shrugged and attempted to climb off the boat. He tripped over the side and fell into the water. Jim laughed as he leaned out of the boat to help Gabe up.

“Careful, buddy,” he said. He lifted the cooler and dropped it into Gabe’s arms. Gabe stood there a moment and looked at Jim, then looked at the brown waters of the lake. It was already seven or seven-thirty at that point, and the sun had begun to cast a crystal coat onto the water. He looked at the bank, its promise of a few moments away from Jim’s conversation as inviting as an unmade bed.

“Yeah, I’ll just hang here for a while. You two have fun,” Gabe said, hauling the cooler to the bank and setting up the folding chair.

“We won’t be long. Just some one on one time with me and the boy,” Jim said. Kev looked annoyed, but not enough to muster a complaint. Jim steered the boat away from the bank and Gabe watched the boat’s powerful wake splash away.

He took a beer from the cooler and eased himself into the folding chair Jim had left for him.

“Jim’s not a bad guy,” Gabe reminded himself, taking a long gulp from the can.
“Annoying as all shit, but an okay guy.”

The beer Gabe drank soon turned into two, which turned into three. He was getting a slight buzz and about to open a fourth can when he spotted Jim’s boat on a trajectory to the bank. He didn’t see Kev in the boat.

“Must be skiing behind it,” he figured, cracking the can open. Jim parked the boat on the bank. Jim’s body was dripping with water and he was shivering slightly. He fumbled through a compartment in the boat and pulled out a pack of cigarettes. He continued to look in the compartment, whispered “shit” under his breath, and jumped out of the boat.

“You got a light?” he asked Gabe.

“Uh, maybe. Since when do you smoke?” Gabe fumbled through his pockets and pulled out a lighter, which had been soaked from Gabe’s fall into the water but had mostly dried from him lounging on the chair.

“I hope it works,” Jim said, wiping it on a towel he grabbed from the boat and flicking it a few times. After a few tries, a small flame burst from the top and he dangled a cigarette from his mouth and lit it. He took a long drag and exhaled slowly, then sat on the cooler beside Gabe.

“Where’s Kev?” Gabe said. Jim’s hand shook as he took the cigarette from his mouth.

“You saw it, didn’t you?”

“Saw what?”

“Don’t tell me you didn’t see it.”

“I didn’t see anything, Jim, I was just sitting here the whole time you were gone.”

“Kev drowned,” Jim said, slowly. Gabe twitched and stood up out of his chair.

“What are you talking about?”

“Kev drowned,” Jim said, moving his shaky cigarette to his lips and taking another long drag. Gabe looked at his neighbor, eyes wide and jaw open. He started to walk back towards the boat, but then sat back down in the chair and looked at Jim, who was still on the cooler and had already prepared another cigarette, twisting it in his fingers and looking at the jagged rocks on the edge of the bank. “He was—he was skiing. And he just fell off the skis.”

“Didn’t you turn the boat around and get him?”

“He had already drowned by the time I got to him.”

“That fast?” Gabe’s eyes widened even more. He attempted to stand up but Jim’s still-shaking hand forcefully pushed him back down onto the chair.

“You saw him drown.”

“I didn’t see him drown, Jim, I already told you.”

“You saw him drown.” Jim stopped shaking and glared at the surface of the lake. He picked up a rock from the bank and tossed it into the water. Gabe didn’t take his eyes off Jim. He clutched his fists tightly.

“I don’t know how Laura’s going to take this. She’s planning on leaving me, you know.” Jim tossed another rock into the murky water. His cigarette, a sad, leaking faucet dripping smoke, drooped from his mouth.

“I didn’t know that.”

“I didn’t know what else to do at this point.”

“What are you talking about?”

“I just didn’t know.” Another boat drove swiftly past the bank. Jim waved. “I don’t think they even saw me.” Gabe tried to subtly gesture for the passers-by to stop on the shore with them, but it was evident that they had not seen the two men.

“It’s not that I haven’t been a good husband. I don’t understand it.” Jim stood up and began pacing back and forth on the bank, smoke pouring from his lips. “One little thing shouldn’t be enough for her to just leave.”

“One little thing?”

“She’s being irrational.”

Gabe was looking at the boat, thinking of jumping in and leaving his neighbor on the shore. Jim stopped pacing and turned towards the lake, staring at everything and nothing. “I lost my temper with Kev a few weeks ago. He was being a little shit. Excuse me, I don’t mean to curse. I mean, he was just being a teenager—but he was being so horrible. I hit him. I didn’t want to, I didn’t even feel myself doing it. It just happened. Ya know what I mean?” He chuckled, that neighborly soft chuckle Gabe was so used to. Another long drag from his cigarette. “Like how he just drowned. It just happened.”

Gabe looked in every direction. The bank was surrounded by an expanse of the lake’s brown waters on one side and heavy forest on the other, and he was so far from the boat ramp that he could no longer see it.

“I know you went through a divorce, Gabe. I didn’t know for a while. I didn’t even notice it until a few weeks ago, really. And then you tried to kill yourself? I can’t imagine reacting like that. I mean, Laura’s leaving me but—”

“Well, I don’t really talk about it,” Gabe said, opening the cooler. He took another beer from the cooler and began to rapidly chug it.

“You don’t really talk a lot about anything, do ya?” Jim said. “Grab me a beer out of there.” Gabe obeyed.

“Shouldn’t we go back to shore and call someone about Kev? I don’t have any phone reception out here,” Gabe said as he handed the can over.

“He’s already drowned. There’s no use in having helicopters airlift a corpse,” Jim said, tears now streaming down to his strange mustached smile, taking a long swig from the can.

“You’re being oddly calm for someone who just watched his son die.”

“I’m dealing with it the way I deal with it.” Jim took another long sip from the can. Somehow he had emptied it in two mouthfuls. He crushed the can with his foot and kicked it into the lake.

“We should at least try to get the body, or call someone, because if you don’t report this, doesn’t that look like, uh—” Gabe started.

“Doesn’t it look like what, Gabe?” said Jim, walking around him to get another beer from the cooler.

“This is really fucked up, Jim. This is really fucked up. We should go back and get help,” Gabe said, beginning to make his way to the boat. Jim stepped in front of him, chest to chest. He pushed Gabe back onto the bank.

“Watch your language. We’ll leave once I finish this cigarette.”

“We need to go, Jim. I need to go.”

“What was the first thing you did when you got divorced? What did you do?”

Gabe sat back down. He put his head in his hands and stared off into the waters of the lake.

“Jim, your son just died. Or if this is some kind of joke, it’s not funny. It’s fucked up.”

“What did you do, Gabe? I just don’t know what to do. I don’t even know who I am without Laura. Or Kev. Or Kev.” Jim began shaking again. Gabe stood up and grabbed Jim’s shoulders.

“Jim, I know that you’re not handling this well, and I understand that, but we need to go. We need to go tell someone what’s happened.”

Another boat’s motor roared in the distance. As it approached, Gabe let go of Jim’s shoulders and attempted to flag it down.

“Hey! Hey!” he shouted. The driver didn’t notice. “Goddammit.”

“Why were you trying to get them over here?” Jim asked, retrieving another cigarette from the pack.

“Any help is good right now. And I thought we were leaving after you finished your cigarette?”

“Kev drowned. No helping there.”

“Jim, dammit, I don’t understand this!”

“Yes, you do. You’re divorced, you’ve been through this.”

“I’m not talking about the divorce, Jim, I’m talking about the fact that your son just fucking drowned!”

“All the same.”

“All the same? That’s not the same, Jim.”

“This will take everything, Gabe.”

“What will take everything?”

“Laura leaving me. I’ll have nothing. I’ll be nothing. You tried to blow your fucking brains out, didn’t you? You get it.”

Gabe looked at Jim, who plopped down on the bank, not even bothering to sit on the chair or the cooler this time. Gabe looked over at the boat, the only thing around him that wasn’t woods or water. He made a run for it.

“Where are you going?” Jim yelled, standing up and reaching for Gabe’s shirt. He was much faster than Gabe and managed to grab him and attempted to pull him back onto the bank from the shallow water around the boat. Gabe flung a fat fist at Jim but Jim moved out of the

way and Gabe tumbled into the water, producing a huge splash even in the shallows of the bank. A jagged rock stabbed him and the water's brown murk began to redden.

"Shit!" he exclaimed. He attempted to lift his portly heft from the water but Jim stepped on the wound inflicted by the sharp stone. Gabe yelped in agony. "What the hell, Jim?"

"Kev drowned while he was skiing. Have you ever skied before, Gabe?"

Gabe gathered muddy sand from the bottom of the lake and threw it at Jim's face, causing him to recoil back. He flung his bloodied body into the boat and managed to ride away.

Looking back, Gabe saw as Jim plopped back onto the ground, staring at the beer cans and burnt out cigarettes that covered the ground. A long, black snake slithered by Jim, then slid onto the cold, dark waters of the artificial lake.

CHAPTER IV
HIT OR STAND

Sam Jacobs was nervous. He fiddled with a poker chip, moving it between his fingers and flipping it like a coin. He was thirty but looked much older. He had stringy blonde hair that complemented his lanky body. His arms and legs were awkward and long, and his face was sullen and sharp. He looked like a sad scarecrow. He thought Big Mama looked annoyed to see him again.

“This is the third time you’ve been here in the past three months,” Big Mama said. “You must be in some real shit.”

“Listen, I’ve got a Cadillac car out there that was my uncle’s. It’s old but there’s not a thing wrong with it. I don’t know what it’s worth and honestly I don’t care. Just give me what you think it’s worth,” said Sam.

“Damn, Sam, what the hell happened?” Big Mama said, leaning around Sam to look at the Cadillac car outside in her lot. It sparkled in the muggy summer Memphis heat.

“To my uncle? He was just old.”

“No, I mean why are you selling this pretty-ass car?”

“Do you interrogate everyone trying to sell you a car?”

Big Mama let her sunglasses slide down to the tip of her nose. “I ask my friends what is happening when they’re just pawning off their whole inheritance.”

Sam put his hand on the back of his head. He ran it down the back of his scalp and let the sweat fly away from his hair. It was hot and the air was heavy and humid.

“I’m in real bad with Jack Scratch.”

“Lord, kid. I told you not to be fuckin’ with that slimy bastard.”

“You’re not my mother.”

“I may not be your mother but I am your Mama.”

“Are you gonna buy the car or not?”

“Let me take a look at it.” She dropped her cigarette on the concrete and used her cane to smash it into a pile of ash.

Big Mama was not big. She was four and a half feet tall and probably didn’t weigh more than a sack of potatoes, at least by Sam’s estimation. She wore a floral dress and small sunglasses and usually had a cigarette firmly installed between her lips. On her head sat a tuft of white hair. She had a clipboard in one hand and her cane in the other.

She walked into the lot and lightly ran her hand on the car’s white paint. Sam wasn’t lying: aesthetically, there wasn’t a thing wrong with it. She kicked the tires and stared at the trunk then looped back to the front.

“This is a 1965 DeVille. Woo, baby, you don’t see many of these anymore,” Big Mama said. “Pop the hood,” she told Sam. He obeyed. “Now crank it.”

The engine roared to life then hummed with the intensity of an old car. Big Mama lifted her sunglasses into her hair and stared into the engine, glaring at every nook and cranny, every metallic piece, as if she were a teacher and the components of the car were unruly school children. “They don’t make ’em like this anymore,” Big Mama said. “Are you sure you want to sell this?”

“It’s not about what I want, it’s about what I’ve gotta do.”

“All right, kid. Hold on.” She pulled a pen that had been stuck in her thick white hair and began writing something on the clipboard.

“That’s all I can do,” she said, ripping the paper from the clipboard and handing it to Sam.

“\$25,000? It’s worth way more than that. At least \$35,000.”

“If you sell it to me, I’m gonna sell it for \$35,000. Hell, even that’s risky. I gotta make some kinda profit on it, kid.”

“Dammit to hell. Fine,” Sam said. He fished the title from his messenger bag. It was wedged between the edge of the bag and the gun box.

“What’s in that box?” Big Mama asked, pointing a bony old finger towards the black box.

“It’s my uncle’s World War II revolver. I’m selling that, too.”

“That’s the saddest shit I’ve ever heard.”

“It’s just objects.”

“Whatever you wanna tell yourself,” Big Mama said. She gestured towards a car salesman in the building. “Come get this kid’s papers drawn up.” She then grabbed Sam’s shoulder and took him aside, out of ear reach of the car salesmen and mechanics milling about the dealership.

“Listen, kid. Once you pay Jack Scratch off, don’t you go back on that boat again. I won’t buy more cars from you. I can’t keep enabling you to let that man destroy your life.”

“I’m done after this. Trust me, I don’t ever want to see that son of a bitch ever again either.”

“Good, I hope you mean that. Let’s go finish up the sale.”

After finalizing the deal, Sam called Nephilia. She didn’t answer at first, then he tried calling again. Once again, no answer. Finally, on the third try, she picked up.

“What the fuck have you done?” she said.

“What are you talking about?”

“Some big sons of bitches came to my house today looking for you. They said you owed money to Jack Scratch. Again, Sam, really? Does your wife even know about this?”

“I haven’t talked to her in a while. That’s probably why they’re bothering you. I just sold Uncle Rayber’s Cadillac and I need a ride back to the office to get my car. I’ve got to go sell this gun.”

“You’re such a stupid bastard, Sam. You ought to be ashamed of yourself.”

“I am. Now, will you please come pick me up? I’m at Big Mama’s in West Memphis.”

“No. Call an Uber.”

“Please, Nephilia. I’m gonna fix this. I’m a lawyer, for God’s sake. I could beat him in court even if I didn’t pay him back, which I’m gonna do.”

“You know damn well Jack Scratch doesn’t give a shit about the law. You’re a shitty lawyer, anyway. You got by on luck and luck alone. Don’t come home until you’ve paid him back.” His phone cut back to the homescreen.

God fucking dammit, he thought. As he waited on his Uber driver he opened the box and examined the gun. His uncle had taught him to shoot it when he was 12, but he was never a great shot. He felt the smooth barrel and the indentations caused by his uncle’s engraving. He thought about trying to shoot bottles in his uncle’s backyard. He pictured Jack Scratch’s face on the bottles in his brain, trying desperately to break just one of them, his uncle frowning in

disappointment. His phone vibrated in his pocket. Nephilia again. He answered quickly, almost dropping his phone.

“Neph,” he answered.

“I’m coming to pick you up,” Nephilia said. “I’ll call you when I get across the bridge.”

She arrived within about twenty minutes. Her car was old, loud, and had rust around every tire and on the wheels themselves. Sam always felt uncomfortable looking at it. It seemed like a failing on his part in some way. He looked at the Cadillac that Big Mama’s mechanic was inspecting in the parking lot while Big Mama looked on. It glittered in the sun, a pearl on a black asphalt seafloor. Nephilia’s rickety car honked. Sam climbed in, almost hitting his head on the top of the car. Nephilia was glaring at him as he sat down.

“You’re selling your uncle’s gun?” she asked.

“It should get me some money. He actually used it in World War II.”

Nephilia sighed. Her hands gripped the steering wheel and turned around in Big Mama’s lot. Big Mama watched curiously as the couple drove away from her lot, balancing her glasses on the end of the nose, then pushing them up, frowning, and walking back into the office of the dealership.

“It’s a damn shame I have to sell it,” Sam said, trying to make conversation. Nephilia said nothing. “It’s something of an heirloom, you know.”

“Yes, I know,” Nephilia said. “Your uncle would be disappointed with you.”

Sam stopped looking at his Nephilia, turning his gaze swiftly towards the window and staring out at the river below the bridge connecting Memphis to Arkansas. He fiddled with his poker chip, rolling back and forth on the car’s window seal.

“I know he would. I know you are, too.”

“Sam, I’m not disappointed. I’m done. And I need you to know how hard of a decision that is for me. Especially now.”

“What do you mean?” Sam asked. Nephilia looked at him for a moment, then turned back to the road. “I tried to stop, Neph. I really did. But I just felt like it was never enough, even when I won. Hell, winning a case doesn’t even satisfy that. It doesn’t have that rush. I don’t know what it is. It’s like I’m not living up to something. And when my wife stopped talking to me, that just made me want more.” He stopped, sensing a nerve being hit.

Nephilia remained silent with her sad eyes focused solely on the yellow lines moving on forever.

While Nephilia waited in the car, he sold the gun to a pawn shop for less than it was worth. With the money from the Cadillac, the gun, and his liquid inheritance, he was at \$170,776. It was a little more than what he owed Jack Scratch. Standing outside the shop, he felt a coolness come over him as he pressed the dial to call Jack Scratch. He had never wanted to get rid of money so bad in his life.

A secretary answered the phone. “Mr. Scratch is in a meeting at the moment.”

“Tell him it’s Sam Jacobs. The lawyer. Tell him I’ve got his money.”

“I can leave him a message.”

“I need you to tell him now. He’s sending people to my house.”

The secretary breathed out an annoyed sigh. “Fine, just a moment.” He heard a rendition of “Danse Macabre” as she put him on hold. After a while, the phone clicked signifying she was back on the line.

“Did you tell him?”

“She told me, yes,” Jack Scratch answered. Sam’s eyes shot open, red veins popping out into the third-dimension.

“Jack,” Sam said, his voice cracking. “I’ve got your money. \$170,000.”

“You owe me more than that, my friend.”

“What do you mean? I did the calculations. It was \$170,000 on the dot.”

“You’re not factoring in interest. You’ve owed me for at least three years. You’ve doubled that debt since then.”

Sam’s face turned pallid and his skin felt cold. He put his phone on his shoulder and crossed his arms, either for warmth or comfort, he knew not which.

“Jack, you know I can’t pay that. Can’t you forgive the interest?”

“If I forgive you I’d have to forgive everyone, and I couldn’t be doing that, now, could I? That’s just bad business sense, right there.”

Sam’s teeth began to grit together again. He tried to think of something to say.

“I can see you’re in a bad place. We all get in a bad place from time to time. Why don’t you come on and board the riverboat tonight and we can talk about it?”

“I can’t gamble anymore, Jack. This is all the money I’ve got.”

“Just come have a chat. It’s not like you’ve got much of a choice in this matter, anyhow.”

Jack Scratch was right and Sam knew it. “Okay,” he said, defeat on his tongue, “Where will you be moored tonight?”

“Right by the Pyramid, under the bridge. But not for long, we’re going down the river and back up it tonight. It’s gonna be a whole jam-bo-ree. Hell, we may go as far as ‘Orleans.’” Sam didn’t like that. Traveling with Jack Scratch on what was essentially an ambiguously legal floating casino, potentially for days, was not his idea of a safe meeting. But he knew that Jack

Scratch would keep sending people to his house if he didn't comply, and so he agreed to the meeting.

"We're shipping off at seven P.M. sharp. Don't be late," said Jack, satisfaction in his smooth voice.

Ending the call with Jack Scratch, Sam crawled into the car with Nephilia again.

"He wants me to pay him in person," Sam lied. He listened to Nephilia's breath for a moment. "Neph?" he said.

"This is it, Sam. I'll take you to his boat but after that I don't want to see you."

"I'm done after this, Neph. I promise."

She paused. Sam could hear her tense breathing. "You know I can't trust that. How can I trust that when men with pipes and holstered guns are showing up on my doorstep? How many times have you said that, Sam?"

"They won't be showing up anymore, baby. I promise."

"Don't call me baby. I ain't your baby."

"You were."

The two rode in silence all the way to the harbored riverboat. There wasn't actually a real harbor near the Memphis Pyramid. Jack Scratch had made due with his own private little alcove that he used to allow his guests to board. There was no one demographic that boarded the boat; sleek ladies in long, elegant dresses, fat men with oversized Hawaiian shirts, skinny men with scruffy beards and dirty clothes, all were welcome on Jack Scratch's Riverboat Casino. The Pyramid stood looming over the riverboat, the huge fish's eye on the gaudy Bass Pro Shops logo staring directly at Sam as the car rolled past it. He looked up at the Pyramid from the window of

the car. As a kid, he had seen musicians play some of their most memorable shows at the great glass building. Now, it sold bait and tackle.

The riverboat was huge and red and lit up bright, a shining red star on the inky black river in the night. Even in the daytime, the boat's red paint stood out against the brown waters of the Mississippi river. Jack Scratch stood on the ramp leading up to the boat shaking hands with his guests as each entered the boat. His teeth were immaculately white, his hair was salt-and-pepper slick. He was clean-shaven and had a strong jawline that accentuated his fit but sleek frame. He wore a red suit with a black tie and held a cigar in his left hand. He had a badge-pin that looked like a set of dice on his suit's breast. He was slender and tall, having about an inch on Sam. That inch felt like a mile as Jack Scratch's presence towered over the average.. He had "LOVE" tattooed on each finger of his right and "HATE" tattooed on each finger of his left, which Sam remembered from a movie his uncle watched when he was a boy. Jack Scratch was left handed. He was strange but somehow attractive. Everything about him seemed constructed. Sam suspected Jack Scratch wasn't even his real name. He seemed to glow against the black river.

"I guess this is it," Sam said, looking out the window of Nephilia's car.

"I guess so," she replied, distantly.

"Have you talked to your wife?"

"I don't want her to know about any of this. It's better that way. Jack Scratch hasn't bothered her. I don't think he will." He paused and looked at Nephilia silently. They both said nothing for some time.

"I love you, Neph," Sam said, cracking the door open. Nephilia said nothing. "Okay, I'll see you around."

“Wait,” Nephilia said, grabbing Sam’s shirt. She gave him a kiss on the cheek. “I hope you make it out. But I don’t want to see you again.” She touched her stomach, and moved Sam’s hand over it. He imagined the child within her, struggling for consciousness in the waters of her womb

Sam tried to process what he had just felt. Something squirmed in Nephilia’s belly, something that was a part of him. Something that would inherit some of what he was. He rubbed his hands into his stringy hair, finally regaining his composure.

“I understand,” he said. He stepped out of the car and waved Nephilia away. He watched her pull out of the parking lot of the Pyramid and then continued to watch for a moment to make sure none of Jack Scratch’s men weren’t following her. Not that he could do anything about it if they were, but a small weight lifted when he saw no one tailed behind her.

Sam stepped up on the ramp and into the cacophony coming from inside the riverboat. A blues band loudly played, the singer sadly crooning about losing all of his money and his friends and his wife. *Appropriate*, Sam thought. Jack Scratch noticed Sam boarding the boat.

“There you are, Sammy! I’ve been waiting for you! I got a special cabin set-up for you to sleep in right next to mine. Let me show you.”

“You didn’t have to do all that, Jack.”

“My guests are my family, Sammy. And my customers are even closer than that,” he said, his wicked white grin expanding into a giggle.

“Jack, I just want to talk about what we can do to get me out of debt. I don’t mean to disrespect your hospitality,” said Sam, uncomfortably, as Jack put his free hand on his shoulder.

“All in good time, Sammy, all in good time. We’ve got much mischief to get up to before then.”

“I can’t play, Jack, I don’t even have enough to pay you back.”

“Perhaps that’s how you can *earn* enough to pay me back,” he said, his voice sly. He cocked an eyebrow at Sam, who moved his head away to avoid eye contact. “Did you bring clothes? This is gonna be a three-day pleasure cruise.”

“No, I was hoping to just get this meeting done and head out,” Sam said.

“Well ain’t you just a little spoilsport. I tell you what, we look like we wear around the same size. I’ll get you hooked up with one of my suits and a pair of my pajamas. Never worn, don’t you worry!”

“Thanks, Jack.”

Jack’s grin was warm but it always felt off, like the warmth was not that of joviality but of a hot furnace burning in his mouth. The inside of the riverboat was themed after ancient Egypt. Jack Scratch’s guards, waiters, and dealers all wore tight period costumes, with pharaoh’s hoods for the men and Cleopatra costumes for the women. Two statues of Anubis guarded the area where the cabins were located.

Sam went into his cabin. It was luxurious, with a king-sized bed and a wardrobe that already contained one of Jack Scratch’s suits. A sticky note was stuck to it that said, “Go ahead and slip this little number on and meet me up on the upper deck,” signed J.S. He obeyed, and put the suit on. It was too gaudy for Sam’s liking. Rather than the red that Jack Scratch wore, it was white, with the same black shirt and tie. He found the tie to be suffocating and loosening it did no good. He imagined a snake around his throat, tightening every second he still owed a penny to Jack Scratch.

On the upper deck, debauchery and tomfoolery had already begun. There was a piano on the deck, and Jack Scratch energetically banged away Jerry Lee Lewis songs. Jack Scratch’s

guests all danced and fell about and chugged cocktails, one after the other. Jack Scratch's world was chaos and that was just the way he liked it. He had a shot glass on the piano and when he saw Sam step onto the deck, he stopped playing and turned the shot glass upside down. The instant he did, the casino patrons all grew silent and made their way below the deck. Sam watched them nervously as they walked past him back down to the indoor part of the boat. One old man shot Sam a look of sympathy and placed a hand on his shoulder as he went inside.

"Come over here with me, Sammy," said Jack Scratch, moving to the edge of the boat overlooking the wake that the boat was leaving behind.

"You wanna cigar?" Jack Scratch asked, removing a cigar from his coat pocket.

"No, thanks," said Sam. "The wife's got me trying to quit smoking."

"Suit yourself." Jack Scratch looked up at the Pyramid. "It is a thing of beauty, ain't it?" he asked Sam.

"What is? The Pyramid,"

"Yessir, that Pyramid. They made that to better emulate the city by the river in Egypt. It's where our city takes its name. You know anything about Egyptian legends, Sammy?"

"Not really," Sam said, nervously staring out at the Pyramid, trying not to look into Jack Scratch's shining eyes.

"Let me tell you the story of Osiris. Osiris, see, he got a great big inheritance. But his brother Set, well, he didn't like that, not one bit. So he killed him and chopped him up into little pieces and scattered them all over Egypt, from Memphis to Cairo." Sam gulped nervously.

Jack Scratch continued, "Well, you think that'd be the end for old Osiris, but no. His wife, Isis, she was a good lady, she got all those pieces and put the fella back together. But she

couldn't bring him back to life, so instead, she fucked him." This seemed to amuse him. He took a puff from his cigar, breathing out slowly into the warm night.

"She got pregnant with his son, Horus, and she hid him from Set, because, of course, that's a big old threat to Set's lifestyle. He's used to having it easy, see, and if Horus comes back and gets his inheritance, that means Set is back in the shitter." He paused, looking over to make sure Sam was still attentive. He was.

Jack Scratch continued, "Horus grew up, and took his uncle to court. And can you guess who the judge was? It was Set's own damn daddy! Now ain't that wild. I'm sure you don't see any shit like that in the legal profession today."

"No, not in my practice, anyway," Sam said.

"What do you deal with again?"

"A bit of this and that. I started in wills and estates. I mostly defend small-timers now."

Jack Scratch nodded. "That makes sense. The law, see, it's a lot like gambling. You gotta know when to bluff and you gotta know what to hold back and what to reveal. And Horus must've had a damn good lawyer, because he won back all that inheritance, even with Set's own daddy presiding over the whole damn thing."

"Why are you telling me all this?"

"Set's own daddy said he couldn't have all that inheritance. Your daddy gonna leave you any inheritance, Sammy boy?"

"I didn't know my dad," Sam said. "He died before I was born."

"Ah, that's a shame. Or maybe it's for the best," Jack Scratch said, smiling at Sam. Sam felt compelled to look into his eyes now, burning and yellow. "My daddy kicked me out of the house when I was just a teenager. Said I was too damn rebellious. Can you believe that? Me, a

rebel?" He cackled. "My brother got everything. He was my daddy's favorite son. I feel like I can relate a little bit with Set, and when I see that Pyramid, I think about old Set. Hell, this city is a lot like Set," he gestured at the lights of Downtown Memphis, which were beginning to fade as the riverboat got further and further from them. "That Pyramid was Memphis's inheritance, and it got taken from her, and was given to a damn bait shop."

"You still haven't said why you're telling me all of this."

"Sam, I'm giving you a chance not only to pay me back but also win back your inheritance. I know about your uncle. I got people everywhere. I don't wanna be my brother. I don't wanna be Horus. I don't wanna take your inheritance. But I've got a business to run, and I can't just be forgiving what's owed to me. So, what I'm proposing is that you put your vice of yours to work. Blackjack. Just you and me. Sammy and Old Jack Scratch. Debtor verses Dealer. You have to play all you have. Every cent. All or nothing."

Sam thought about this.

"What happens if I say no?"

"Well then, you still owe me money and time has been up for a while," he said, pulling out a pocket knife and wagging it in his "HATE" hand. "I think I'll cut you into little pieces and spread you out all over Memphis like Osiris. And I don't think your woman will put you back together and fuck you, either."

Sam's back tensed, then loosened, and he shrugged. He thought about his uncle's gun flashing as it shot targets that Sam would ultimately miss. He tried to pretend it was in his hand, that he was holding it steady. His hand quivered.

"What's in it for you?"

"It looks like I'm not getting all my money back either way. I just want to see you squirm."

Sam sighed. "Okay. Let's do it."

"Good! That's what I like to hear!" He slapped Sam's back. "Some gentlemanly competition. I'll tell you what, if you lose and can't pay me back, I'll make it easy on you. I'll just shoot you in the back of the head and throw you off the boat."

The two headed below deck. As he entered the casino floor, two large men dressed as Anubis flanked Jack Scratch.

"None of that, boys. Sam here's a friend." The bodyguards nodded and went back to milling about the casino.

The casino floor was carpeted in red with hieroglyphs making a pattern all over it. All around, people were circled around poker tables, roulettes, and slot machines. There was a long bar where a frazzled bartender, dressed like an Egyptian priest, was quickly sliding drinks down to the people at the bar and to the waitress carrying drinks to the various tables. There were paintings of different suits of cards that dotted the walls every few feet. All together, every card was represented individually except for the King and Queen of hearts, which was prominently on the wall in the centermost section of the floor. The top half of the card was as Queen, stern and stone-faced. Sam thought she looked like Big Mama. The bottom half was a King, dressed as a pharaoh, whose sharp teeth displayed a sinister grin.

"We'll just take over the main blackjack table here. It just wouldn't be fun without an audience."

Sam didn't like it but as a lawyer he was used to performing in front of a crowd, so he just nodded.

A standard casino blackjack table sat seven players on one side and the dealer on the other, but Jack Scratch shooed away the players from a table, leaving just him on the dealer's

side and Sam on the player's side right across from him. Blackjack was such a simple game, Sam thought, and yet he'd lost most of his money playing it.

Jack Scratch sat down on the dealer's side of the table as a woman in a skimpy Cleopatra-style outfit handed him a deck of cards, which he began to shuffle. The lady glided over to Sam's side of the table and asked him if he wanted a drink. He was about to decline, but looked across the table at Jack Scratch, who had a twinkle in his yellow eye, and asked for a Jack and Coke.

"I'll wait for you to get your drink before I deal," Jack Scratch said.

Normally, Sam would have two options: bet small amounts from his \$170,000, risking losing it in smaller increments but with the possibility of more safely and slowly doubling it, or simply betting the whole \$170,000 from the outset. However, Jack Scratch's "all or nothing" rule forced him into the latter option. He didn't care. A win would immediately double his money and maybe he could even go home free from Jack Scratch's influence. A loss wouldn't let him go home but he'd at least be free from Jack Scratch.

He glanced around at the joyous people around him. It was a strange sight. Rich Memphis elites were intermingling with people any other day of the week they would consider trash. Ladies in long, extravagant evening gowns flirted with portly, scruffy men wearing hoodies and jeans. The District Attorney, who Sam knew from work, was sharing a story that was making the head of one of the biggest drug operations in Memphis bust his gut. He tried to invite himself into any of their worlds, twisted as they were, but couldn't do it. He imagined Jack Scratch's claws pulling him away and tightly clasp him to the blackjack table.

He pulled a poker chip from his pocket and began spinning on the table nervously. He moved it between his fingers, turned it, and spun it over and over while Jack Scratch stared at it. It was red and old and the casino name on the chip had long been scratched off.

“Why do you have that?” Jack Scratch asked, absently.

“It was my uncle’s,” Sam said, picking it up and holding it in front of his eye. “I guess you could say it’s my inheritance. The only thing I couldn’t bear to pawn off. Not that it would’ve fetched a price, anyway. I don’t even know what casino it came from.”

“Here you go, darlin,” said the waitress as she placed the drink on the table in front of Sam. Her name-badge said “Brenda.” She had a pained look on her face. He felt some comradery with her. She, like him, was firmly in the claws of Jack Scratch. He thought maybe she had children to feed, or maybe she had gambled away all of her money like he did and Jack Scratch made her serve on his hellish riverboat until she paid him back (which, given Jack Scratch’s nebulous interest rates, she probably never would). He thought that this might be the last person who would ever show him any warmth. He wanted to thank her somehow, but all he could think to do was smile and say, “thank you.” Brenda smiled back. He felt warm for a moment.

“Now,” Jack Scratch said, “let’s play some blackjack!” Sam’s consciousness shot back out of himself and the warmth slipped away from him, replaced with an arctic frost that traveled up his spine and into his mind. A dealer with a shoe shuffled a deck of black-backed cards, and Jack Scratch did not take his shining eyes off of Sam the entire time. The moment a game began, he hid all expression, an uncanny neutrality coming across his face. The dealer slid Sam a card face up, then Jack Scratch , then Sam another card face up, then Jack Scratch a face down card. The dealer sat the deck face down and lifted his cards, taking a quick look.

Sam forced himself to look at his cards. He saw the Queen of Hearts and the Three of Clubs. Jack Scratch’s face up card was the Six of Diamonds. The image of the queen on the card was the same as the one on the King and Queen of Hearts painting. He saw Big Mama’s stern

eyes leering at him from the card, judging that he was even in this situation in the first place. She seemed to be urging him to stay.

“Hit,” he said, tapping the table. Jack slid him a card face up. The Five of Clubs, making his total 18. He grimaced and took a huge gulp of Jack and Coke. Jack Scratch still showed no expression. He waited for Sam to react to his cards.

“You gonna take another hit or are you gonna stand?” the dealer asked.

Sam thought. He looked down at Queen Big Mama, who was absolutely scowling at him at this point.

“Stand,” Sam said.

“All right then,” Jack Scratch said, looking at his own hand. He revealed his face down card: the Six of Clubs. He received his third card. His neutral expression finally changed. Sam could feel his bladder loosening as a grin came over Jack Scratch’s face. He turned the card around, revealing the Six of Spades. Jack Scratch had 18. Sam regained control of his bladder before urine leaked from him.

“Push,” Jack Scratch said, annoyed.

Sam felt his body float. He looked down to make sure he was on the floor. He felt vomit almost leave his body, but he regained control. Jack Scratch looked bored. He rolled his eyes at the cards on the table.

“Are we going to play another hand?” Sam said.

“I’m bored of this. This wasn’t just about the debt, now was it, Sammy?” Jack Scratch said, cocking an eyebrow. He waved the blackjack dealer away and gestured for one of the men working the casino floor to come by.

“Like I told you earlier, I’ve got people all over. I heard all about you selling that beautiful Caddy to pay me back. That’s a damn shame. A damn shame, I say!” Jack Scratch said, standing up and pushing his chair against the table. “But what bothered me more was that World War II revolver. Now, that’s your inheritance, boy! That’s a piece of your heritage. That saddened me to no end to see you pawning that thing off like an old golf club.”

He moved over to Sam’s side of the table and placed his left hand on Sam’s shoulder. “So, I thought to myself,” he continued, glaring into Sam’s mind through his eyes, “I ought to give him a chance to get that little beauty back.”

The lady came back to the table carrying a familiar black box. Jack Scratch took a key from his pocket, popped the case open, and pulled out a vintage revolver.

“Look at that on the barrel there,” he said, bringing the pistol to Sam’s eyeline. “‘Kraut Killer.’ That is just absolutely charming.”

“How did you know I sold that?”

“It don’t make a damn difference,” said Jack Scratch. “A part of my mind is tempted to just press this pretty piece against your head and pull the trigger.” He put the barrel of the gun against Sam’s head. Sam closed his eyes. Everyone in the casino grew silent as Jack Scratch stood with the gun pressed against Sam’s head. Every second he didn’t pull the trigger another bead of sweat formed on Sam’s head. He finally pressed his finger on the trigger and pulled down. A gasp resounded through the casino-boat.

The gun clicked.

“It ain’t loaded yet, that wouldn’t be fair at all,” said Jack Scratch, cackling. He pulled a bullet from the black box, popped the gun’s chamber out, placed the bullet in the chamber, quickly spun it, and popped the chamber back in. “This ain’t just about what you owe me. This

ain't just about life and death. This is about inheritance, boy. Do you understand the value of inheritance? You are a lawyer. You should."

"Why do you care so much about *my* inheritance?" Sam asked, his throat throbbing.

He put the gun against the bottom of his own head. His grin grew even wider. "Let's settle this right now. New game. Russian Roulette. Six shots. Double or nothing. I win, I get your inheritance, like old Set when he killed Osiris. You win, you get something more than just double your debt returned. You get to be Horus. You get to reclaim your inheritance."

"Why would you risk your life just to fuck with me like this?"

"I am not fucking with you, Sammy. I'm a gambler. I gamble. I'm gonna lose one day no matter what, and I've accepted that. That's just the nature of the beast. Gambling giveth, gambling taketh away. Today, it looked like it was coming to collect from you, but you were given another chance. You're a gambler, boy. Don't spit in Lady Luck's face. Keep it spinning. Take what's yours."

"That's ridiculous, Jack. I'm done," said Sam. "I'm going to my cabin. Come get me when we get back to Memphis." Jack Scratch grabbed him by the shoulder.

"You can't just be done. Your wife and mistress hate you and your uncle's dead. Hell, you pawned off all of his shit. You've got nothing to go back to. Lady Luck is here with us tonight. Play, Sammy. Win." Jack Scratch's gaze penetrated Sam's eyes and sunk deep into his mind. Jack Scratch put the gun in his hand and Sam ran his hand across the "Kraut Killer" engraving. He thought about the bottles. He pictured himself, his uncle behind him, shooting the bottles, missing again and again, until he finally hit one, one that had Jack Scratch's toothy grin plastered across it. He smiled. He didn't know why.

"Fine," said Sam. "Take your turn first."

Jack Scratch took the gun out of Sam's hand and pressed it hard against his chin, his grin growing wider as he put his finger on the trigger. One of Jack Scratch's men tried to say something, but Jack Scratch waved his hand and pulled the trigger, and the gun clicked. He handed the gun to Sam.

Sam gently put the gun against his chin. Beads of sweat ran down his face and damped the stubble around his mouth. He licked his lips and tasted the salt of his perspiration. He pulled the trigger. As the gun clicked, urine began to run down his leg. Jack Scratch laughed.

"It's gonna be okay, boy. This is gambling, after all." Jack Scratch took the gun. Another click. All of the patrons of Jack Scratch's riverboat casino were circled around the two men playing a game for their life.

Sam once again took the gun, and the gun once again clicked. He felt simultaneous relief and tension with each shot. There were only two shots left.

Jack Scratch took the gun. He was beginning to sweat but his smile remained. He pressed the gun hard against his temple. He put his free hand, his right hand, on the back of Sam's neck and pressed his head to his own forehead. "This decides it, Sam," he said. Sam gulped heavily as Jack Scratch pulled the trigger.

Another click.

Jack Scratch laughed wildly. Sam felt faint. The wetness of the sweat and urine that covered his body was becoming heavy. He sat down on the blackjack table. Jack Scratch put the gun into his hand.

"Looks like Set won out in the end after all," said Jack Scratch. Sam looked at the gun in his hand. Jack Scratch's men were beginning to draw closer with their own guns drawn to enforce the rules of the game. Jack Scratch's teeth gleamed in the lights of the casino while his

patrons began to congratulate him, not taking their eyes off of Sam, the living corpse sitting in the chair. He felt the "Kraut Killer" engravement one more time, his mind slipping, the bottles lining up in front of him. He thought about Nephilia's gentle kiss. The tiny moving body from within her rang through his head, pounded on his temples, shook his body. What would that child inherit? What part of Sam would the child reflect?

He looked at the painting of Queen Big Mama, whose face had seemed to change from sternness to concern. *Should I?* he thought, a silent prayer to Big Mama. Big Mama nodded.

He pointed the gun at Jack Scratch and pulled the trigger.

Blood began to drip from Jack Scratch's chest onto his suit and the casino floor. Jack Scratch's men moved to grab Sam while he still pointed the gun at Jack Scratch, his hand shaking in realization of what he had just done. The men began pulling Sam away but he pulled back, wanting to see how Jack scratch would end. The blood blended in with the casino's carpeted flooring and with Jack Scratch's red suit. He fell to his knees and coughed, flecks of blood shooting from his mouth and into the redness of the carpet below him. He rubbed his hand into the blood. The glow of his eyes began to fade. All of the staff was in shock, frozen in the moment of the gunshot, except for Brenda, who was holding back a smile and tears. Jack Scratch looked up once more at Sam, cocked his head, and smiled. He fell, his smiling face hitting the ground with a meaty thud.

Sam looked to the painting of the Queen one more time. The King's eyes were closed, his smile faded, and Queen Big Mama smiled warmly at Sam as Jack Scratch's Anubis-costumed men carried him away towards the upper deck of the boat.

CHAPTER V

CERNUNNOS

The cold air pierced the hunter's skin even through his heavy camouflage jacket, a cool mist escaping his mouth through deliberately quieted breaths. It was unusually cold for November, especially for the muggy woods of Mississippi that cradled within them the various lakes and ponds that constituted the home of mosquitoes and snakes. The hunter shivered from both chill air and anticipation as he trudged through dead leaves and debris from trees. The brisk weather, the brown and red leaves, the abundant deer; it was his favorite time of year, and even though he had been unsuccessful in the past few days, he knew today would be the day. It was early; dawn had barely broken and the birds, chirping amongst themselves as the sleepy sun began to rise, even sounded as if they had just raised themselves from their comfortable nests. The hunter had spotted tracks when he first set out, and he took it as a sign of a good day to come. He ventured far into the woods, maybe even further than he had ever been. He figured, though, the prospect of that beautiful buck made the journey worth it, and continued his trek through the frosty air.

The woods started on his father's land and continued out for miles around. Besides an old neighbor on one side, a tiny church on the other, a virtually abandoned graveyard across the street, and a tiny, rural school a few miles down, the land was removed and isolated, the perfect place for someone who loved hunting. His father was not that person. He had bought the land on a whim, having grown tired of living in the suburbs in his retirement, and since his death the

hunter had paid the taxes on the place just for the right to hunt on it. Though, at the moment, the hunter was beginning to doubt that he was still within the limits of the property, having ventured so far into the woods. Not that he cared; if questioned, he could just say he spotted the animal on his property and took it out there, an excuse that applied both to his wife and the law. The sun was just beginning to peek out over the trees and shine daylight upon the deep woods when the hunter arrived at the peculiar hole.

He'd never seen anything like it. The entrance was probably twenty feet around, perfectly circular, and sloped, so someone or something could walk into and out of it. It was impossible to tell how deep the hole was, due to the slope and the darkness that slowly engulfed it. The hunter had a small flashlight with him, which he shone down into the hole. He squinted and bent slightly, trying to get a better look at the hole, then noticed that the tracks abruptly came to a stop at its entrance. The deer had gone into the hole, or had been taken there. He noticed the red drips around the entrance to the hole, and stumbled back. A bear? He didn't know they were out this time of year. He turned around, shivering again (for different reasons), and attempted to quietly walk away from the hole.

Behind him, a deer stood, not fleeing or attacking, just staring blankly ahead. It looked from left to right, then looked down into the hole. The hunter stood frozen in shock. The deer slowly walked with a limp around the hunter and down into the hole. The hunter stared, mouth agape, as the deer descended lower and lower until it was no longer visible. He shone his flashlight down into the hole again, but could see nothing except the hole's dark entrance and the drips of red that outlined the front of it. The hunter suddenly felt his hands grow colder, despite his gloves, and removed one, feeling around the hole with his bare hand. The hole was colder even than the frosty air that coated the woods in white highlights. He drew his hand back and

gazed at it for a moment, then reapplied the glove and pulled his hat tighter over his head. He readied his rifle, carefully taping his flashlight onto it, and took one step into the hole.

The hole was colder than he even expected. Besides the cold and the slope, which laid out as a path before him, the hole seemed rather ordinary from the inside. He aimed his flashlight at the dirt walls and saw roots of trees and vegetation protruding from it up to the ceiling. His teeth chattered from the cold and from nervous anticipation at what lay at the end of this hole, if there was an end to it. Aiming the light onto the floor, he saw that the deer tracks went deeper into the hole. He continued to follow them, quieting his breathing as he made his own tracks around those of the deer. The hole continued to go deeper and deeper, the floor still sloping lower and lower into the ground. The hunter, growing more nervous, started to turn back. First, at a walk, then a gallop, then a full sprint. He did not make it out of the hole, however, due to a huge deer, a buck, that stood at the edge of the hole. He didn't need to approach it to know its intent. It was the largest he had ever seen, breathing heavily, angrily, at the entrance. Its breath was visible in the cold air, and it stood guard, a dragon blocking the exit from the dungeon the hunter had found himself in. He took aim with his rifle, and the titanic buck let loose a scream that pierced into the hole and echoed even in the dirt that formed the walls and ceiling. It moved its back hooves through the dirt as if about to charge, and the hunter lowered his rifle. The buck then laid its huge body down across the entrance of the hole, and the hunter snorted in frustration, and turned back to shine his flashlight once again into the inky blackness. The hunter thought of turning around and attempting to take on the huge deer that guarded his only path out, but shivered and continued his trek. Further and further into the hole, the ceiling was becoming more and more overtaken with roots and vegetation and moss.

He heard the crackling of a fire ahead, and he considered turning back, but when he turned, the monstrous deer stood less than a foot behind him, staring. Even without the light of the flashlight, the dimness of the approaching light illuminated the deer and made its fiery red eyes glow in the darkness of the hole. It breathed heavily, close enough to the hunter that its hot breath beat upon his face in an unsettling rhythm. Besides the breathing, the deer made no noise, simply nudged its snout on the hunter to keep him moving along through the hole, closer to the dim light that drew nearer and nearer. The hole's path started to open up, and the slope began to flatten.

The deer pushed the hunter into a room within the dirt hole. The room's walls were covered in mounted heads of various animals, most of which the hunter did not recognize, indescribable creatures that the hunter barely comprehended as animals. On a table sat a dead ape-like creature, its chest cavity open and its entrails spilling out. Next to that sat the body of the deer that the hunter had seen wander into the hole before he ventured into the aberration himself, still alive but barely breathing. He turned to face the deer, but in its place stood a short, bony old man with wild hair and eyes. On his head were two antlers that looked as if they had been jammed in, the area around the base of them being red and infected. The hunter aimed his rifle at the old man, who put his hands in the air in surrender, smiling the whole while.

“What the hell is going on here?”

The old man said nothing and simply scratched at the wounds around his “antlers” and continued to smile. His teeth looked like rotten corn, yellow and black, with red from bleeding gums mixed in. He walked towards the hunter with the smile still plastered across his face.

“I’ll blow your brains out, old man! Stay back.”

The old man pressed the rifle against his head. He looked up towards the hunter with fiery eyes, eyes like that of the gigantic deer.

“Do it,” he said. His voice sounded like rocks rubbing against each other, as if he hadn’t spoken in years. The hunter hesitated. The old man’s long, bony fingers ran up the length of the rifle to the trigger, and he pulled it himself. The bang echoed through the mossy cavern and a hint of smoke filled the hunter’s nostrils. The hunter turned away from the carnage, expecting to be splattered in blood and brains, but there was no red shower. Instead, he heard the sounds of the old man laughing. He looked to see the old man in front of him, perfectly intact, save for a red mark and a flattened bullet.

“Who are you?” the hunter asked.

“I’m a hunter,” said the old man, scratching at his long, wiry white hair. There were bloody splotches in his hair from the butchering of the ape. “That’s about the only people you’ll find out this far, don’t you think?” he chuckled, walking over to the table with the ape and the deer to continue his work. The hunter stood aghast, unable to speak. He watched the old man take apart the ape creature’s body bit by bit, with an amazing quickness, finally mounting the creature’s head next to the other abnormal animals that decorated the wall.

“What is your name?” the hunter finally mustered, barely able to even spit that phrase out.

The old man looked as if he were thinking long and hard about it. “Don’t really have one of those. Not for a while now.”

The hunter was about to make a break for the exit, but as he turned, he noticed that there was no exit. The room was completely sealed all around. How and when this happened, the

hunter had no idea. When he turned again to look at the old man mounting the ape's head, the old man already stood before him.

“Why don't you sit down since you came all the way down here?” he said, gesturing towards a decrepit wooden chair. The chair was so covered in moss and vegetation that it just looked like it was a part of the forest hole itself.

“No, thanks,” said the hunter. The old man took one hand and pushed the hunter into the chair.

“I noticed you admiring my trophies. You're a hunter too,” said the old man, smiling with genuine pride. The hunter said nothing. “All of this game,” said the old man, gesturing towards the wall covered in mounted monstrosities (and some regular deer, as well), “come from these woods you've found yourself in.” The hunter, still fearful, looked about the collection again, and then looked at the scrawny old man, who still smiled proudly as he tended to the injured deer that had lay on the table next to the ape.

“I've never seen any of these, uh,” the hunter paused, “*animals* in these woods before.”

“You've never been in these woods before,” the old man replied, the smile vanishing from his face.

“This was my father's land,” said the hunter, his voice cracking. “I've hunted out here all my life.”

“And you've never been this far, have you? These woods, these are *my* woods, and I do not appreciate your trespassing.” The old man's gravelly voice grew quieter. The hunter's pants became wet. “It can be very dangerous in my woods,” the old man continued, his voice growing even quieter.

“Listen, sir, I didn’t realize anyone owned these woods,” said the hunter, standing up and reaching in vain for his knife (the old man had picked it off of him when he sat him down), “If you’ll show me out I’ll just be on my way back to my land.”

“Your land?” said the old man. “I thought you said it was your father’s land.”

“My father’s dead. It’s my land now.”

“Oh, it is?” the old man said, stroking the deer, which now stood up on all four legs, seemingly healed of any injuries. The deer began to sniff around the room, and the old man gave it a handful of corn. “I don’t hunt deer,” the old man said. “They’re too easy. They’re too friendly. And they can’t put up a fight. Not like this fellow.” He gestured at the newly-mounted ape creature. “Or especially, this beauty,” he added, pointing towards another mounted creature. The creature itself was unlike anything the hunter had ever seen. It had large, almost insectoid eyes, fur, sharp teeth, a slit nose, and horns on the top of its head, barely visible through the fur. “In fact,” he said, “I’m still not quite sure how to kill this thing.” The mounted head let forth an unearthly scream. Again, the hunter wet himself.

The old man appeared in front of the hunter, still smiling his yellow, crooked smile.

“Sir, I really didn’t realize this was your land, and I—”

“I don’t want an apology.”

“What do you want from me? Money?”

“Do I look like I have a use for money?” the old man asked, picking moss from his armpits.

“What do you want?” said the hunter, his cracking voice having turned to tears.

“A hunting buddy,” said the old man. His long, bony hand ran across the hunter’s face, wiping tears from his eyes. Though the old man appeared small, his hand seemed to be the size of the hunter’s head when he was up close, touching him.

“What do you mean?” cried the hunter, his eyes red and watery and his pants wet.

“The deer, they’re nice enough, but they don’t exactly offer quality conversation.” The old man laughed. “Not that you’re really providing stimulating conversation either. Would you like something to eat?” The old man moved back to the table with the apes innards, some of which he had salted. He took an organ, which appeared to be the heart, and gave it a long whiff. “I love it raw!” he said. He took a huge bite out of it. The hunter looked on, eyes still wet. “Do you ever bite the heart of your game?” The hunter remained silent, not out of disgust but of shock. The old man ate the rest of the innards, offering some to the hunter, who shook his head.

“I’ll lay out exactly what I’d like to speak with you about and why you’re here,” said the old man. He pulled a chair to face the hunter in his seat. “When I saw you approach my woods, my first instinct was simply to make a trophy, much like those on my wall in my favorite, secret little corner.” Again, the old man gestured towards the wall, where the hunter noticed something he previously did not: a row of human heads, tucked away near other ape-like creatures like the one the old man had butchered. The hunter fidgeted in his seat, but felt like he couldn’t stand up. Some invisible force pushed him into the chair. The old man picked at the red, inflamed skin around his antlers once again, picking off a piece of it and placing it gently into his mouth, then swallowing and licking his lips. “But I think we have use of each other,” said the old man, his yellow smile piercing into the hunter. “I’ve been wanting to do some hunting outside of my woods, and your father’s land offers the perfect opportunity. Since we’re neighbors and all, why

don't I allow you to use my land, and I can use yours?" This disgusting, uneasy being that sat before him simply wanted to use his land to hunt?

"All that's on my land is deer and squirrels. You'd get bored fast," said the hunter.

"You'd be surprised what you can find if you look hard enough," said the old man. "And besides, I just want to be able to stretch my legs a bit. I've been hunting in my woods since before —" He thought a while. "Well, for a long time."

"If I let you hunt on my land, you'll let me go?"

"I'll let you go either way," the old man said, "but all I can say is that anything that wanders into my woods is my game. I won't be far behind you."

The hunter looked at the human heads that adorned his wall, mixed in with the monsters and animals as if they were nothing but that to this old man, and then again faced the ragged old figure.

"That seems reasonable," said the hunter. "You can use my land, and I'll use yours."

"Then it's a deal!" said the old man. He put a hand out for the hunter to shake, and as the hunter reached out to meet the old man's giant hand, he started to feel sleepy. "See you later, neighbor," said the old man as the hunter drifted into a deep, deep sleep.

When the hunter awoke, it was nighttime, and he lay on his front doorstep. On his lap sat a note written on a piece of bark. *I'll be hunting on your land tomorrow night. Please don't shoot at me!*

#

At first, the arrangement was fine. The hunter barely noticed the antlered old man hopping through his trees, staring down at the deer that roamed about, and catching raccoons

with his bare hands. The only thing that the hunter noticed was the creeping kudzu steadily growing from the forest, beginning to slither like tentacles around his property.

But the old man's hunts drew closer and closer to the little church, and the hunter began to worry that the old man would be spotted by the churchgoers. One day, the hunter attempted to speak with the old man, who was munching on a beaver he had just killed.

"I don't own that land," he said, gesturing towards the church. "That's a church."

"A shame. That's some prime hunting grounds."

"Well, neither of us have any right to it."

The old man stroked his wild, tangled beard, which was messy with bits of beaver. He looked over at the church. "I may have to have a conversation with the pastor of that church!"

The hunter opened his mouth to protest, but the old man laughed, assuring him it was just a joke. The old man clambered back into a tree and began hopping through the line once again.

The next Sunday, no church members attended their services. The hunter, staring out his window, frowned. He barely saw the old man, blending in with the trees that lined the back of the church, holding part of some poor animal in his hand, with another animal, a raccoon, impaled onto one of his antlers.

"I thought you said you were joking," the hunter said, approaching the old man.

"I made the pastor an offer," the old man said, chewing on some unknown meat. "It was very fair. Not the same kind of arrangement we came to," he said. "Tell you what, you can use this church land too! What's mine is yours!" The hunter said nothing, and guiltily walked back to his own house, while the old man continued to swallow chunks of meat off of what was quickly becoming just bone.

Months passed, and somehow, just as the kudzu vines had covered the house of the hunter, strangling it with their green, leafy hands, the church became overtaken by the wild that had permeated the hole which the hunter had met the old man in. The hunter began to suspect that the old man was living in the abandoned church, a prospect which did not sit easily with him. The hunter dreaded visitors, scared they would spot the old man, unnaturally skinny, with antlers, covered in grass and moss, running about the property and in and out of the church. It seemed that the old man was getting further and further from “his woods” and closer and closer to the world at large.

One day, the hunter observed the monstrous deer that had blocked his exit from the hole in pursuit of a school bus that was headed to the little rural school. The school served all grades from kindergarten all the way through twelfth, and the deer, which looked as big as a car, was certain to draw attention. The hunter went and banged on the church’s door, but was met with silence and a still door. He shivered again, that same shiver that he felt when he had first entered the hole, and ran back to his own house. His hands shook as he dialed the police. He had no idea how he was going to explain what he had witnessed and what his part had been in it. All he could think to do was to leave an anonymous tip that he saw a “suspicious character” following the school bus.

After that day, school buses didn’t come down the road. The hunter hardly saw the old man anymore. When he finally did, the old man was collecting things from the church, sacks filled with unknown contents, and throwing them onto a cart outside. It was a strange, ancient thing, with barely functional wheels. It looked like it had been whittled by the old man’s bony hands out of the trees behind the church.

“Where’ve you been?” asked the hunter, feigning friendliness.

“I’ve acquired some other properties. I’m a regular real estate mogul now.” He stifled a giggle.

“What do you mean by that? How could you possibly need more hunting grounds than you have now?”

“Son,” said the old man, staring intensely, almost angrily at the hunter, “the whole world’s a hunting ground.” The hunter looked gloomily at the ground. He did not know exactly what this old man was, or what he was doing, but he knew whatever it was, it was his own fault.

“The deal is off,” the hunter said. “You can’t use my land anymore.”

“You know my deal. The minute you set foot on my land, which you are currently on, you’re not worth more to me than a raccoon.”

“I’m well aware.”

The old man, who had been at once both shorter and taller than the hunter, now only appeared taller. He lurched over the hunter, his eyes red. The hunter thought they may have even been bleeding. He said nothing. The old man said nothing. They stared at each other. The old man shrank back down to his usual posture.

“Well,” he said, shrugging, “it’s not as if I need it anymore anyway. I’m on to bigger game at this point.” He loaded up the bags, which were dripping with various liquids, red and green and blue, onto the cart. “I’m moving out to one of my newer properties. I probably won’t be ’round much anymore.”

“That’s probably for the better,” the hunter said, staring blankly at the hunched, antlered figure before him. The old man frowned, and for a moment, the hunter felt a tinge of sadness emanate from the antlered man, a feeling he did not know the wild man was capable of.

The old man opened back up the door of the church, covered in vines. “Well, I’ve got a few more things to take care of. Maybe I’ll see you around again.”

“Maybe,” said the hunter.

The hunter made his way back to his own house. He locked and bolted the door and put a handgun by his side. He looked out the blinds, expecting the worst, but the only thing he saw was the enormous, red eyed deer, attached to the old man’s cart, jogging sadly down the road. As he left, the kudzu withered from the hunter’s house, falling dead onto the ground below.

CHAPTER VI
SONS OF GOD, DAUGHTERS OF MEN

“The fallen ones were in the earth in those days, and even afterwards when sons of God come in unto daughters of men, and they have borne to them...” - Genesis 6:4

At first, Brother Eli Doublefield thought that the swath of unmarried, young pregnant women within his beloved community of Jaybird, Mississippi was simply the work of immoral youth falling prey to the sins of the flesh. It was, as he always said in his sermons, “the sign of the times.” The country, even in the Bible Belt, was going to Hell in a handbasket, and all the older folk could do was sit back, watch it burn, and wait for that triumphant day of the Rapture to arrive and take all the good and decent folk to the Land of Glory. Brother Eli had no doubt that he would be among the souls who Jesus would carry there to lay in Abraham’s bosom, while the wicked men begged for a sip of water from his tongue, burning in Hell like in the story of Lazaraus and the rich man. So, too, would all these vile young women burn for engaging in their promiscuity, their fornication, all carried before the eyes of the Lord. So, too, would his own wife, who ran off with the youth minister, off to Nashville, or Chattanooga, or wherever. He couldn’t be bothered to remember the actions of a whore.

This was until his own daughter, just seventeen, woke up with a swollen belly herself. She looked to be quite pregnant. Brother Eli was shocked at how well she’d been able to hide it. He’d thought she’d been gained a little weight, maybe from being at home all summer, but he

never suspected this. Had she really been with child this whole time? He'd been busy, someone in the church was always needing him, and maybe he'd not been paying enough attention. Of course, a pastor's duty is to his congregation first, everything else second; but still, perhaps a little more attention should've been given to the girl.

He gently placed his hand on Esther's belly, moving it up and down that wretched bump, cursing that it was real, trying to wake up from a nightmare that he knew he wouldn't. She was standing straight up, her face red and her eyes closed tight with tiny pools forming around the wrinkles. His gentle hand left her body and struck her face with force to knock her down onto the bed.

"Girl, who has done this to you?" he shouted, grasping the girl's chin in his hand and yanking her face close to his. Spittle flew from his lips to her nose.

"I don't know, Daddy," she cried. "I woke up sick one morning, but I thought it was just a stomach flu."

Brother Eli struck her again with greater force. She was silent, her mouth closed but tears sliding down her face. He frowned. He couldn't get a read on the girl. When she'd been younger, when her mother had still been around, things were simpler. She would raise the girl to be a lady, and Brother Eli would provide, as was a man's station. She'd always been a quiet girl and she never did cause any problems. She didn't have many friends, and the ones she had were all girls who attended Brother Eli's congregation, part of the flock he tended. But she did go to the public school, because they couldn't afford the private, and there were dirty little boys and succubi that could've crept into her mind and removed Brother Eli's influence. Sons of drunks, daughters of whores, children of the fallen world from which he couldn't afford to keep her.

Over the past few months, Brother Eli had noticed Esther getting friendly with Bobby Crab, a delinquent boy whose father was a town disgrace who spent his days downing beers and sitting in filth in a trailer park. Bobby was named after his father, and if Brother Eli's suspicions were correct, the genes at work were powerful. How had his daughter, daughter of a pastor, a spiritual leader, begun fraternizing with such a degenerate? Such were the times, he decided, and sighed.

"I'll bet it was that Crab boy you're always hangin' around with, wasn't it, you little whore?"

"Daddy, Bobby Crab and I ain't been seeing each other in months!" she cried.

He hadn't seen much of the boy, but he hadn't paid much attention to the comings and goings of his daughter lately, either. He was a busy man, a leader of the community. More people than just this girl relied on him, and he couldn't be bothered to keep up with every single move the girl made.

"Likely story," he grunted. "You're going to be just like your whore of a mother. Where did I go wrong?" He stormed out of the room.

Where did the little girl who drew pictures of angels taking her up to heaven go? Did her mother take her, too? Replaced her with this harlot? He remembered Esther telling him about the angels. She loved drawing them as a child and would doodle all over the sides of the church bulletin with winged cherubs and halos. Brother Eli, of course, told her that's not really what they looked like. There was a reason they said "be not afraid" every time they appeared. But Esther claimed they liked to look like little winged babies because that's just so much prettier. Brother Eli figured there's no reason to accuse a little kid of sacrilege, and she grew out of it, anyway.

He put on a suit jacket over his maroon polo shirt, making sure his old New Testament Bible was tucked safely in the right pocket, then slammed the door to his house shut, leaving Esther locked inside.

“I oughta kill that Crab boy. Someone oughta have done something about him and his drunk daddy years ago,” he muttered to himself as he turned the ignition in his old Ford truck. After a few sputters, the engine hummed, and Brother Eli darted down Timber Road towards the Country Haven trailer park. He approached his church, which seemed to divide the town between saints and sinners, lambs and goats. Just before the church were the little houses where the churchgoers lived, the school where they sent their kids, the stores they owned, the park they lounged. After passing the church, there were the bars, the jail, the sleazy old drive-in theater, poorly maintained houses with rusty silos and broken fences. But even that was better than the trailer park. The dregs, the failures, lived there. They lived in rows, scrunched together like cockroaches. Barefoot women would stand on their porches, tossing out old scraps to packs of stray dogs that kept the property values nice and low and the disgusting denizens of the trailer park comfortably housed. It made Brother Eli sick that a significant portion of his own congregation lived here, among the filth. He took some solace that by coming to him they had taken at least one step to rise above their station and find salvation. As he pulled into the gate, he noticed several pregnant teenage girls staring at him with swollen bellies. Roy Rider’s girl, Jack Merritt’s girl, Billy Watson’s girl. The girls’ eyes seemed to glow in the soft illumination of his headlights. He inwardly wretched and averted his eyes, focusing squarely on trailer number 209, which belonged to Rob Crab and his son. On the porch, Rob sat nursing a Miller High Life and a pack of cigarettes.

“What you want, Preacher Man?” said Rob, taking another swig from his beer can, which he nestled in a paper bag upon seeing Brother Eli approaching his driveway. Brother Eli resisted the urge to strike Rob Crab across his jaw. Feigning calmness, he sat down next to Rob Crab and removed his glasses, placing them in the breast pocket of his suit jacket.

“You know your boy’s been hangin’ around my daughter for quite some time now,” said Brother Eli, putting a hand on his shoulder. “Well, I found out some disturbing information about my daughter’s personal life this morning, and I believe your boy to be the culprit.”

Rob Crab tilted his head. He put one hand on his bird’s nest of a beard, then wiped some snuff spittle from the sides of his lips.

“Preacher Man, my boy ain’t been hangin’ round with your girl for some time now. He’s been drivin’ bouts with Jadan Kelly.”

“Jadan? Duane’s girl?”

“Yeah, I don’t know nothin’ ’bout her though. The boy barely says two words to me.” He took another long swig of the beer then crushed the bag and the can into a flat circle, tossing it behind him into a bush that was decorated with flat beer can ornaments.

“Is your boy at home? Can I talk to him?” asked Brother Eli

“I don’t think he’s likely to talk to any Preacher Man. Besides, he ain’t here. He’s working down at the Bop’s. I suppose he’d take any excuse to take a break from that hellhole.”

“I may go visit him, then.”

“You ain’t still accusin’ my boy of knocking up your girl, are you?”

Brother Eli cringed at his choice of phrase. “I just got some questions, that’s all.”

Rob Crab smirked. His cigarette had gone out, and he reached for another in the pack which sat in his breast pocket. “Well, it could really be any boy in this town.”

“What did you say, Crab?”

“All I’m sayin’ is, you know what they say about preachers’ daughters.”

Brother Eli gave Rob Crab a sharp jab in the nose, and Rob Crab’s cigarette fell, half-lit, onto his jeans, causing him to quickly smack at his crotch to put out the smoke.

“That ain’t very Christlike of you, Preacher Man,” said Rob, laughing.

“Matthew 21. Ain’t Jesus even kept his cool all the time.”

“Think you should be more concerned with Second Peter chapter two,” Rob Crab said, wiping a drop of blood, a bit of snot, and flakes of tobacco from his face with a black-stained rag he kept in his pocket. He was smiling, a disgusting black smile. What little teeth Rob Crab had were stained brown and yellow from chewing tobacco. Brother Eli spit on the ground next to Rob Crab’s feet and clambered into his truck.

“Keep God’s word out of your nasty mouth,” he said, starting his truck up. It sputtered a few times, kicking smoke into Rob Crab’s face as he stood up from the ground. Rob Crab coughed, but the cough turned into a laugh, and Brother Eli wretched in disgust. As he drove away, Rob Crab waved, still laughing and coughing. Brother Eli gritted his teeth.

He fully intended of going to Bop’s and confronting that bastard Crab boy while he was on the clock, but as he made the turn out of the trailer park, his phone, pressed underneath his New Testament, began to vibrate. He ignored it, but after a moment, the vibration began again. With a gasp of frustration, Brother Eli looked at the screen. The caller was Sheriff O’Hara.

He answered the phone with shaking hands. “Brother Elijah Doublefield speaking, Sheriff. How can I help you?”

“Eli, we got some boys here who want to talk to you,” said the sheriff.

“What seems to be the problem with these boys, Sheriff?”

“Well, frankly, Brother, I’m not quite sure,” said the sheriff after a pause. “All I can get out of them is that they’ve seen something that’s spooked ’em bad and they wanna talk to you.”

Eli rolled his eyes as he turned his car in the direction of the sheriff’s office. “I will arrive shortly,” he said. “I’m just finishing up some business with the local AA chapter.”

Brother Eli drove past the church and the town hall back into the livable part of Jaybird. He passed the little gray-brick cheesecake store that Barbara Rascoe owned. She and her husband—Don? Dan?—stood outside and tried to flag Brother Eli down. They loved to talk. He didn’t have time for that. Perhaps that wasn’t very pastorly of him, but there were more pressing matters at hand, reputational matters that concerned the whole community, so he pretended not to see them.

By the time he walked through the glass doors and past the secretary in Sheriff O’Hara’s office, Brother Eli’s patience was long gone. The sheriff sat behind a desk, his large frame bulging out from the sides of his chair, with two teenage boys sitting on the other side with drained, terrified expressions plastering their young faces. The sheriff himself looked a bit worried, and Brother Eli knew this was because the sheriff, despite his title and occupation, was not a people person. Sheriff O’Hara led a no-talk, all-action lifestyle, and Brother Eli had some level of appreciation for it. It did make situations like this, however, annoying, as often the sheriff lacked the vocabulary to console victims of theft or whatever other small crime happened around Jaybird.

“Brother Eli!” said the sheriff, hoisting his large bulk up from the small office chair behind his chair. “I’m glad you’re here.” He grabbed Brother Eli’s hand and shook vigorously. Eli could feel the sheriff’s sweaty palms and grimaced, making little effort to hide his discomfort.

“What’s going on, Sheriff?”

“Well, Brother, this is Calvin,” he said, gesturing to the skinnier of the two boys, “and this is Charles.” He gestured to the other, heavier-set boy. Both wore camouflage shirts with matching hats and tan cargo pants. Calvin had a bit of stubble that aged him, but Charles’s chubbier face made him appear younger. Calvin and Charles didn’t attend church on their own volition. Whenever they came, Brother Eli noticed they were being dragged in by their camo jackets by their mothers. During service, they would often whisper and snicker to each other, distracting Brother Eli from delivering whatever message the Lord had put upon his heart that Sunday.

“Calvin, Charles, my brothers, what can I do for you?”

Charles was silent. His eyes were dark, and circles formed around his eyelids, little dark caves sinking into his head. Calvin looked at Brother Eli. He, too, had a haunted look, though somewhat less obvious than that of the younger Charles. Brother Eli could feel the boy’s gaze trying to read him, to understand him, before addressing him.

“We wanted to talk to a preacher,” Calvin finally said. “We’re not sure who else to turn to. We saw—*somethin’* while we were fishin’ out on the river.”

“Well, boys, can you describe what you saw?”

Charles began to weep. Calvin stared harshly at Brother Eli.

“If I tell you, you will not believe us,” Calvin said.

Brother Eli cocked his head. He was still annoyed and impatient, but the strange, haunted look of these boys made him curious. They satisfied a strange interest in him that he’d not felt since seminary.

“Well, boys, the Bible does say that with God all things are possible, so don’t put it past me.”

“God didn’t have nothing to do with what we saw,” Calvin said, still staring at the preacher.

“Well, God has something to do with everything, by my estimation.”

“Whatever we saw was something He hates. Or maybe He doesn’t even know about it.”

“God knows everything, Calvin.”

“If He knows about this, He hates it. He hates it,” Calvin said

“God doesn’t hate except for sin.”

“Maybe these things were sin,” said Charles, finally speaking. His face, despite being round, chubby, and youthful, seemed hollow.

Brother Eli frowned. “Boys, if this is some sort of joke, you’re really wasting the sheriff’s and my time.”

“This ain’t no joke, Brother Eli. This is as far from a joke as you can get.”

“Well, then, boy, tell us what happened.”

Calvin finally averted his stare from the preacher. He looked at the sheriff, who was chugging some coffee. the sheriff saw him staring and nodded. Then he looked at Charles.

Charles wiped a few tears from his cheeks and nodded.

Calvin rubbed his chin, scratching the few, thin hairs that covered his pubescent face. He looked at the clock.

“We were out there, like I said, on the river fishing. It was just before sunset. You know my sister, Christy? She dropped us off. We’d both just gotten out of school, and we knew we weren’t supposed to be out there, but we didn’t care.”

He got up and began to pace the room, toying with the Dukes of Hazzard car that sat on the sheriff's desk. "Charles and I, we don't smoke nothing or drink nothing. We try not to get into any of that. I had a beer once with my dad. But I wasn't drinking nothing. I promise I wasn't."

"I believe you, boy. Go on," said Brother Eli, shooting a glance at the sheriff, who had sat back down behind his desk.

"Now Charles saw some blue lights reflectin' off'a the water, and we thought it was cops. We don't have no fishin' license, so we started to panic," said Calvin, now standing between the sheriff's desk and Brother Eli. Charles was beginning to cry again.

"I was gettin' our excuses ready, and Charles was gathering up all our stuff, when we looked up. It wasn't no cop car. It wasn't anything I'd ever seen before."

"What do you mean?" asked the sheriff, setting down his coffee mug.

"It was just light. But it was physical. Like a sphere of light."

"A sphere of light," the sheriff repeated, a somewhat sarcastic note in his voice.

"Yessir. And then these—" He paused. "These things came out of it. I don't know what they were." He started crying. "I don't know what they were, but they had so many eyes, Brother, so many eyes. I could feel them looking at us, and it felt like they hated us."

Brother Eli glanced towards the sheriff to assess how seriously he was taking these boys. the sheriff was mixing creamer into his coffee.

"And they had my sister. She was in the middle of one of the things. Like, she was in its body. And she was screaming. She was so scared, Brother. I shouted for them to stop, I threw rocks and my rods and everything at them, but they just stood there, hurting her and watching us." He was beginning to become hard to understand through his sobs.

“Finally, they melted back into that physical light, and they just—disappeared. With Christy. No sound. Nothing.”

The sheriff put a hand on Calvin’s shoulder and forced Charles to stand up with his large arm.

“Are you sure you boys didn’t just fall asleep out there by that river?”

“How could we have had the same nightmare?” Calvin protested.

“Charles ain’t said shit. Excuse my language, Brother Eli,” said the sheriff. Brother Eli nodded.

“I swear to you, what Calvin saw, I saw.”

“I think you boys have been smoking on the funny lettuce,” said the sheriff.

Sheriff O’Hara was always saying kids were smoking on the funny lettuce. Brother Eli, in fact, found it annoying, even if there was some truth to it. Any strange goings-on could be explained through the funny lettuce. The girls in town all getting pregnant at once without a single boy stepping forward? Well, they’re on the funny lettuce, the sheriff would say. His own boy growing aloof and distant? Must be the funny lettuce. That’s why it was so hard for the Sherriff to deal with his boy engaging in the sin of homosexuality. When the sheriff found out about it, he came to Eli, whose advice, of course, was to kick him out. Cut him off. It might be hard at first, but it’s for the boy’s soul, after all. The sheriff was reluctant, though he did come around and eventually follow Eli’s advice.

“We don’t touch it, Sheriff, you gotta believe us,” said Calvin, now grasping the sheriff’s shoulder. He turned to Brother Eli. “You have faith, don’t you? Don’t you think that there’s something that we can’t explain?”

“Well, the Bible does say there are many things we can’t explain,” said Brother Eli. He had been partially entertained by the boys’ story, but his patience was once again at his limit. His mind wandered back to his daughter at home, with a child in her belly and sin in her heart. He wanted to leave the sheriff and these two kids with what he was about to diagnose as an overactive imagination.

“And you believe in those things, Pastor?” Charles asked, looking up from under a Ducks Unlimited cap.

Brother Eli’s teeth gritted and fists balled up. “What you mean by that, boy?”

“I just mean—” Charles started. Calvin put a hand on his shoulder, interrupting him.

“You don’t believe us?” said Calvin, his voice shaky.

Brother Eli felt his muscles loosen. He composed himself. *It’s just stupid kids. They don’t know nothing*, he thought. “I believe that you believe you saw something, and I believe that maybe you did, but maybe you didn’t see what you think you saw.”

Calvin scowled. The dark circles around his eyelids darkened even more, turning his eyes into feelingless, inhuman pits. He looked at Charles, and they both sat back down.

“Sheriff, call my sister. If she’s not at home, that’ll at least back it up a little.”

The sheriff frowned, but picked up the phone on his desk and dialed Calvin’s home phone number.

“Is this Christy? This is Sheriff O’Hara. No, he’s not in trouble. I’m sure your brother will explain it to you later. Don’t worry about it, Christy. We’ll call you soon.”

Sheriff O’Hara hung up the phone and looked back at the two boys, a victorious grin on his face. Calvin put his head in his hands and bent over. Brother Eli could tell he was suppressing tears. The sheriff motioned for Brother Eli to walk out of the office with him.

“Thanks for coming down, Eli. I’m sure it was nothing, but I didn’t know what to do. They kept asking for a pastor and you’re the best one I know.”

“Seems like they think they saw an alien abduction,” said Brother Eli with a slight laugh. He was annoyed by the diversion, but amused by the boys’ ravings.

“Yeah. I think they were either exhausted or maybe had gotten some bad funny lettuce from one of their little buddies. You know how kids are in this town. I’ll have ’em drug tested.”

“It’s a damn shame. It’s all going to Hell with the younger generation,” said Brother Eli, shaking his head. “Say,” he added, “have you heard from your son lately?”

The sheriff looked down, his face turning a bit red. “I’m sure he’ll call any day now,” he said, lifting up his hat a bit to scratch at his scalp. “How’s your girl?”

Eli hid a frown under a toothy smile. “Esther’s just great. You know, she’s going to Lee University. That’s where I got my Bachelor’s.”

“Is that right? What’s she majoring in?”

Brother Eli didn’t know. “Nursing,” he said.

“A noble pursuit,” the sheriff said. “I remember her playing with my boy when they were growing up. You used to say they’d get married.”

Well, that seems even less likely now, Brother Eli thought. “They were quite the pair.”

“You remember when we took them up to Memphis? The Mid-South fair? Back when they did it up there. I think they do it in Southaven now. Haven’t kept up.”

“Of course I remember,” he lied. “What a great time of fellowship for our families.”

“That boy, I don’t know what was bothering him, but the only thing that seemed to make him happy was spending time with Esther. She was like a little ray of sunshine to him. I remember her yelling at him to ride the Zippin’ Pippin’ with her and him being too scared! He

wouldn't do it unless she held his hand the whole time and even then he was screaming like a banshee," the sheriff said, laughing. Brother Eli attempted to make himself chuckle back but all that he managed was a snort of air through his nostrils and a grunt.

The sherriff put his hat back on and gestured to the door. "You seem busy," he said. "I'll let you get back to your life."

Brother Eli stepped outside and looked across the street from the sheriff's office to see two pregnant girls he didn't recognize pointing at him. One whispered something to the other, and then they both giggled. He cocked his head and moved his eyes from one girl to the other, trying to spark any kind of recognition as to who the girls were. They didn't seem to be members of his congregation. *Well*, he thought, *that tracks*. They put their fingers down, and stopped laughing. Their smiles turned to frowns, frowns more bitter than Brother Eli had ever seen from a teenager. He shuddered.

"Excuse me, what's y'all's problem?" he yelled across the street. The two girls looked at each other and then back at Brother Eli. They were still making that strange expression.

"You Esther's daddy?" one asked. She was short, chubby, and pale. Her hair was a muted orangish-red and she wasn't wearing any shoes. Brother Eli felt nauseous seeing her bare feet.

"How do you know her?" he asked.

The two girls hesitated. They looked at each other, and one smiled, the one who hadn't spoken previously.

"We friends," she said. She was as tall and thin as the other was short and fat, and had tan skin and dark hair. She took out her cell phone from her purse and showed Brother Eli her lockscreen, which was an image of her and Esther's faces. The skinny girl reached out and

touched the other girl's pregnant stomach, who returned the favor. Brother Eli raised an eyebrow.

"Yeah, good friends!" said the fat red-headed girl.

"I'm Elizabeth," the skinny girl said. "That's Mary." She pointed at the redhead.

"I've never seen you two before," Brother Eli said, taking a step back.

"Esther said you don't like people comin' to the house," said Mary. "She said that's why you live outside of town like a hermit."

"I don't live like no hermit. I just like my space," Brother Eli said.

The girl laughed.

"Why's that funny?"

"You a preacher?" Elizabeth asked. Brother Eli hesitated a moment, then nodded.

"Preachers are supposed to be hospitable," she continued.

"Yeah, that ain't very Christlike of you," Mary said.

Brother Eli's shoulders tensed up, and he reached for the door of his truck, his eyes darting around the girls to the sheriff's office. "I can call the sheriff out here if you two are trying to cause me trouble."

"We ain't trying to cause no trouble," said Elizabeth. Mary whispered something to her, and the two giggled. "We gotta go. Tell Esther we said 'hey.'"

"I don't think I want her hangin' around girls like you."

Both girls erupted into a fit of laughter, with Elizabeth putting her hand on Mary's shoulder to support herself. Brother Eli was shaking. He didn't know whether it was fear or rage or something else, but he wanted to get away from these girls.

“Well, we’ll see her soon, anyway. See ya later, ‘Brother!’” Mary said with a snort. The two ran back across the street and into a building.

Brother Eli wanted to interrogate them, to find out who had put their seed in them, and to know if it was the same sinner who’d done it to his own daughter, but he felt such a sense of relief when they closed the door behind them that he just leaned against his truck and exhaled. He made note of the building, a small law office, and quickly took out a pen to jot down the phone number. If it was one of the girls’ parents’ offices, he would have to let them know with what disrespect his daughter had treated him. Brother Eli shook his head and headed back towards the cheesecake store and the church, then past the bars and the bail bond offices and the jail, to Bop’s.

Bop’s was a local place, with no other locations besides Jaybird. The ground around each of the parking spots was greasy and slick, and half of the speakers on the boxes were broken. The place was always packed, however, and was a staple for the teenagers of the town. *Half those pregnancies probably began here*, Brother Eli thought as he slung his truck into a parking spot close to the building that housed the kitchen. Bobby Crab was carrying an order out to a customer, a dejected frown on his face and bags under his eyes. He had a bruise below one of his eyes and some bandages across his arms. Brother Eli leapt from his truck and strode towards the boy, grabbing for his collar.

“Boy, what have you done?”

“What are you talking about, Pastor?” Bobby looked terrified.

“You know *exactly* what I’m talking about. What did you do to my daughter?”

“What?”

“Esther, smart boy!” He smacked the boy on the forehead with his free hand. People in

other cars were beginning to look. Brother Eli noticed many of them were members of his congregation. He smiled at them, and let go of the boy's collar, dusting him off. His voice dropped to a whisper. "Esther Doublefield! Your girlfriend!"

"I ain't been seeing Esther in months."

Brother Eli cocked his head. The boy's forehead was sweaty and greasy, and his face full of pimples that surrounded the bruises and a black eye.

"You better not be lying to me, boy."

"I ain't lying. What happened to her?"

"She's pregnant."

"Goddamn. My new girl's pregnant. I've been trying to find the bastard who did it."

Brother Eli cocked an eyebrow. "Don't take the Lord's name in vain. But what you mean, boy?"

"Well, she started getting big. Then I started feeling kicks comin' from that belly."

A large, red, sweaty man emerged from the kitchen. He was carrying a towel, wiping sweat from his forehead. "What the hell is going on out here? That boy is working!"

"I'm just asking Bobby some questions, Bop. Some personal questions."

Bop blushed. "Oh, Brother Eli, I didn't realize that was you. You came into the parking lot like a bat out of—" He stopped himself. "Is everything okay?"

"I reckon. Ain't been seeing you on Sunday lately."

Bop laced the towel on his hip and ran his hand over his bald head. His reddish face grew redder. "Well, I've been workin' here most Sunday mornings. Takes a lot to keep this place going."

“Is running your business more important than congregating with your Christian brothers?”

“Well, no. I’m sorry.” Bop’s eyes darted back to the kitchen. “I’ll let you two get back to it.” He began to walk away but Brother Eli waved his hand.

“No, no, I’m done, we were just talking over some things.” Inexplicably, even to himself, Brother Eli believed the boy. Bobby looked weary and harassed. A small, but significant part of the boy had been broken by his father’s hands and belt and words, and by his mother’s absence, and by whatever else was going on in that immoral den of a trailer park. This boy didn’t impregnate anyone, and might not ever. Brother Eli even felt a twinge of sympathy for the son of the drunk.

As he was driving home, Brother Eli formed a plan. He would take Esther across state lines, into Tennessee, far away from the little, talkative community of Jaybird, and take her to a clinic there. There was a certain responsibility and respectability he held within the community, and it was neither fair nor good for the community and his church if his daughter were to wreck that reputation. The church and the community of Jaybird itself couldn’t handle that, and if they needn’t know, why burden them with the knowledge? Only Rob Crab and his son and maybe those weird girls who claimed to be her friends knew so far, and he didn’t know much, and no one would believe a drunk, his son, or a couple of promiscuous teenagers over Brother Eli, anyway.

When he pulled into his long, gravel driveway, it was after nightfall, and soft light was radiating from his daughter’s bedroom. It was the only spot of light illuminating from the darkness around his house and land. He lived a bit outside of town, and liked to keep his physical distance from the congregation he pastored outside of the church. While his anger at his daughter

had subsided over the day, seeing the light from the bedroom reignited his righteous fury, and his hands quivered as he removed the keys from his truck. Tomorrow, whether she liked it or not, they would be going to a clinic to have this thing taken care of, and never speak of it again, and she wouldn't be allowed out of his sight.

He opened the front door to his house expecting to hear music or the television from his daughter's room, but it was unnaturally quiet. Even outside, the usual buzz and hum of the streetlights and the woods surrounding the house were silent, and Brother Eli felt a slight chill inside of his body. Fall in Jaybird was always warm, and even so, it was unusually warm, but the house felt frigid. He wondered if Esther had turned on the air conditioner, but doubted it immediately. She was cold-natured, something he found irritating during the summer when he liked to keep the house cool and she complained of feeling like she was "freezing." He looked back outside into the woods and squinted, trying to see beyond them to something at which he couldn't even guess. Turning back towards Esther's room and seeing the light leaking out from under the closed door, though, set him back on his path of indignation towards her. She would cry, she would cry for days and weeks, but ultimately the punishment he would bestow upon her would be worth it, and one day, she would thank him for it. As the Bible says, he thought, "He who spares the rod hates his son, but he who loves him disciplines him diligently." Brother Eli figured it must apply to girls, too. Maybe even more so.

Opening the door to his daughter's room without knocking, he inhaled deeply in preparation of a sermon he had prepared in his head on the drive over, but was taken aback by what he saw.

His daughter lay still as if she were in sleep, but her eyes were wide open, and milky white. Above her, a white, man-shaped light hovered, similarly still, but staring deeply into her

eyes. Upon hearing the door open as the preacher make his presence known, however, the light-form suddenly turned its head and stared at the preacher before floating into an upright position.

As it stood in the air, its form began to change. Its body turned into wheels, and within those wheels were more wheels, all covered in unblinking, staring, bloodshot eyes. The wheels approached the preacher without veering in any direction. All of the eyes were fixed on Brother Eli, and all were unblinking. Eli could tell, though, that this creature was not mechanical in nature, as its wheels appeared to be composed of some form of flesh, and its eyes were damp with what seemed to be mucus and blood. After staring for a long time, it finally blinked all four of its moist eyes, and from within the four wheels the form of another eye appeared, this one less sickly and moist than the others, but strangely glowing itself.

Brother Eli remembered Ezeikiel, who saw angels by the river of Chebar. A strange sense of relief came over him upon realizing that his daughter wasn't a whore, she was the instrument of angels! Of God Himself! Perhaps, even, this was his reward for his years of service to God, years of service that seemed to have been all in vain when he found out his daughter was pregnant. On the other hand, the only angels Brother Eli knew of that had taken the daughters of men were fallen ones. Still, better that than her fornicating with some degenerate town boy. At least in this case she was being manipulated by principalities outside of her control and not a nasty little boy. The relief faded somewhat upon seeing his daughter behind the creature with a smile on her face.

Her eyes had returned to their normal state, and she held one hand on her pregnant belly. It seemed now that the child within her had aged from just a few months to full term, and she looked ready to give birth at any moment. The wheels with the eyes looked from Brother Eli and then back at his daughter, and made some noise that could be interpreted as a language, but in no

tongue that Brother Eli had ever heard. Esther replied in the same language, and the creature slowly floated past Brother Eli outside the door that he had left open, knocking him off of his feet in the process. Esther looked at her father, giggled, and took his hand.

“Don’t be scared,” she said. Her voice sounded different than he remembered it. It was older. It reminded him of Esther’s mother. “He is the father of the child that is within me now, and he is kind.”

“Esther,” Brother Eli started, but couldn’t find any words to say.

“He told me many secrets, Daddy,” she said, “things about life and about the world and about people that I could’ve never known in my whole life. I’ve decided I’m going to go with him. After all,” she pressed her hand to her belly, “it wouldn’t be right or fair for this poor baby to be born a bastard, would it?”

Brother Eli made an effort to grab Esther’s wrist. She felt strangely soft, softer than she had ever felt, as he gripped her tightly. “I forbid this,” he said. “You’re my daughter!”

“He said you’d say that, and, well, I agreed with him,” she said, bringing her wrist with her father’s hand up to her mouth and gently kissing his hand. “He’ll be a good husband. In fact, he’s much nicer to me than you’ve ever been.”

“What even *is* he?” Eli said, searching his mind to rationalize what he was beholding, what he was losing.

She laughed, and kissed his hand again, before jerking her wrist out of his grip harshly and with inhuman strength. As she did, her nail caught onto Brother Eli’s skin, tearing into it. Brother Eli felt his hand begin to bleed, and he put his other palm over the wound his daughter had just made. He saw her eyes glow the same soft light that the thing that hovered above her

bed had glowed. As she stepped over him, Brother Eli felt his hand dripping warm blood onto the carpet below him. He winced at the sight, placing one hand on top of the other's wound.

Brother Eli followed Esther outside, where the sky was now lit with hundreds of wheels within wheels with eyes like the one that had been in his house. He felt himself scream but no noise left his mouth, his jaw falling limp and dangling as he tried to muster the strength to say something, to say anything. Even at the funerals of men who he knew were rotting in Hell, Brother Eli could find words to say, something to offer some kind of comfort to the grieving family of the dead sinner. Not here. He could find no words for this.

Inside each of the wheels, he saw the daughters of his churchgoers and of people in Jaybird. All of the young women were beaming with smiles that gave off light from the inside of the wheels. The girls laughed and danced in the wheels, taking no notice of Brother Eli quivering on the ground below, until he saw Mary and Elizabeth, each in their own wheel, staring down at him and cackling. Esther looked back at her father, her eyes glowing, and smiled, her mouth now glowing with a light coming from within her as the other girls.

"It's a wedding ceremony. For all of us," Esther said, and reached out towards the creature which had been inside the house. She stepped into its body, and her smile lit the creature from the inside. They floated into the air, joining the mass of girls inside things that floated above the preacher's yard.

Brother Eli shouted and screamed words even he didn't understand. Hot tears ran down his face and the wound on his hand still dripped blood onto the ground. The light from the girls' smiles and eyes reflected off of the blood as it pooled up around his feet, shining a ruby-red into the night that became collectivized into the lights of the creatures above him.

A form began to take shape that was different from all the others in the center of all the wheels. It had four faces, one somewhat human with its skin pulled tightly over its skull. The other three, which were spinning slowly around the human face on its left and right sides, were animalistic, but like no animals Brother Eli had ever seen. The heads looked around at the wheels around it, and the human face began to utter what Brother Eli assumed was a cackle, but it was so unearthly and unlike anything he had ever heard that it defied classification.

As the four-winged, four-faced creature laughed, the other, wheel-like creatures began to fade, as did the girls inside of them. The four-winged creature looked down at the preacher, and the humanlike face smiled.

It was a gratuitous one that Brother Eli recognized from members of his congregation whenever he gave them advice, like the sheriff's smile when he told him what to do about his sinful boy, or Jean Abernathy's, when he told her that there was a reason for everything, so God must have a plan for her husband's cancer. Once again, the creature uttered forth the cackling noise, this time from all four heads, as the three heads began to multiply until there were seven. The only one that remained the same was the head in the center, now more skeletal and gaunt with two rows of teeth on each jaw.

Brother Eli's terror blossomed once more, and from his knees his body went limp and fell onto the ground. The creature slowly faded away, again like a projection, until the night sky was black and starless with only a light and hazy fog lifting through the air.

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