

SUSTENANCE

A Novel-in-Progress

by

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Sustenance

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(Abstract)

Sustenance explores the world of brokenness in its characters and their progress toward a redefined wholeness. The narrative moves between two characters: Hannah, a 13-year old trying to make sense of her family's new dynamic after an episode of domestic violence and her father's subsequent abandonment of the family; and Joe, a gifted Kentucky architect who loses his young family in car crash just as he has gained national attention in his field and the promise of a brilliant career lies ahead of him.

Hannah's world moves in and out of Holiday, located in Tom's Creek, Alabama. It's the home place of four generations of her mother Mercy's family. Hannah's relationship with Mercy, an attentive mother and artist, deepens as Mercy struggles to understand her husband's leaving. Her mental health begins to deteriorate and its decline is exacerbated by the rhetoric preached by Havis and Clara Keeble, the pastor and pastor's wife of Higher Power Pentecostal Church, where she flees for spiritual guidance, emotional solace and help with the bills associated with the ancestral home at Holiday. The Keebles have their sights on Holiday as a place to relocate their growing congregation, which meets in a building conjoined to a rural gas station. Clara Keeble, rigidly religious, convinces Mercy she is largely responsible for her husband's abandoning the family due to her absorption with her own self-focused, artistic pursuits. Clara moves into Holiday to watch over Hannah and her incorrigible younger sister, Jolie, after Mercy's mental health deteriorates to the point where she must be hospitalized for a brief stint. After Mercy returns home, Clara shuns and works to stifle Mercy's creativity, clearing the house of any signs of artistic endeavor, and takes up a personal campaign to move Mercy, Hannah and Jolie towards her own personal view of more godly living. As the strictures of Clara religion starts to put a chokehold on any of the family's remaining identity, freedom or happiness, Jolie, Hannah's strong-willed younger sister works as a counterpoint to crack open and reveal Clara and Havis' self-serving natures.

After the funeral of his wife and daughter, Joe leaves Kentucky for Atlanta, the only place he can remember any previous happiness. After a bout of drinking to stifle the pain of his loss and unable to conceive of place to go to find solace or to receive welcome, local police find him sleeping off his drunkenness and sorrow in a vehicle in his in-law's neighborhood. He is escorted to a local Catholic food bank and homeless shelter. Here, he finds comfort in serving others, the companionship of a very large dog named Solomon, and healing in working the fields of the local Cistercian monastery. Feeling called to serve the church, Joe enrolls in a seminary in Atlanta and is ordained as a Presbyterian minister. His ministry focuses on serving the local immigrant Latino population who have sacrificially left families behind in search of affording them better opportunities and life in Georgia. As he helps them deal with their own separation and loss, Joe finds himself healing. A memory of soul's repose while fevered with the death of his wife and child, passing through the town of Tom's Creek has stayed with him since his leaving Kentucky. When the opportunity to escort Horacio, a newly arrived immigrant

from Oaxaca, Mexico with his family in Tom's Creek, Alabama arises, he jumps at the opportunity to discover what may be there waiting for him. Shortly after his arrival, his life and the lives of Hannah, Mercy and Jolie intersect.

"Not in what conquers, not in glory, but in what's fragile and what suffers
– there lies sanity. And salvation."

John Jeremiah Sullivan
from "Upon This Rock"

HANNAH

I

Into the painting on the wall: I step over the flat valley of green fields that surround Tom's Creek until, cater-corned in a field five miles from town, Holiday rises tall and friendly above me. Holiday, our two-story Victorian house, the only home I've ever known. Everything is freshly painted white, and the gingerbread trim is whole and new. Mother perches on the front step, her hair swept back in a scarf, putting the finishing touches on the porch railings. I flail my arms at her, throw my shoes off, and run to the back of the house down through the line of plums to the Chinaberry tree at the edge of the yard. I suck the air into my lungs, sweet and light without a hint of sadness. I open my eyes wide to let the light get deep behind them. From the treehouse above me, Jolie's legs dangle from our treehouse.

She looks at me and blows her gum. "What took you so long?"

"Come down!" I say.

We sing songs with the radio. We make up dance routines in the yard. We count on our fingers and toes how many days have passed that mother is whole until we run out of digits...

"Hannah? Hannah? HANNN-NNAH?"

I stood in the hallway of Holiday, lost in thought among paintings that line the wall downstairs, I hadn't noticed Clara's arrival, and even once her voice snapped me back into place, it took time to place the severe, older Pentecostal lady with thick, dark shoes and silver temples against dark brown hair. The old woman burning up the end of the hallway with my name had no place here, but she was here, nonetheless. I must have jumped.

"It's like you were in a trance," she said, advancing on me and bringing the smell of her second-hand-store clothes.

Three weeks ago, Clara Keeble was a complete stranger, a pew-warmer studying us from the third row of a church where Mother had gone searching for a God to help her as fast as He could after my father, JP Malone, up and left mother, my sister, Jolie, and me with nothing but our house, a few bruises and each other. Soon enough, we found out Clara was the wife of a fire-breathing preacher, the Reverend Havis Keeble, and before we knew it, she'd also become the move-yourself-in caretaker of me and Jolie. She'd arrived the afternoon Mother went into the hospital in Anniston. She was there, she said, to keep us whole in the Lord and to ease us into this time of transition, but her snake-like

voice, whispering around the walls of Holiday sounded like sin itself. To borrow a phrase from her husband, the preacher Havis Keeble: that woman was a blasphemous spewing disruption in my sanctuary.

“Hannah, you're up early,” she tried to coo now. “Good. Good. And since you are, I think, dear, it would prove wise to bathe before your dear mother arrives. Don't you?”

Clara grabbed at the bun of hair she tried to wear screwed to the back of her head.

“I'll go and fix breakfast, while you clean yourself up.”

She clutched at her tight bun again. By noon, it would sag from her continual need for reassurance. But Clara didn't leave right away; she opened her arms in my direction. I had the horrible notion that she might try to embrace me, sighing, the way she did with Mother or, worse, try to undress me and ready me for the bath as she would a small child. I flinched before fleeing towards the stairs, but not before catching sight of Clara's scowl. I knew she liked to keep that hidden, and by the time my hand had grasped the walnut knob of the banister, shiny from the quick palms of generations of Holidays, my mother's family, I could feel her shift behind me and knew she'd reclaimed her mask, a placid, saintly gaze.

In the bathtub, I lay in water so hot it turned my skin a hot pink. I tried not to think of Mother. I could see again the “episode” that had carried her away from us, even though Clara wouldn't mention it in front of me or Jolie, but I couldn't and wouldn't imagine Mother anywhere else but home. Home is the only place I allowed she could possibly exist. I toed the spigot and, ignoring the thought of Clara's breakfast, settled in to think on Mother. From the window by the tub, I could see the front porch below, the white paint peeling off the trim, the worn arms of the rocking chairs and a few clay pots

waiting to be filled with Mother's rose-colored impatiens.

She's sitting there on the step, her hair swept back in a scarf, putting the finishing touches on the porch railings. She looks up at me and smiles and waves. Then, I am outside, too. Jolie has climbed down from the treehouse, and we set up for badminton in the yard. When the light wanes, the smells of supper waft out the windows and lay themselves out across the grass until she calls us to table from the back porch. In the kitchen, we eat our meal of pork chops and rice, or of corn and beef, or of fish and slaw and we blast our laughs over the food laughing as we imagine our made-up dance routines catching on and becoming famous. But in reality, it's because we are – all of us - happy. Later, Mother, Jolie, and I lie in the bed on the summer porch and distinguish tree frogs from cicadas. One trills and another hums. They are the sound of the night breathing. We join our breath with theirs and drift off to a dreamless sleep, knowing that in the morning, we'll get to do it all over again.

The water had cooled so fast. Suddenly, I was shivering and despite myself, felt a pang of hunger and nudged the plug from the drain to let the water drain. I was almost dressed when I heard Jolie in the hall. Jolie is eleven, two years younger but half a head shorter than me and afflicted with meanness. At school, she follows the girls in the class right below me, the ones who like to experiment with clothes that make them appear older than they are. They are the girls the boys hit on and talk about, the girls who their eyes always scan the hallway for, hoping to glimpse them between classes. Jolie, the youngest of the clique, has her own take on style: scooped-necked blouses with sequins

or blue jeans with leather lace-ups on the sides.

Where she gets her outfits from is a mystery that Mother has never seemed to notice, but Clara has. More than once this week, she's mentioned to the air around Jolie that the Devil has many servants, fashion included. Jolie almost paid attention then. Our hair is different, too. Mine is dull blond. Jolie's is a frizzy brown that she wages a constant battle to keep presentable. It's safe to say Jolie's hair is her archenemy, her personal demon. She might have paid Clara real attention if Clara could have produce some Devil-fighting hair conditioner, but once Jolie realized the pastor's wife was sqwaking away about her leather and sequins, any possibility of that vanished.

By the time, I'd left the bathroom, Jolie, her hair tousled into a fuzzy halo, had staggered from her bedroom, half-dressed, into the hallway. We eyeballed each other as we passed in the hall, but didn't speak. She even craned her neck to make sure I didn't drop my eyes before slamming the bathroom door on our shared gaze.

Back downstairs, I was mesmerized again by the wall of paintings. From ceiling to floor, placed so tightly against each other they seemed one continuous mural, the subject was the same: Holiday and its fields. Here was Holiday in the morning light, old but shining bright and new with the promise of day; Holiday as Mother remembered it from her own childhood, her father's truck sitting in the drive; Holiday as it was in her grandmother's youth, when the surrounding fields rose high on three sides making it a world all its own; Holiday in the fall when the trees were bare and the wind blew cold from the mountains into this valley below; and, Holiday in the snow, even though we rarely got much, if any. But the one I liked best, the one from my dreams, was Holiday right after my younger sister Jolie and I were born. In it, the house glowed among June's

bright green fields and trees flushed with leaves. Orange day-lilies bloomed in a pattern that outlined the front yard, showing it as a place reserved for rest and beauty not work. The only lilac tree in town hung full of purple blossoms at the corner of the porch, and the row of white hydrangeas that lined the front made it seem the house itself was blooming. Holiday: Mother's world and all her doing here as well. If Mother's paintings survived Daddy's leaving, surely she would as well. The thought cheered me until I reached the kitchen and met Clara's back. She stood, one hand on her hip, surveying our backyard.

Bowls of cereal – a cheap no-name brand that Clara's church gave out in food baskets – had been placed on the table. A sparing bit of milk had been dribbled over them, just enough to make the cereal soggy. Beside the bowls, jelly glasses had been half-filled with a thin-looking orange juice.

“Don't forget to bless God's gift,” Clara said without turning around. She took a long slurp of her coffee, a rudeness Mother would have chided either of us for. Beyond Clara, I could see the sun exposing the back fields with morning light and almost thought better of her for being captivated, but then she spoke again.

“What happened to that floor out there?” she asked, motioning with her coffee toward the back porch. The morning light exposed every crack and cranny, dust particles, and dirt, but what had truly caught Clara's attention were splotches of dried paint, mostly shades of brown, black and purple.

I couldn't help myself. My spoon rattled against the bowl and flew out of my hand, clattering on the floor.

“It's nothing,” I almost shouted to Clara. “Nothing.”

“Heavens, child,” she laughed in her tight, mean way, “calm down. You’d think you’d seen someone murdered right there on that disgraceful back porch.”

Brown, black, purple – the color of bruises, but not blood. Though, as far as this family was concerned, their remains might as well have indicated a murder of sorts.

It had been only a month since Jolie came home with a small statue of the three wise monkeys, bought for a quarter at a yard sale: one monkey covered his eyes, one covered his ears, and one covered his mouth. Mother laughed when she saw it and told us it reminded her of us three. We had come in from town to settle into a late lunch, and Jolie had sat the figurine in the kitchen window as we ate. When we finished, Mother set our dishes into the sink, observing the monkeys as she did.

“Jolie, you are brilliant,” she said.

She laughed and wiped her hands on a dishrag.

“Come on out to the back porch, girls. Those monkeys have given me an idea for never-before seen-or- heard-of Halloween costumes.”

Halloween was months away, but we all agreed to the thought and fun of making them. Mother measured Jolie, me and herself and cut three large canvas panels from a roll she kept in the corner of the kitchen. We each took turns lying down on the canvas while Mother traced us. I volunteered to trace Mother and was halfway through when Jolie jerked the charcoal pencil out of my hand and took over.

“I’m the one that inspired all this anyway,” she said.

Mother cut out each silhouette something near our individual heights, but squat and rounded, monkey-ish. Jolie's silhouette had its hands over its mouth, which I thought

would never in a million years happen in real life. My silhouette had its hands over its ears, which works for me because Mother says “blessed are the peacemakers” and tells me that this is my appointed role in life. Mother's silhouette had its hands over its eyes, which I thought was perfect for her, because she is just too sensitive to the hard things in this world, and I would rather her not look at them anyway. When she finished, we were larger-than-life-sized primates. Mother allowed Jolie and me to paint our monkeys various shades of brown. We experimented with colors, mixing reds with purples, oranges or yellows to get our own individual shade just right. Jolie, of course, and I had gotten a little carried away and painted part of the porch floor as we mixed and painted. We took the monkeys to the clothesline to dry, and listened as the costumes, heavy with paint, made thick flapping sounds against the wind, as if a spectral housekeeper was shaking dust out of a rug.

While we waited, Jolie and I tore through boxes of cool-weather clothes put away at the back of our closets until the first frost arrived. We unpacked them until we found black or brown pants and shirts to wear under the costumes. Mother told us to wait at least three hours for our monkeys to get good and dry, but Jolie convinced her to let us bring them in after an hour and a half. The wind, blowing up occasional gusts, had nearly dried them. Mother cut out holes for eyes and for strings to secure them on as costumes. Quick as a flash at the sewing machine, she made us each a tail, which we pinned onto the belt loop at the back of our pants. We all cut quite the figures, running through the house squawking and bouncing about in grand monkey fashion. Jolie and I danced around each other, swinging the ends of our tails like billy clubs, hitting each other sideways with them. On the back porch Jolie slapped me, and I slipped and fell face

down onto the palettes of paint. Jolie wouldn't let up flogging me, so I ignored the paint squelched and oozing over my front, and chased her back through the house up and down the halls, the sounds of our chasing and battling reaching fever pitch.

We didn't hear our daddy pull up in the drive. Jimson Pettigrew Malone – everyone, even family, called him “JP” – wasn't due home for days, and lately, he hadn't arrived on the days we thought he would return. I knew because Jolie kept a calendar, a promotional one JP handed out in his job as a representative for the Lyerly Pharmaceutical Company, and she'd marked his comings and goings, based on the promises she thought he'd made her during his previous visits. If she'd known he was coming, she would have dressed up for him, careful not to wear any sequins or leopard print, smoothed her hair, and assembled all the newest animals in her porcelain collection, her greatest source of pride, to show him how much she was like him. For JP, she was going to go places, too.

It was early evening by the time Jolie chased me down the stairs and into the kitchen. At the back door, half-blinded by my costume, I ran headlong into what I thought was an easy chair set up as a trap. Jolie ricocheted off my back, looked up and shouted, “Daddy!”

We three stood in the doorway, our panting the only sound, our heaving chests the only movement, waiting for his reply. His eyes swept over his white dress shirt muddied the color of earth and his blue satin tie now lacquered brown, the color of excrement. Jolie, oblivious to his building rage, panted expectantly for a kind word, but I froze on the inside. We hadn't seen him in more than two weeks and during the times of peace that characterized the time alone with Mother, we flourished and almost forgot how his

disapprovals flared so easily - at some small noise one of us would make as he worked in his study, or at a window cracked open to let in the breeze - or what usually followed.

JP had spent most of my lifetime on the road working as a representative for Lyerly Pharmaceutical Company. And as far as I could tell, the road was his primary home. Sometimes, Holiday seemed just another stop on his route. Nonsense, Mother would say, if I hinted as much, but when he was home, JP felt like an intruder, a guest you couldn't wait to see the end of. Like Clara, he had expectations, and we were always falling short.

Still studying his clothes, Mother bounded around the corner of the dining room into the kitchen, squawking loudest of all, pulling stuffing out of a pillow that was already ripped and throwing it at Jolie and me, just for a laugh, blissfully unaware he was home.

When she saw him, she immediately worked to get her monkey suit off of her black turtleneck and jeans. She ran to him, almost breathless.

“JP,” she said, as she tried to throw her arms around his neck.

His hands caught hers in mid-air, stopping her a few feet from him. I could see his whole hands wrap themselves around her wrists the way some bullies will give an Indian rug burn. And though, for a brief second she struggled to hug him, he simply would not let her go. He held her at arm's length, while Jolie and I fell back a few feet behind the kitchen table.

JP always told us the reason he was the South Central Regional Rep of the Year nine years running was because he took command of an office once he entered.

“Your suit is like your uniform. You walk into a room, and people know you mean

business. They understand my time is valuable, and I understand their time is valuable. They respect that. There's no room for prattle and play in my line of business.”

Now, his suit was ruined, and we were to blame.

“Just. God, Mercy. Don't come near me with that. What is hell is going on here? Is this what you do while I'm gone? This is what you call parenting? Just, let me get through here.” He flung her arms out of his face, pushed his way past her, and stomped up the steps without another word.

Mother's joy vanished; she stood stunned.

Jolie broke the silence. “Why did you make us these stupid costumes anyway! No one is going to think this is a good idea! We're all going to look like a bunch of idiots ringing people's doorbells like this! Besides, Halloween isn't until October; it's still June!”

She tore at her costume until she had pulled it off, and threw it face down beside the palettes and paintbrushes jumping on the crumbled heap. At the kitchen window, she found the statue of the monkeys, and shattered it on the kitchen floor.

“I hate you for doing this!” She ran out the back door, and I was shocked to see dark had settled in. She ran in the direction of our treehouse at the far edge of the yard, letting the screen door slam freely behind her, thereby breaking Mother's one hard-and-fast rule, one that she maintains out of respect from the generations of her family living at Holiday. It's an act handed down as a sign of courtesy and thoughtful living for the ones who came before; it's how she connects us to them and their time at Holiday. The farm had been in my mother's family for generations. One Holiday after another had inherited the place, passing it forward in a neat line that had carried my mother from childhood

into marriage. Even JP, who liked his own way more than anyone else's, didn't disrupt the line. He and Mother went from the wedding ceremony straight to Holiday, and it seemed understood that while JP might leave the place, again and again, for work, Mother was rooted here. But over time, it seemed, he'd grown jealous of Holiday and tried to punish the place by neglecting repairs or ripping down Mother's efforts, declaring them inadequate, even as he left greater shambles behind and blamed her for it. Jolie's slam nearly became the final death knell for the screen door, which slanted dangerously sideways. I prayed it wouldn't fall off just yet.

I watched Jolie running into the night and became embarrassingly aware of my monkey covering his ears, the canvas moving in and out where a hole had not yet been cut for the mouth. Mother looked over at me, made a half-hearted attempt at a smile and then bent to pick up her suit. She walked over to me next and began to untie my strings.

"Don't worry about it, Hannah," she said as she worked the suit loose. "He's just tired from being on the road. That's all," she said.

"That's not true," I half whispered. "I don't know why he even bothers to come home in the first place. He's never happy with anything or anyone here. It's better when he's not here."

"Hannah, that's unkind. He just needs a bit to shake work off and settle back in."

She let the lie pass between us as she worked.

"And Jolie is just mad that her daddy didn't say anything to her," she said with a great tenderness that neither of them deserved. "He'll come out of it. And when he does, she will, too," she said as she smiled at me over my shoulder. "Now, go see if you can find Jolie. I bet she's in that treehouse of yours."

I eased out the back door, careful to not let it make a sound as I went out. The cooling air of evening in the back yard chilled my sweat-drenched hair. I heard a dull thud over and over again coming from the Chinaberry tree. I climbed up and found her lying on her back, her feet against the walls bouncing a black walnut, still green, off a wall.

“I’m not going in, if that’s what you came for,” She began throwing the walnut harder and into the corner where I had carved the initials for Leo James, in small letters out of her sight.

Leo James has been my one true crush, in every class with me from first grade through fifth. Since middle school we’ve consistently been in the same math class. He and I always competed. We would see who could raise their hands to answer the most problems without being too obvious we were trying to outdo the other. Sometimes we still do even though we’re in the ninth grade, but now when one of us answers a question, we don’t look each other’s way or make a smarty-pants face at the other. Now, it’s different. I couldn’t stand seeing Jolie taking all her frustrations out on his name.

“She’s ridiculous. If it weren’t for her, he would be home more,” she said.

I plucked the green walnut from her hand and hurled it out the window.

“God. You’re so dumb. I bet you think those stupid costumes were a good idea,” she said and slid down the wall, arms crossed, into a corner of the treehouse.

“You thought so, too, before he came home,” I said. “He might have thought it was a good idea, too, if he had seen the new additions to your Noah’s Ark collection.”

Jolie looked out the hole in the floor where we entered and exited and said gruffly but softly, “No he wouldn’t,” but I could tell she was almost convinced he would. JP had

started Jolie's preoccupation with figures by giving her a porcelain rooster that came in the bottom of a box of Majestea Brand teabags.

As he handed it to her, he'd read from the back of the box: "It says here this is part of the Noah's Ark collectible series. You oughta see if you can get the hen to go with that, Jo."

I think he may have even tousled her hair as he said it. After that, Jolie insisted that Mother only buy Majestea Brand. Not only had she collected the Hen, but almost all the other figurines in the series. Of course it only took two years, as I like to point out during my less charitable moments.

"Even if he didn't think it was a good idea, didn't you just finally find the male Giraffe that you needed?" I said, hoping to convince her to get up-

Jolie bent and unbent her knees, rubbing the soles of her shoes across the smooth wooden surface of the treehouse floor. Suddenly, she jumped up and said, "I still think you are both stupid," and climbed down.

I followed her as we retraced our steps back to the house, kicking the leaves. I kept her talking about her collection, but as we neared the house, we both sensed a low-level rumble, and we stopped our kicking and slowed our pace even more in time to hear JP's voice careen into the night air from the open windows of the house.

"... makes me feel like a joke. Like everything I do out there to support us as a family makes me feel like I am supporting a circus. No one who lives here or visits here could possibly have any respect for the man who presides over this."

As he yelled, we heard a crash coming from the back porch.

JP! What are you doing? I'm sorry! We were just having fun. Jolie bought the

cutest figurine today and I had this idea for Halloween...”

“Listen to yourself! You're not making any sense. How the hell does something JOLIE buys turn into the whole house being turned upside down and paint all over my work clothes before I even set foot in the house? Don't drag the girls into your insanity. You're making them victims of your deluded, skewed view of what a normal person's life looks like. This is not normal, Mercy. You are not normal. This is no life; this is a joke. Besides, Halloween is months away and you're doing this now? And when it does come, how hard would it be to go to the store like normal families do and BUY Halloween costumes. Don't I make enough money for that? Don't I work so I can provide for things exactly like Halloween costumes? If so, the real question is why do I bother making a name for myself and this family if my “better half” couldn't care less how she acts or how she is raising our children to act?” he yelled.

We were at the back door now and we could see how his fury had occupied the back porch. My palette was broken, and a can of paintbrushes had exploded onto the porch floor. Mother held frozen beside the table, her hands at her neck, while JP moved back and forth about the kitchen, unable to come to rest.

“Well, you like disorder, you want chaos?” he taunted. “You don't mind living in a house turned upside down?”

And with that, he flipped her art chest over onto the floor. Mother immediately ran to stop him and to keep her paints from falling out of the drawers and to keep Jolie's figurines, lined up across the top, from falling.

“JP! What are you doing!” she yelled.

She scrambled for Jolie's figurines as they crashed to the floor. As she did, JP

swung around and pushed her backward, slamming her against a wall.

Dark had fully fallen, and we felt pitched into the night. My legs turning to concrete and Jolie biting into tight fists she held at her mouth, we stood in the yard, riveted to the earth beneath our feet, watching helplessly as the kitchen lights became spotlights for the drama inside.

JP moved toward the kitchen cabinets, yelling, “Why not just go ahead and tear everything out? Huh? Isn't this the only thing that's left? And if you can't beat 'em, join 'em, right?” He went from cabinet to cabinet pulling out canned goods and pots, crashing plates and glasses to the ground.

Mother was begging him, now, “Jimson, no! Stop! Don't do that! I'm sorry. Ok? Ok?”

“Sorry?” he suddenly paused. As he turned to face her, I heard Jolie suck in her breath as if she knew what he might do, and just as quickly, he released a can of peas he held in his hand. The can hit Mother in the face, and she slid into the back porch, landing in another mess of paint, covering her head with her arms, out of fear of another one. Jolie burst toward the kitchen with a roar that tapped the same wild well of his own anger.

“No!” Jolie rammed his stomach.

But throwing the can had taken some of the bite out of his burn, and he simply brushed Jolie aside.

“It's your own fault, Mercy,” he said as he left the room. “You explain it to these kids of yours.”

As he stomped through the hallway, we could hear his anger directed at Mother as one by one, her paintings fell to the floor. A few moments later, he thundered back down

the stairs, his wingtips kicking glass. He barely glanced our way, his arms full of suits.

“You pack up my things, Mercy, neat as a pin. I’ll send for the rest. Today is the last day you make a fool of me. Don’t think I won’t make you sorry.”

Jolie, shocked to see her figurines lying in shards, joined me and Mother, who was silently sobbing, my arms around her, her own hands covering her face. Jolie dropped to her other side while we each sobbed, though maybe for different reasons.

As JP slammed the door, a pant leg caught in the door, and he dropped a shoe. Jolie sprung to her feet, and though I was sure she’d run to help him, instead, she ran over the broken glass in the hallway, retrieved the shoe, and hurled it at his retreating car. Without missing a beat, she slammed ice cubes from the their trays and into Mother’s favorite tea towel. It was Jolie’s light touch on Mother’s shoulder that eased her enough to let us see her battered face. Her eyes had already begun swelling shut like the monkey she had pretended to be for us. She let us press the ice against her cheek while we, too, did our best monkey impersonations: Jolie not saying a word; me, trying hard not to hear the gasps and sobs. A murder had occurred that evening. It was bigger than any sin we’d heard about in Clara's church: the murder of a family, yes, but more, it was the murder of my mother's spirit.

“Oh, Hannah,” Clara Keeble hooted in the kitchen that morning a month later, “you’d think you’d seen a ghost. Now, eat up, girl. You mustn't let food go to waste. Your mother’s coming home today.”

II

My bowl and spoon clanked into a sink of fresh dishwater as Jolie slipped into her place at the breakfast table.

“Be careful, there,” Clara said as Jolie began to pour milk into a new bowl of cereal.

“We must all be sparring with the Lord’s gifts, and greed is especially ugly in a child.”

Jolie ignored her and let the milk rise to the top of her bowl. She shoved a heaping spoonful of raisin bran into her mouth and passed her forearm across the milk dribbling down her chin, then opened her hand to reveal a small dove which she placed next to her orange juice. She eyed it, daring Clara to come near it. The Majestea Tea Company had

issued twenty pairs of animals in its Noah's Ark campaign. Until the night of JP's rampage, Jolie had amassed 38 of all 40. She had only lacked the Lion and a Dove. Their partners, the Lioness and a Dove of unknown gender had made it through unbroken, though now, only 16 of the figurines Jolie had spent the past two years collecting had survived enough to call whole. She placed them, not two by two as before – that was no longer possible, except for a pair of Rhinoceros and Pelicans – but in a neat row atop of her bedroom bureau, each looking as if it were reporting for duty, no longer purposefully engaged with its mate. She had swept the broken pieces into a shoebox and kept them under the foot of her bed. Jolie didn't let the catastrophe of losing so many dissuade her from finishing what she had started. In fact, she seemed more driven than ever and focused all of her attentions on finding the Dove's mate. It was a particular challenge perhaps because although Majestea had supposedly made each of their doves – male and female -- distinctly different, she couldn't tell the gender of her dove, and it had become a mystery she felt she simply must get to the bottom of. She researched them in the encyclopedias at the library and announced to Mother and me one evening:

“The doves where Noah lived weren't even white,” she said. “They're brown and gray. Why do they always show them white if they weren't?” she asked Mother.

“I think it's meant to represent purity, a sort of clean slate for mankind, a chance to start over.” Mother's voice shook and creaked a bit as she told this to Jolie, but I couldn't see her expression. Her head was bent over her sewing. She was finishing a sachet, into which she intended to stuff the leaves of lemon verbena she had gathered from a pot that had fallen from the kitchen windowsill as JP hurled dishes everywhere..

“And I think it represents peace, too,” she continued. “After such a relentless

storm, one that must have seemed like it would never end, I'm sure the sight of nature quieting itself ushered in a sense of relief, great joy, and hope for a future." Mother laid her sewing down and gazed out the window. I could see that she struggled to keep tears from her eyes.

"You know, Jolie, after the storms ended, it took a while before hope could be found," she said, continuing her sewing. "Noah and his family had to be patient and wait for a sign that things were back to normal again. In fact," Mother's voice broke, "the earth had become a better place, purged from people who lived lives of damage to others, for earth had become a hostile place."

Mother continued, "Noah's dove brought his family signs of hope. It was sent out, and returned with a fresh olive leaf, an indication that life on earth was starting to flourish again," Mother said and excused herself to the kitchen window where she discreetly blew her nose.

After that night, Jolie held onto the Dove as if finding its mate would bring peace and rebuilding to her own world. Maybe she believed that if she showed JP she could set goals and finish her work, she would somehow be good enough for him, then maybe there would be hope for the rest of us as well.

"Why can't we have tea for breakfast?" Jolie murmured now under her breath.

"Tea? No problem. Tea is fine," Clara said. She pulled a brand of tea that Jolie didn't recognize from the cupboard.

"Not that kind. We only drink Majestea Brand," Jolie insisted.

"This is what we have, dear. There's nothing else. I brought it myself from the church pantry last week when I discovered that there was very little to eat in this house."

Clara took a tea bag from a box with ValuRight spread across its front flap. She filled a mug with tepid water from the tap, swept Jolie's orange juice off the table, and replaced it with the tea mug. Jolie crossed her arms.

“What's this you've brought to breakfast?” Clara reached for the Dove, but Jolie hid it beneath her thigh. Clara sniffed and returned to her cup of coffee, feigning disinterest in Jolie's treasure. In fact, she appeared to purposefully turn her back on Jolie, studying the kitchen itself as if really seeing it for the first time.

“My, this is a large room. I can't get over how tall the ceilings are. These windows let in so much light.”

Her gaze shifted onto the back yard, eyeing the wide expanse of green fields that had mesmerized me a few minutes earlier. Her curiosity with our place quickened, and she turned to face me with unusual interest.

“And two living rooms? Those two rooms together are bigger than the whole of our Tabernacle. What on earth are they for?”

“They're not living rooms,” I said. “Well, one is a living room and one is our father's office. Originally, they were parlors, I think. One for men and one for ladies.” I'd overheard Mother explain this to first time visitors to Holiday smitten with the charm of the old rooms.

“Separate rooms for the sexes. That is truly an old-fashioned idea, and I think a very good one,” Clara pondered.

She hesitated a moment, before continuing, “I'm sure most folks see that kind of social division restrictive, even oppressive, but I tell you, those Victorians knew a thing or two. A gathering hall for women distinct from men allows each gender a certain

amount of independence, freedom to be themselves,” Clara said. “Independence,” she repeated quietly.

We heard the crunch of gravel grinding beneath car wheels and Clara peeked out the kitchen window and announced, “Speaking of independence, Sister Dot Horton is here to deliver a watermelon from Higher Power's Pantry. It's not just the Fourth of July, you know. Your mother is freed from the hospital today. Both are reasons enough in themselves to celebrate,” Clara said, looking at Jolie who still showed signs of pouting.

At Clara's insistence, Jolie and I met Sister Dot Horton on the back porch to wrangle the watermelon from her into an old metal tub Clara had pulled from the barn for the occasion. She instructed Jolie and me to fill it with water and ice to keep it cool, a chore that required numerous trips to the freezer.

On one of those trips, I caught bits of a conversation that I wouldn't fully understand until later.

Clara had pulled Dot Horton into the hallway outside the kitchen.

“Sister Dot,” I heard her say, “would you mind terribly if I asked a favor of you? ... now, you tell Havis... suitcases.”

“I'll explain it all to him later,” she concluded as one of the ice cube trays rattled beneath my hand. Then she hustled Dot Horton through the front hall and out the front door. An unlikely way to exit, I thought, considering Dot Horton's car was parked out back.

Jolie abandoned the watermelon task right away and came back into the kitchen to watch me fill up the ice trays. She yawned and stretched, exposing her bare midriff as she lifted her arms to tighten her ponytail. “I know a better way we can celebrate Mother

coming home,” she said. “Let's move JP's stuff outta his office and turn it into a real studio for Mother. We can bring the rest of her paints and easels out of the attic.”

Clara, who had hotfooted it back to the kitchen, overheard.

“You mean there are more art supplies?” she asked incredulously. “I've spent all week working this house over trying to establish some semblance of decorum and neatness. I've collected brushes, half-finished canvas, rags, and tubes of paint from every nook, cranny, drawer, closet, what have you. Especially the kitchen. How many tubes of paint does one need and why keep them in the same drawer with the silverware!”

“Burnt Sienna, Manganese Blue, Sap Green, and Cadmium Yellow in the silverware drawer?” I asked.

“Among other places,” she said.

“Mother uses them most of all. The morning light is better here in the kitchen.”

By Clara's own admittance a moment earlier, the windows filled the kitchen with a bright glow.

“And the silverware drawer lies closest to her morning painting spot,” I explained.

“What about the half-finished canvases in the dining room? Why so many in there? Does anyone actually eat at the dining table?” she asked.

“We eat there on Christmas and Easter. Paintings dry quicker in the dining room. The windows pull in the breeze, and Mother can spread her work out on the table and no one bothers them or accidentally spills anything on them,” I replied.

“Painting has taken over this house. No one can serve two masters. Either he will hate the one and love the other, or he will be devoted to the one and despise the other. Matthew 6:24,” she said. “If we can get your Mother to channel her energies to serving

the needs of others, the church, and her home, she would find a remarkable change in her life. There's more in the attic, you say? How much more?"

I sat back down at the table by Jolie who had returned to a soggy bowl of cereal, "Nothing but a small box of old paints and paintbrushes," I said.

Jolie stopped jabbing at her raisin bran, raised a quizzical brow to begin questioning me, but I kicked her under the table.

In the attic was Mother's special painting. As an art student at the University of Virginia, Mother had sat under the tutelage of Dr. Russell Hart, one of the finest art conservators working at that time. She had shown great passion and promise for the work, and upon his retirement offered her a painting he'd acquired and begun restoring while researching Renaissance pigments in Venice years before. It was a version of *Christ in the House of Martha and Mary*, by a student of the 14th century artist Tintoretto. The canvas had been ripped across the middle, and age had muddled all the colors into a single expanse of brown hues except at the bottom right corner, where she had begun to painstakingly bring blues, golds, and russets back to life late at night, after everyone had gone to bed. The painting had sat in the attic, out of sight and out of harm's way since before she married JP. If Clara got whiff of it, I had a sinking suspicion that she might consider it more of what she deemed clutter.

"Very well. That box can stay there for now," she said. "Your Mother will be home very soon. Why not decorate the porch for the Fourth of July? Let's make it festive so she'll feel welcome when she arrives."

"That's fine with me. This cereal is disgusting," Jolie said and dumped the bowl's entire contents, milk and all, into the garbage, causing Clara to wince. Surprisingly, she

didn't say a word.

Clara had found some red, white, and navy blue streamers while cleaning and reorganizing the kitchen drawers. She handed them to Jolie and me and instructed us to drape them across the porch railings. While we did, Clara sat on the front porch perched in the middle of the porch swing, her elbows propped over its back. I could see her underarms stained with sweat, and she hummed a tune I didn't recognize, though its rhythm made me want to sit up straight and watch my tongue.

But not Jolie.

"The red doesn't swag deeply enough," Jolie said doing an inspired mimic of Clara's instruction. I bit my lip trying not to laugh. She had begun to parrot Clara right after breakfast.

"The white streamers in the middle," she repeated in a singsong way.

"You'll need more thumbtacks," she sassed, though softly.

Clara had managed to ignore all this. I caught her studying the porch ceiling, take in the fullness of the hydrangeas, rub the seat of the swing with her palm as if she were trying to calculate the value of the wood. She cast an eye over the fields that stretched past the front yard, and the dirt drive that winds up from the road in the distance. Bluejays flitted between bush and branch, squawking and diving at an old tom that found his way into our yard and skulked about. Catalpas and oaks hung heavy with their own weight.

"Such quiet and peace," Clara remarked, the swing creaking with her heft.

"Surely God is in this place."

My heart leapt when she spoke those words, for I felt the same way and for a

moment, I almost liked her, but then she starting up with that humming again, the same tune, I realized, she'd begun the morning they took Mother away, and suddenly I felt quite the opposite.

“How long did you say you girls have lived here? Where did you live before?” she asked.

I sat on the front step and looked across the lawn. Morning shadows had nearly disappeared leaving small circles of shade around the bases of the trees just as they have on any sunny day I could remember.

“We've never lived anywhere else,” I answered. “Only here at Holiday.”

“Holiday?” One heavy brown shoe stopped her swinging. “You mean this place has a name?” She emitted a small incredulous laugh and grabbed at her hair, which had settled into a loose bun.

“This has been our family’s place for five generations going back to my great, great-grandpa Holiday. It's Mother's now and when she goes, it will be mine or Jolie's.”

Jolie barked out a laugh, a near-perfect imitation of Clara’s, and grabbed at her own wild hair, forcing it into a crazy bun.

“You mean this place has a name?” she squawked like Clara.

“Now, listen, young lady...,” Clara began, rising to her feet, but that was about as far as she got. A white taxi appeared and began to wind up Holiday's long drive. Jolie saw her chance and dashed to my side, while Clara lifted the finger she was about to wag in Jolie's face and began to wave toward the taxi as if she'd run to greet it. The car's back window rolled down, and another hand, thin and elegant, waved excitedly back. Mother couldn't contain herself. She dipped her head through the window as Jolie dashed from

my side toward the slow-moving taxi. She ran beside it until it came to a stop even with the hydrangeas.

“Oh, I've missed you!” Mother cried. She held her arms wide. As Jolie ran into one side, Mother smothered her head in kisses. I ran into her other arm and she hugged me so tight, I felt my heart shift back into its place.

“It couldn't have been a week. It seems like a year!” she said. My chin rested on her shoulder a second longer than a normal hug. I couldn't pull away yet. I needed that moment. I inhaled deeply to take in her scent. She smelled like violets as she always had, but mingled with an unfamiliar stale, plastic scent.

“Well, you certainly look hearty and hale, Sister Mercy. I am glad to see you recuperate so quickly,” Clara said.

I searched for signs of health, for signs of Mother herself, but her eyes didn't look the same. She put one foot in front of the other, but blindly so. The hospital had left her thin and slow, not fully connecting to anything. Plastic.

“Mrs. Keeble, I don't know how in the world I can ever repay you for your kindness,” Mother managed. “What would I have done if you hadn't been here? I'm not sure I know how to thank you or the church properly.”

“Please, Sister Mercy, call me Sister Clara. After all we truly are sisters in Christ. And don't worry one minute about that.”

Clara took a roll of money wound around with a rubber band from her pocket. She peeled off a bill and handed it to the driver.

Mother stared down at Jolie but didn't seem to truly see her. “Is it really the Fourth? I must have lost track of time.”

“Yes, and a very hot one at that. Let's go in. I've had the church bring over a watermelon,” Clara said.

In the foyer, Mother silently acclimated herself to the house, or maybe the house acclimated itself to her, for suddenly it felt like home again.

Jolie fingered Mother's hospital bracelet and asked, “What is Thi-o-ben-da-zine? Is that something that JP sells?”

Mother patted Jolie's hand on her own, but didn't answer her.

Clara began, “The church has re-stocked your pantries for you. We knew that you were having a hard time making ends meet and we just couldn't stand to see you and these girls go hungry.”

Jolie dropped Mother's bag at the bottom of the staircase. Mother eased onto a chair in the foyer.

“Mrs...Sister Clara,” she said, “how could we possibly repay you for all of this?”

“It's a gift from the church and part of the reason we exist, to help those who cannot help themselves. And if you feel led to give back later on when you are better off than now, then you can do so in whatever way you see fit. Here, come to the kitchen and have a seat. Let me fix you something to drink. It's a long trip from the hospital in Arcola.”

As Clara pushed roughly through the swinging kitchen door, it caught on the floor and the screws and hinge panel pulled away from the door frame. I cringed as the door fell off of its frame and crashed into the kitchen.

“What happened here?” Mother asked.

“I don't think this old place is quite the same as it was in some of the paintings I

have seen around here,” Clara said.

“Jimson promised he would take time out to restore it, but he just never got around to it,” Mother said and sat down, suddenly looking more pale and weakened.

Jolie and I scrambled to either side of the door and set it up just outside the kitchen. Clara opened a kitchen drawer and held up three pieces of the porch trim.

“A few days ago, I found these in the yard,” She added, “You know, Brother Harold Richmond could come out and fix this broken door, the screen door that's failing at the back, as well as the trim in no time flat.”

“I couldn't ask him to do that, Sister Clara. I'd think we better just wait for now. I don't think we can afford that,” Mother tried to reason.

“Nonsense,” Clara said “I'll call him first thing tomorrow. Harold has been a member of Higher Power since we opened our door and has never failed to be the first to volunteer in any situation where he might be of help.”

As the chink of ice filled a glass, we again heard the crunch of gravel grinding under car wheels. I imagined another church member on her way to gawk at Mother and hand us all unwanted advice, but the knock on the door was gentle and familiar and followed by-one of the sweetest sounds we could have possibly heard echo across the kitchen:

“It wouldn't be the Fourth of July without Bert Daddy's barbeque, would it?”

“Florida!” Jolie squealed.

Florida was on her way to work and dressed in her nurse's uniform. She loomed tall and proud, and I had never thought of her without thinking about the Statue of Liberty. Her hair, a neat, toffee-colored bob, matched her skin. She had, since I could

remember, carried spicy cinnamon candies in her pockets, even in the middle of a heatwave. She made me feel like anything was possible, and she was the only person who Jolie fully listened to and mostly obeyed.

Jolie squeezed Florida's middle, and instantly dug into her pockets searching for the candy. Florida held a brown paper bag high over my sister's embrace and furious digging.

"Whoa," Florida gave a throaty laugh that she coupled with tossing her head back. Everyone in Miss Florida's family laughs like that. She was the closest thing we had to family since JP had left us. Her family and my family have worked together for as many generations as there have been folks living at Holiday. She babysat us until Jolie was seven and I turned ten, putting herself through nursing school. Florida is the same age as Mother and I think it fair to say that they are best friends. JP had never seen any reason for Mother to hire a babysitter and he'd never much cared for Florida either, who he called a busybody, but we loved her, and she was probably Jolie's most favorite person in the whole world.

"Hey, Jolie," Florida said, patting my sister on the back, "That's a whole lotta love you've got for me today. Stand back and let me look at you," Jolie twirled around once for Florida to show off her outfit. She wore a white t-shirt with the word SUGAR spelled out in gray sparkles, and she'd gathered the shirt's ends into knot at her navel leaving a few inches of bare skin above a pair of denim shorts that threatened, but not quite, to be obscenely tight. She had contained her unruly hair into a high ponytail, which she secured with a red elastic band from which red stars bobbed about her frizz. She had stayed up the night before painting her toenails red, white, and blue, alternately for the occasion.

“That's quite an outfit you've got on,” Florida replied. “Isn't it, Mercy?”

Florida studied Mother for a second. She caught a glimpse of the hospital bracelet and looked Mother in the eye, but she looked away quickly so Florida might not notice the shadow of the bruise left by the can of peas. But I'm pretty sure Florida could see, like I did, that Mother's eyes had lost a certain spark.

“Why, this must be the famous Florida,” Clara said.

“Florida, this is Sister Clara,” Mother said, “She's from High Power Tabernacle over in Galena.”

Florida glanced at Clara, nodded politely, and grabbed Mother's hand.

“Mercy, why are your hands so cold?” she asked while reading the bracelet.

Florida frowned and asked, “Mercy, who prescribed this medication to you?”

Clara thrust a tea glass under Florida's nose. “Sister Mercy has been under my care since Mr. Malone left,” Florida accepted the tea in front of her, dropping Mother's hand. “We've stepped in to help the family bridge this time of separation and adjustment.”

“Separation? Mercy, is that true? Why didn't you call me?” Florida asked.

Florida sat Bert Daddy's barbeque on the table, still frowning. A tangy, smoke scent began to fill the room, and my mouth started to water with memories of biting into a rib.

Florida neared Mother, but she averted her face again by turning toward the window. This time, though, Florida saw the bruise and got the whole story. She softly grabbed Mother's hand again and looked her square in the eyes.

“Well, you know what I think,” she said quietly. “Good riddance is what I think.”

“You should have called me,” she said to me.

“Sister Florida, understand,” Clara interrupted. “I was told to contact you, but under the circumstances, I wasn't sure who of the family friends to trust. I certainly didn't want to call someone who might have been in contact with Mr. Malone, so I thought it best just to see to everything myself,” she said.

“In contact with JP? Me? Excuse me, girls, but Mercy, you know how much regard I have for that man.”

“Nonetheless...,” Clara began.

Out of the blue, as if starting the conversation all over again, Mother said, “Clara, this is Florida. Every Fourth of July since I can remember, Florida has brought us a platter of her daddy's barbeque. You might have heard of Bert Daddy. He's known throughout Tom's Creek and well beyond for his ribs. He's equally famous for keeping their recipe a secret.”

Mother laughed nervously. “Why, WLIT News came out a few years back to try and get it out of him. Filmed him standing over his pit in his back yard preparing it. He still wouldn't relent, even with all the pressure of the bright lights on him.”

“Well, that certainly is quite an honor,” Clara said, pulling a few stray strands of hair towards her bun.

The sound of car wheels coming to a halt under gravel passed through the kitchen again. A moment later, I could see the Reverend Havis Keeble coming up the walk. Havis's complexion matched the fire he spewed from his pulpit. He was short, mostly hairless, plump, with shiny skin that glowed red. The top of his head shone ringed by a bit of dulled red hair. He looked, at every moment, like he might pop. Florida saw him, too, and her mouth tightened even more when, without knocking, he burst into the

kitchen as if he owned it.

“Hello, Sisters,” he boomed.

He scanned the room the way he did the church, tallying up attendance before setting his gaze on the worshipper of choice. Today, that special someone was my mother. He didn't even seem to acknowledge me or Jolie, and Florida's voice clearly made him jump.

“Mercy,” Florida said, ignoring the Reverend right back, “you call me, and we'll talk. Hannah, go get a basket and come to my car. I've got a load of vegetables for your mother.”

And a load of questions for me, I thought, as I ran to the pantry for a basket.

III

“It was the Sunday after JP left,” I began for Florida.

Mother urged Jolie and me out of bed early, hurrying us into our Sunday clothes and out the door. We pulled up in front of the First Methodist where, off and on, we've been in attendance since forever. I had the thought that I might tell my old Sunday School teacher, Mrs. Hightower, what had happened with JP. Who knows, maybe she could help us. Maybe, too, she could help calm my worries that he would never come back, or worse, that he wouldn't stay away. I opened my car door to get out but Mother's grip on the steering wheel tightened.

“Shut it,” she told me. “Not here.”

Jolie, who doesn't like to get up early, had brought her bed pillow with her and was lying stretched out on the back seat and said, “Yeah, Hannah, shut the door. It's already hot and you're letting the cool out.” Jolie tugged at her mini-skirt adjusting it as far down her thighs as she could. She slid off her platform shoes and they landed with a thud in the floorboard of the backseat.

I said nothing, but shut my door and looked over at Mother, her sunglasses almost hiding her broken face, and decided she knew what she was doing.

She drove every street of Tom's Creek. Up the back avenues that I didn't know so well where new subdivisions walled out old trailer parks with rows of quick-growth giant trees; down lanes where old homes that reminded me of Holiday stood restored with newly seeded lawns and begonias bursting from baskets next to others whose paint peeled and roofs sagged and whose front porches hosted worn-out recliners instead of wicker or rocking chairs. We passed the Assembly of God, the Church of Christ, and the new non-denominational Soul Saving Station for Every Nation. In the end, she decided on none in Tom's Creek. I believe she did it, first, to protect JP, his reputation. In those days, she still held a glimmer of hope that he would return. Secondly, to keep us from coming to gossip. I don't think she had the energy to combat any idle talk that may have resulted from our visiting a church where we would inevitably know someone and the conversations that would inevitably ensue from her battle-worn appearance.

Instead, Mother drove to the interstate a few miles away. I saw the sign that said, *Now leaving Tom's Creek* as we merged onto the highway, and I felt a low, hollow feeling take over me. We had gotten on the interstate to go on vacation, to visit San Destin or

Gulf Shores or Jacksonville, but never for church and I felt like it was wrong, like we were fleeing the world as we knew it and any security we had left. I realize now we hadn't driven more than 15 miles, but that day it seemed we drove much further.

We exited at Galena/Lubbocks, where it was rumored in school that cattle mutilations by satanic worshippers were supposed to have taken place; but it could've just been that story was made up to make for a better football game. Coming into town a billboard warned, "Welcome to Galena Home of the Galena High Steers. 3A State Champions 1976, 1983, 1988, 1992, 2000." The Galena High Steers were the Tom's Creek Patriots' fiercest rivals, and for a minute I felt like we had willingly given ourselves over to the dark side, into the realm of a hostile, unsympathetic enemy.

Galena was laid out like a beautiful, but distorted butterfly. Train tracks ran through the middle of town where its metal spine might be and divided it into two separate sections, mostly houses built before and after 1980. We drove deep into Galena's countryside, away from the separated town, to a more familiar-looking landscape where ageless farms, much like Holiday, stood.

"We're nearly out of gas," Mother said as she pulled into Patel's Gas and Bait. Jolie slept and I waited in the front seat. I could hear the ring of blood pumping in my ears, it was so quiet. Jolie's sleeping breaths, inaudible a moment before, grew louder as the quietness of the desolate country store on a desolate country road pressed itself around us. The ringing in my ear became unbearable, and I cracked my window slightly, shocked to hear the thump of a bass and the din of singing voices float through the window. Mother saw my face and pointed to what I took to be a small business attached to the Gas and Bait. On its door, written in an uneven arch: *Higher Power Tabernacle* –

All Welcome. Now I could see, too, that a kind of church spire rose out of the roof of the gas station, at its tip protruded a forked antenna.

Mother pulled the car over to the end of the lot and parked beside a church bus painted with an open hand reaching for the sky splayed across its side with the words *High Power Tabernacle, Town of Galena, AL* written beneath. Mother and I got out, waking Jolie, who still in a stupor of sleep, obediently slipped on her platform shoes, and mindlessly brushed the wrinkles from her top and skirt.

The sound of a preacher's voice burst through the quiet countryside as the three of us slid into the back row of metal folding chairs, Mother still wearing sunglasses to hide her bruise. That was the first time we saw the Reverend Havis, his face, burning red with his sermon. Several women folks, fanning themselves craned their necks to watch as we settled in. The preacher manipulated the acoustics of the small sanctuary, bouncing his voice against the back wall, or down over the tops of the heads of people during the preaching with the gravity of his words. We couldn't have known it beforehand -- there were no indications of what the day's lesson would be -- but Havis's sermon, "Marriage as a Reflection of Christ and the Church," set Mother to sobbing uncontrollably. I had never seen a preacher work up a sweat as he spoke, or heard one who drew out the last syllable of every sentence as if it were an exclamation mark. His words hit Mother right where she lived and she got up to leave with Jolie and me in tow. But the church folks were well-trained. As Mother fumbled for the car keys, a petite, small-featured blonde lady, Sister Joanna Weatherly, followed us out and spoke to Mother, eventually coaxing her back inside and into a Sunday school room, giving her a private place to unload her burden. Sister Joanna Weatherly was the first of Mother's Higher Power friends. Jolie ate

the cookies and juice another woman offered us while we waited beside a trio of pudgy toddlers in a makeshift nursery. It was nothing more than a cardboard partition that separated a large room into two smaller ones.

None of us returned to our seats or the sermon, but Mother left that day feeling better. After talking to Joanna, who had comforted her, taken her phone number and address, and sent her home with a new Bible (and the pack of cookies with Jolie), she felt everything would be okay. She received phone calls daily from a long list of concerned churchwomen who checked in on her. She was encouraged to come out on Wednesday nights to be part of a support group for single women. Mother was not ready for that.

“Single women,” she exhaled the words in a tone of disbelief mixed with the beginnings of resignation, and something a bit like fear.

Though she appeared comforted and tried to busy herself around the house, I caught her sobbing as she cleaned JP's office, which she finally abandoned. As the week progressed, she had all but stopped eating, and Jolie and I sometimes found it hard to get her to respond fully when we asked her a question. She seemed confused by the stern care some of the women offered. Sister Joanna Weatherly was not this way, but others, like Dot Horton – and Clara - were. Sister Horton brought over a large box of food – peanut butter, cereal, powdered milk, and vienna sausages – from High Power's food pantry. She arrived at the house with provisions for our family the Tuesday after our visit, which was kind, but then she sat Mother down and explained, while Jolie and I listened, that gluttony is a sin and that we should use our provisions in such a way that God would be pleased.

“Sister Mercy,” she went on, “you must be aware of your responsibilities. A warm

and welcoming home for men and children to thrive in is not a task to look down one's nose at. A man can't be blamed for chastising a slovenly wife.”

As she got up to leave, she ran her fingers along the top of Daddy's desk. She wiped the dust onto her skirt, looked at Mother seriously, then smiled at her, as if it would make the bitter pill she had left in Mother's mouth a bit easier to swallow.

Once we had visited Higher Power, it seemed impossible to get away. In the three weeks since that first Sunday, Mother channeled her crying to constant praying. I caught her numerous times in her bedroom on her knees asking for forgiveness for everything, from painting to cleaning to not being a good provider, even not wearing more attractive blouses or mastering mascara. On the fourth Sunday, we missed church. I woke up late and found Mother lying on the floor at the foot of her bed in her nightgown. She was awake, staring at nothing in particular. I shook her, and she sniffled and lifted her head a bit, but it was more out of reflex than out of pure volition to do so.

“Can you sit up?” I asked, and mechanically she did so.

I pulled her to her bed and told her I would fix her breakfast, to just wait. She was weak, and I searched my mind to try and remember the last time she had eaten. She had fixed our breakfasts, lunches, and dinners, portioning out leftovers with scrupulous attention and detail, but she'd forgone her own sustenance, even as she pressed herself more physically, cleaning the house as if her happiness and ours depended on it. She had even roped Jolie and me into helping her. I cleaned all three bathrooms, even the laundry room and its paint splattered floors - though not much came off. Jolie swept the kitchen, hall and parlors as Mother mopped behind her. Mother and I carried rugs out to the line to air, and Jolie made a big fuss coughing after she spent the afternoon beating the dust out

of them. Somehow, all the work only scratched the surface of Mother's sorrow.

“No, *I'll* fix *you* breakfast,” she said, and stumbled across the room and down the stairs.

On the landing, she paused by the large bay window crowned with stained glass she herself had designed and cut, and for a moment, I thought she had snapped out of it.

“The plums are in season,” she said. “Let's go pick some, Hannah.”

I ran out ahead to get the picking baskets from the barn, while she pulled on her galoshes. The hem of her nightgown caught in one boot, and she teetered in my direction across the yard. I ran, meeting her with the baskets under the trees.

I had dropped only two or three plums into mine when she dropped her basket and knelt under a tree saying, “Oh, Hannah, pray with me.” She struck a pitiful sight, her hands and eyes pressed together so tightly under the bruise that was fading though still purple and yellow on her face.

“Here. Let's kneel down right here. Just like Jesus prayed in Gethsemane,” she said, grabbing my arm and pulling me down beside her. While the ground stabbed my bare knees, my mother quietly sobbed beside me, and I closed my eyes and squeezed my hands together, too.

“Hannah, Hannah, I've been a sister to the one who destroys. I've not done my part as a wife or mother and now we're coming undone,” she quivered. “I've painted, made costumes, and played when I should have been doing other things, better things, more important things. And now your father has left us, left this family that I helped create,” she sobbed. “Even Holiday is falling apart. Somehow you and Jolie are the only things I've created that haven't yet come to ruin. Somebody's got to stop me before I mess

that up, too,” she whispered.

When she stopped speaking, I stole a glimpse of her and saw her lips moving, but could hear no words. I closed my eyes and pretended to pray, but I wasn't sure what for. Everything she told me about herself was wonderful, the good stuff, what endeared her to me. Panicking, I really believed she was slipping away, like I might lose her. I felt myself begin to pant. I got up, brushed my knees off, and gently tugged her towards the back door. I sat her down at the kitchen table and poured her some of Jolie's Majestea iced tea from the refrigerator. She took a sip, rested the glass on the table, and for the next few hours, she didn't move.

Jolie came down to find Mother sitting there. By then, her head had fallen to her chest. Jolie looked her over from head to toe.

“Mother?” she whispered.

Mother didn't say anything, but gave Jolie a look that propelled my frightened sister right out of the room. Eventually, I convinced Mother to let me lead her back to bed. I tried to serve her a ham sandwich, some more of Jolie's iced tea and one of the plums I had picked. She smiled when I brought the tray in, laid her hand on my cheek, rested her head on her pillow, and closed her eyes.

That evening, Jolie and I watched ourselves to sleep in front of the television, waking to a car rumbling up, the driver honking its horn. I peered out the living room curtains and recognized Havis and Clara Keeble, the pastor and his wife, as they got out and surveyed the wide expanse of our front lawn.

“Jolie,” I hissed. I put my hand over her mouth and before she could slap it away, I motioned toward the front window from which the top of Clara's bun was visible. They

were almost on the porch.

Mother was not in her bedroom. She was nowhere upstairs.

“Hellooo,” Clara called from the other side of the front door.

Mother wasn’t in the kitchen either, but from that window, I could see that Havis and Clara had made their way to the backyard.

I saw her before they did. Her galoshes first, between two plum trees. Their branches obscured a clear view. I held my breath as I saw Havis stop in surprise wondering if someone was playing a joke on him. Mother stood unmoving, staring at the ground, still dressed in her nightgown. A picking basket lay at her feet. I ran out the back door, unaware I had let the screen door slam behind me. Clara was yammering, but Mother was insensible to her, her posture perfectly erect, chin pressed hard into her chest, arms clenched across her chest, utterly unresponsive. I pushed past Clara.

“Mother?” I said.

“Mama!” Jolie implored and she rammed Mother in the stomach and tugged at an arm to get her to move. But with a force stronger than hers, Mother resisted returning her arm to its rigid position. Jolie tried to pry it loose, but Mother would not yield. Her lips and eyes closed tight. Jolie pushed her again and a leg dislodged and stood at an awkward angle. Clara grabbed her.

“Child, no! You’ll hurt her,” she said.

Mother would not be moved from her spot. Slowly, some force within her drew the leg back to its previous position.

“And that afternoon,” I told Florida, “Havis drove her to Wheeler Memorial in

Arcola and Clara moved in! I told her and Jolie told her we had to call you. Clara asked if you were family, and we said 'just as good as' and she said, 'What? An aunt? A cousin?' Jolie looked like she wanted to hit her but instead ran to the treehouse to get out of her sight. She told me that she and the pastor had contacted everyone necessary, that there was no other guardian in place and that we would mind our manners while Mother was away."

"Hannah, do me a favor," she said, leaning down to hold me by the shoulders, "*you* call me as soon as they leave."

"I mean it, now," she said, as she filled the basket with tomatoes and squash. "As soon as they're gone."

As I watched Florida's car leave with a new sense of hope, I heard footsteps on the gravel behind me and ducked with my basket into the trees. Havis had walked out the back door and after casting an disgruntled look at Florida's retreating car, went straight to his own. Pressed against Mother's plum tree, I might as well have been invisible to him. His car trunk snapped open. I hoped he'd take back everything Clara had brought to Holiday, right down to the ValuRight boxes of tea. To my horror, however, Havis unloaded an oversized suitcase and lumbered up the side path. I followed hot on his heels, spilling and picking up the vegetables, as he made his way onto the front porch, under our Fourth-of-July streamers and right through the front door, again without knocking as if believed he himself was the master of Holiday.

I hurried back the way I came, hoping to outrun his arrival to the kitchen. Out of breath, I smiled at Mother who commented on the size and color of the squash. I heard Clara greet Havis at the front door, and ducked into the pantry with the vegetables. Havis

entered the room and instantly moved to preside over the kitchen again. I suddenly felt suffocated, and I opened the pantry window, sucking air into my lungs, keeping an ear on the events unfolding in the kitchen.

“Sister Mercy,” Havis cooed. “You do look considerably better than you did the last time we came knocking on your door.”

Through the door crack, I noticed Clara had two or three inches on her husband, which seemed much more because she kept the top part of her hair teased before settling it into a bun. She looked like an old-fashioned Gibson girl, a century removed from her proper place and time. Up close, Havis Keeble was a shorter man than I’d first realized. Florida had told me that short men were the meanest kind. Her first husband was a short man, and he tried to rule her world. Havis appeared much taller standing behind the pulpit with his voice booming hellfire and conviction.

“I know you and your children have not attended long, but I want you to know we are welcoming you all in as one of our very own. It is an evil thing that has happened with your husband leaving you and the children. But the church is your husband now. We will lead you in the Way until you are free and clear of this thing that has you bound,” Reverend Keeble said. “Now dear Wife, if you wouldn’t mind a few minutes of private conversation before it’s time to leave,” he said as he led Clara back outside to their car.

From the open pantry window, I could catch snippets of their conversation.

“I really think she believes she’ll be able to keep this place...” Clara was saying. “No, Havis, she’s not living in the world of reality...the husband took everything...virtually disappeared...not able to take proper care of her children,” she hissed.

“There's no mortgage on this place...any prospect of a job... Who pays to keep the lights on?...needs of a growing flock...upward out of Patel's...taxes due...let's not be unwise...could be our time, Havis.”

None of it made a whole lot of sense, except for the last bit, which I heard clearly:

“Did you bring in all of my things?” Clara asked.

“I've one more suitcase for you in the car,” he said. “Sister Dot was quite clear.”

I felt my heart leap into my throat. I watched them unload another suitcase out of the trunk to make sure I understood correctly that she was staying. Clara was really staying.

The footstool I stood on under the window was wobbly, and in my haste to get to Mother and relay her the news, it collapsed.

“Are you okay in there?” Mother called in a slight voice.

“Ow,” I moaned and cradled my elbow in my right hand temporarily unable to answer or get up. When I did stand up, I peered out the window on tiptoe and caught sight of the tip of the screen door leaning toward the yard, but no Clara and no Havis.

I began to think better of leaving the pantry. I waited. From my spot, I could see Jolie at the kitchen table, stirring a glass of chocolate milk with a butter knife. I knew she thought Clara was leaving and was celebrating. She had taken her Dove out of her pocket and placed it carefully by the glass, signaling a return to a normal life. Then, Clara entered with the suitcase and Jolie's knife rattled to a halt.

Clara smiled at Jolie, then at Mother and announced, “Now, I wouldn't think of leaving you here all alone after you've been so sick, Sister Mercy,” she said.

“No. It's all taken care of. My things are here, and between me and the sisters of

the church, there will be no need for any more of these hospital visits. You will find, Sister Mercy, that much of these kinds of problems come from a broken link in that invisible chain that each of us wears around our heart. Once it is broken by sin, we allow many of these kinds of things to come into our lives. It is simply a matter of getting rid of the sin and putting that chain back together. You just sit tight. I'm here to stay.”

“No!,” Jolie leapt from the table, pushed past Clara and Havis and out the screen, which at last collapsed with a slow creak and tumbled down the back step.

“Jolie!” Mother yelled after her.

She rose weakly and Havis bent in to take her arm, “Suffer the little children to come to me and do not hinder them,” he said in an almost-whisper. “She'll come out of it when she's good and ready.” “I have to talk to her,” Mother pleaded.

The Reverend helped Mother down the back steps and they struck out in the general direction of the treehouse. Clara, I was surprised to see, lingered in the kitchen. Cautious, I nudged the door ajar.

She was glancing slyly around the empty kitchen like she was taking inventory again. Her eyes scanned the tall cupboards and high windows and, but they came to a full stop on our big oak table. A crooked smile passed across her face. She moved tea glasses from table to sink and began wiping up beneath them. When she arrived at Jolie's glass, she moved slowly, clearing away the spilled chocolate milk and setting aside the butter knife, as if a bit dazed. Her hand shot back and squeezed her hair, a dead giveaway that she was scheming, but I couldn't imagine what interest our cluttered table could hold. I crept out from behind the pantry door in time to see the dishcloth in her hand sweep across the table in collecting crumbs, then curiously land in her skirt pocket. She jumped

a little when she saw me, her alarm turning briefly into a small, but noticeable smile of victory. Maybe her weird delight was another strange Higher Power ritual. Maybe she believed she was washing away our sins for us by cleaning up the table after us.

“Oh, child, you startled me. It's true that children should be seen but not heard, but next time you should make yourself known,” she said as she tugged her hair so hard I could see her temples stretch. Her meditative mood had vanished -- that was clear -- but she straightened her shoulders and was right back to the Clara we were coming to know.

She cleared her throat, “Train a child in the way he should go, and when she is old she shall not depart from it. This is to be your new motto, Hannah. Which means, I should think, that you may finish clearing the table.”

“Now,” she said, “I'd better see to unpacking.”

Clara left me alone in the kitchen, wondering what she was up to. Glancing over the half-cleaned table, I couldn't figure her out at all. What was Clara acting at?

JOE

I

I once fell asleep watching the commercial where a man in white lab coat proclaims, “I’m not a doctor, but I play one on TV.” The words ran across the screen, and as I drifted off, my subconscious must have grabbed that little bit of reality and taken me for a ride. There was nothing special about the day, I’d come in from work late, as usual. Sophia had just finished bathing Isabelle and was putting her to bed. Rarely, these days, did I get home in time to do more than glimpse Isabelle, already in her pajamas, and give her a quick hug. She fussed a bit with her drowsiness and it was Sophia who she went to for comfort each night. Meanwhile, I’d fight to stay awake myself.

I'd collapsed on the sofa, hoping to catch a nap before Sophia returned to tell me again how my work schedule was ruining our family. It was a useless argument, because it was my work, I believed – and she should know -- that made our family. We had both known what the demands would be when we moved to Kentucky just after Isabelle was born. And we had known the potential rewards, as well. This was my dream job, leading a team of architects to redesign and revitalize downtown Lexington. We would stay true to the city's original feel by guiding the removal of historically inaccurate additions, such as neon signs, bricked windows and doors, billboards, or roof lines that had been altered and we would add elements that had, over the course of time, been removed such as balconies, wrought iron, chimneys, trees, and outdoor lampposts, so harmony of form existed downtown. My team would come in, and for the buildings that were unsalvageable, we recreated or re-imagined a new “old” building in its place. It was a job that combined my love of late 19th century/early 20th century urban architecture with the challenges of modern-day necessities.

Already, my team had garnered multiple awards. Besides ones at the local and state level, the National Trust had recognized our preservation efforts as a model for successful artistic and economic revitalization. But what had started out as my passion for good design and balanced, purposeful architecture had, over the three years we'd been there, turned into something else altogether. Sophia understood and lauded preservation and revitalization. She had much less tolerance for what was becoming an insatiable drive for success. Sophia and Isabelle spent long evenings waiting for my workdays to end. I spent the hours at the office checking details on blueprints, navigating city council meetings, golfing with the county commissioner, and drinking with the mayor.

Meanwhile, Sophia had put her career as a photographer on hold to stay home with Isabelle. The focus on my career had become a point of contention between the two of us. I couldn't see how she could possibly not understand what a successful career could mean for our growing family; she might never have to work again. Still she persisted in trying to convince me -- first, to ease up a little, then, in an unimaginable twist, to quit the project entirely.

“It’s scary, Joe,” she’d said to me, “You’re becoming someone I don’t even know anymore.”

Just thinking about the argument to come, I was overwhelmed with a need to sleep that evening. I had turned the television on, hoping it would keep me awake enough to face Sophia even while I rested.

I’m not a doctor, but I play one on TV.

In the dream that followed, I entered the television, stage left, cutting the actor off mid-sentence with the argument that he was indeed a real doctor, that I had seen him perform countless surgeries with my very eyes, and that he had remarkable powers of healing. He simply refused to listen, telling me it had all been an act, and that he had no training to actually do any of it, that he only went through the motions of surgery and read a prepared script telling him exactly what to say. What I had witnessed, he swore to me, was actually the result many well-intentioned, well-informed people creating the appearance of a doctor. He was, he said, only an actor.

I argued with the man, insisting that what he did was wrong, that he had not only fooled me, but he had fooled countless others, who had, perhaps looked to him for wisdom and had truly believed, like me, that he was a doctor.

“Sorry,” he told me, “but really, I’m just me, just a guy. And that’s the point here, isn’t it?”

“Look,” he continued, “it’s never been my intention to have anyone ever seek medical advice from me. It’s my job to make my characters as believable as possible,” he said. “And if I have done so, then I have done my job well, but I’m an actor, Joe, remember that. This isn’t really me. Any more than Joe the architect is really you.”

His statement was cathartic, it felt like an answer to the question 'Is this who I am?' that I had been posing to myself for years, though, until the dream, I could never have articulated it so. I believe this is also what Sophia had been trying to tell me, in her way, when she suggested I drop everything I had worked for and start over someplace else.

I told the actor that I forgave him for fooling me. I even forgave him for all the others that he had potentially offended. And I told him I was grateful for the knowledge he had imparted to me, for he had truly opened my eyes. Then I told him that I loved him for it, and to please not ever let up sharing this truth with the masses. Instead of addressing me directly, he simply looked back at the camera and picked right back up where he had left off.

I’m not a doctor, but I play one on TV.

I awoke with the fullest feeling, one of wholeness. As if I had somehow a great mystery had been revealed and I longed to go to Sophia and tell her I loved her and about my dream, but somehow, that evening, as she croon softly to Isabelle in her bedroom, I let the moment pass and never picked it back up again.

The night before I lost them, the temperature plummeted twenty degrees just as rain began to fall. The next morning, we awakened to a beautiful but treacherous landscape. The sun shone brightly under indigo blue and the world glistened like glass. Ice clasped trees in a frozen embrace. A few cracked and even fell under the weight, breaking the unusual silence of the day. All of creation appeared fragile. Iced and sagging telephone wires might hit the ground and crumble to powder. Throwing a rock across a field might shatter the planet into a million little pieces.

All my meetings had been canceled. My co-workers were staying home. Sophia was elated. She hopped back into bed that morning and made plans for the three of us to hunker down and wrap presents and finish decorating the tree. Even housebound, I had planned to spend the day going over plans for the old Belk-Hudson building. The meeting to move forward with its restoration had been postponed for two weeks; my Key Structures guy had just returned from being out of town and his input on gutting the place was crucial before any work could progress. I held on to a false hope that the weather would ease enough for us to attend my firm's Christmas party that night, where I had hoped to explain to him a more environmentally friendly way to go about interior removals, one on the cutting-edge that would be sure to get us noticed. Sophia wasn't eager to go, but maybe the storm had done me a favor. As badly as I wanted to get to the office and re-do those plans, after seeing Sophia's excitement, I relented. After all, if I could concede to stay home for an entire day, surely Sophia would agree to come to a party that would last, at most, a few hours.

My scheming aside, I hadn't realized how much I need the downtime. Isabelle chattered all day, pulled me to her room where she methodically took the toys, two by

two, from her toy box, lined them up in pairs on the carpet, and explained or named them. There were a lot of Mommy and Daddy among the dolls and stuffed animals. Sophia smiled as she listened in from the door. I smiled back at her amazed at the power of such a innocent gesture, how it could bring such peace between Sophia and me. She had somehow always managed to do that, but I had nearly forgotten since being so consumed with my work. Then, just before lunch, I got a phone call from the secretary letting me know that the annual Christmas party was still on despite the weather.

“You’re kidding, right?” Sophia said. Then, once she saw how serious I was: “Oh, Joe, there’ll be other parties. Let it just be us tonight.”

I convinced her that everyone in the office would be attending and that I had so looked forward to showing her and Isabelle off.

“The staff constantly asks about the two of you,” I lied, taking careful pains to roll up my shirt sleeves evenly. I caught myself doing this when my mind went into work mode.

Only Hank Peters, my right-hand man, and the secretary, Donna Riley, asked about them with any regularity. In all honesty, everyone else had probably forgotten I had any family: I spent all my time talking about work.

“Really, Sophia. This would be a great opportunity for you. Russ Cooper's wife and children will be there. She owns the better pre-school in town. It would be a great opportunity to talk to her about whether Isabelle might start there soon.

“You know, maybe I don't want to send Isabelle to pre-school. I'm happy with her here at home. She has plenty of play dates with the other neighborhood kids, and I just heard about a mom's co-op for at home-learners. If you'd listen to me, you'd know that.

I've been trying to tell you this, but you don't hear anything unless it has to do with how I can accommodate your work schedule," she said.

"Sophia," I persisted. "This party is important to me."

Sophia scoffed, "Party? What you mean is, work."

"Party, party," Isabelle chanted, picking up my cues.

I stayed on Sophia throughout lunch, Isabelle chiming in. Isabelle even went and found a pair of sparkly "party shoes." Finally, as twilight began to set in, Sophia relented, though unhappy, and in a flurry, we dressed and began a slow, careful drive to the party.

During the party, set among the opulence of the boss's Federal-era home in Grate Park in old Lexington, I spent the evening talking up the head of my department, my Key Structures man. Midway through the evening the CEO of our firm, Drake Connelly and Associates, Mr. Connelly himself, pulled me in front of his grand fireplace, lifted his champagne glass and said,

"It's no secret that this year's success falls squarely on the shoulders on Joe Engram and his crew. Lexington has come to be known as a forerunner in solid downtown revitalization, his team's effort having brought over three hundred new jobs to the city. Besides that, the nation is looking to us as an example for integrating successful and economically viable green practices in the removal and reconstruction of historic buildings. This time next year, the annual Drake Connelly and Associates Christmas party may be renamed the Connelly, Engram and Associates party," he said as the room lifted their glasses fêting my accomplishments.

As I got ready to sip the champagne, I looked around for Sophia and Isabelle and

spied Sophia at the edge of the crowd straining to catch a glimpse of what was going on. I wanted to see in her eyes the triumph I felt at that moment. I wanted her to see that we had done it, but all I could see was her shut out by the crowd, Isabelle nearly asleep on her shoulder.

I had the arrogance to wait until the applause died down before I set my champagne on a nearby table, tugged the edge of my sleeves taut, and went to retrieve our coats. Sophia was so grateful she didn't even notice my reluctance, and just as we were leaving Isabelle woke up to accept an over-size candy cane from my boss's wife.

We were driving the Audi Roadster I had rewarded myself after closing a major deal with the city. Sophia had only raised an eyebrow when I bought it. I had known we needed something a bit more practical, but she knew it had been my dream so she said nothing, only smiled when she saw me pulling up the driveway everyday. It would take me months to see what a jerk I'd been. Months before I spotted an Audi just like mine in another state and realized too late that even my car looked selfish. I don't know how she put up with me.

Isabelle, strapped into her flimsier car seat, the one in my car, of course, the car she seldom traveled in, shook her candy cane and swung her feet in time as we sang *Jingle Bells*, interjecting "Hey!" louder than any of us, proud of herself and sensing the jovial mood palpable among us. We were all happy now. I had gotten my way. Sophia was finally going home. And Isabelle had us both – and candy. Sophia and I laughed with joy hearing her. I craned my neck tall to look in the rearview mirror to catch a glimpse of her while she sang. As I did, light shined across the side of Isabelle's face. I pulled my eyes back to the road, checked the color of the traffic light.

“It's green.” I remember telling myself. “It's green.”

As if that fact made me right and us safe.

Which it didn't, of course. Another car, traveling perpendicular to us slipped right through the intersection, unable to stop, though roads had been salted and sanded early that morning. The car, a '96 Nissan I'd find out later, caught the back end of our car and both cars spun around the middle of the intersection in what, I know, were mere seconds, but what hangs in my mind like hours, days, the whole of someone's lifetime, before a third car arrived, careening through the intersection, too, and colliding with the passenger's side door where Sophia sat. The last impact vaulted our car over and over until we landed upside down in the middle of the intersection. The Nissan, completing its pirouette, sideswiped us, slamming our car into a stop sign and lamppost. A police officer told me that Sophia died with the impact of the first car, and Isabelle was killed as our car landed on its hood, sending glass into the backseat and flattening the back of our vehicle. I was still in the emergency room then myself, shivering with shock. I could hardly understand the doctor as he told me my physical injuries amounted to bruises from my seat belt and cuts on my arms and face from the shattering glass.

I'm not a doctor, I told him, but I play one on TV.

He eyed me a moment and said, “But we'll keep you for the night, just to keep an eye on you.” I didn't begin weeping until I got home the next day, the answer so obvious to me finally.

At the funeral home, Sophie's mother stood guard over the caskets. I could barely make it in the building, let alone approach the two boxes where the light of my entire

world lay snuffed out. After the service and the burial, she had my father-in-law drive up behind where I'd parked Sophia's old Honda, blocking me in. With few words, my father-in-law had me open the car's trunk and he unloaded a mass of wrapped Christmas gifts, all of them intended for Sophia and Isabelle.

I tried to talk to her one last time, but she would only crack the passenger-side window an inch and then only to tell me what I already knew.

"This is your fault...your fault," she said.

I couldn't stay home where Sophia's robe still lay sprawled over the arm of her bedroom chair; where Isabelle's half-eaten dinner sat, trails of her fingers drug through the ketchup still visible on her plate; where, in her room, a nightlight glowed in anticipation of her return, her toys waiting in a neat arc around the toy box. And I certainly couldn't go to work either. Any glory earned there was a thin veil of truth of my real happiness and it had all evaporated.

A day after the funeral, I put a few things in the Honda and started for Atlanta, only hours behind Sophia's parents. I knew I would never be welcome there again, but Sophia and I had met in Atlanta, she at Agnes Scott and me at Georgia Tech, and it was the last place I could remember un-blighted happiness and I thought if I went back to where we had started out life together I would feel close to Sophia and Isabelle.

On the interstate, my cell phone kept ringing. At the office, everyone knew what had happened. I just couldn't bear anyone's sympathy. I certainly didn't deserve it. I didn't answer the phone once, and I tossed it out the window before I had crossed the Tennessee state line.

In Atlanta, I parked on the tree-lined streets of my in-law's Virginia-Highlands home, far enough away that her mother or father couldn't see me, I thought, but close enough to feel that I was nearly home. I tried to work up the nerve to go in and say something, anything that might express how sorry I was, but I could never find the words. There weren't any. Again and again, I drove away, stopping at a local package store more than once. With the liquor, I almost had myself convinced to get out of the car and ring their doorbell, but a glimpse of Isabelle's other, better car seat still strapped behind me, cracker crumbs littering its seat, drained any bravery I might have conjured.

In the car, I drank heavily. I never drove, just sat in my car and drank for three days. The morning of the third day, a police officer woke me by tapping on my window.

Sophia's father had finally spotted the car and had tried to rouse me. When I didn't respond, he called the cops. Now, Sophia's mother and father waited on the curb by their house as the officer coaxed me back into the world.

"Sir," he said tapping loudly on my window with the butt of a flashlight, "you can't stay here."

"Where can I go?" I wept, every defense gone. "I have no home."

A young policeman wearing a shiny new wedding ring of his own, didn't seem to have any inkling of what was happening, but he took note of my face, still scratched from the accident, and the peeling bandage on my forearm, and he extended me some undeserved mercy because instead of simply ordering me to clear out, he asked gently, "Are you feeling all right to drive, sir?"

I nodded.

"Then follow me."

II

When I was seven, a beggar came to my grandmother's back door. He was a tired dirty man

wearing a pair of reflective sunglasses. I had always thought those sunglasses on him looked so

out of place on him and I held on to that image with a certain amount of pride: those sunglasses were

too nice for him. He didn't deserve them.

But who's to say what one deserves. Or if we get what we deserve. I surely didn't.

The young officer lead me away from my in-laws tree-lined neighborhood – civilization, I thought – all the way downtown to a narrow road beside a church parking lot.

“Now, you can continue on, sir, if you like,” he said. “But there’s a soup kitchen inside that church, and you sure look as if you could use a meal and some company.”

Minutes later, I was standing in line at the soup kitchen, my belly churning, much the way that beggar's must have that day he came knocking, and I was almost laughed when I glanced down at myself to see my Brooks Brothers shirt, with its sleeves perfectly rolled, now stained and reeking of alcohol. I was, I realized, no better than a beggar in sunglasses.

I couldn't remember eating since leaving Lexington, and I scarfed down the first few bites of vegetable soup faster than I had meant to and soon found myself retching into a napkin. It was under those circumstances, at my very worst, that I met Father Lonagan. He wore a brown friar's frock cinched with a black belt and had his outfit not convinced me he possessed wisdom I did not have, his gray beard patched with white did. He approached my table followed by a large scruffy-looking dog. He took one look at my red-rimmed eyes and unkempt state and led me first to the men's room where I finished retching while he waited. He waited, too, while I washed my face, handing me a clean paper towel afterwards. Then, he led me to the outside back of the kitchen where he gave me the fresh heel of homemade wheat bread.

“Slowly,” he advised.

As I ate, the dog sat and watched me expectantly, while Father Lonagan spoke about the weather, about his schedule on Mondays and then, in an unforced way, of the benefits of staying clean. I couldn't bear to tell him my story yet. I let him think it was drugs that had done me in.

He rested his hand on my shoulder and told me to stay there at the shelter of Saint

Matthias until God told me what to do next. I didn't tell him I hadn't had many conversations with God lately. Instead, I asked him how I would know.

"Peace," he said. "You will have great peace when you find the right thing to do."

"Let's find you a bed," he said.

"I'm not a poor man," I told him, but when he didn't answer right away, I grew confused. Maybe I was wrong. Maybe I was the poorest man I'd ever met. It was late afternoon, the shelter filling up, but I didn't notice. I unrolled my sleeves, smoothing the lines where the folds had been. In that thin cot, I slept deeply since leaving Lexington without the benefit of alcohol. I slept and slept a dreamless sleep and when I woke in the morning, a plan of sorts emerged.

After a breakfast I managed to keep down, I walked back to a package store but, on the threshold, decided not to enter. Instead, I set out to retrieve my car. It had been impounded overnight apparently, and working to get it out of hock proved to be just what I needed to clear my head, getting me thinking again. I needed a new reality, and Lexington could no longer be that.

I took a leap of faith, though then, I could not have articulated it so, and drove right back to the shelter where I turned the keys over to Father Lonagan.

"Please take it as token of appreciation for your kindness," I explained to him in his office. His big dog looked at me and barked as I spoke.

"The church does not provide its services then require your vehicle or anything else. Don't give anything out of obligation," he said.

"It's not that, Father. I feel compelled to do it. It's something I want and need to do. More than that, I have great peace about it," I said to him in complete sincerity.

The dog ran over to me and heaved its huge paws on my chest. I backed away as I had never fully warmed to animals.

“Solomon likes you,” he said. “He came to us much the same way you did, looking for food.”

“Tell you what,” the priest went on, accepting the keys in his broad hand, “I’ll hold onto these while you’re here. And maybe you’ll keep an eye on this one.”

I looked down at Solomon whose wagging tail had a bit of paper caught in its fur. I studied him a moment. Isabelle would have liked him. I laid my hand on his head with the thought of her and he lay himself across my feet.

With that, I was accepted at Saint Matthias.

Days passed into months staying at the shelter. Solomon became my constant companion though I was reluctant to accept him and did my best to discourage him following me through the shelter as I worked. Where I had once stood in line for a meal and bed, I now spooned food onto trays at lunch and handed out brown woolen blankets and unfolded cots for others at nights. I called the firm I once worked for back in Lexington and they oversaw the business of selling the house. I had all of our belongings, except for a few boxes I asked the secretary to lay aside, given to local charities.

It seemed I had found something, if not happiness, then a dulled contentment. I slept deeply at night and my life took on a hum that I did not have, even while married to Sophia.

Shortly after the house sold, Father Lonagan asked if I might be interested in a weekend retreat to visit fellow followers of Christ at a monastery just outside the city.

Though unsure what to expect, I willingly agreed, and found many others - some seekers, some seasoned followers - of a balanced inner and outer life, where life in the Spirit functioned as a counterpoint to the flesh.

As I unloaded my things and Father Lonegan began his goodbye, he urged Solomon back into the car, but the dog hid behind my legs and refused to budge.

“Very well, you can stay with him,” he said, searching for Solomon's eyes behind the fur that eclipsed them from view. I had no idea how that dog managed to walk around without bumping into anything.

Solomon never left my side that weekend as we discovered the life of the Cistercian monks. Not only did they personify loving anonymity, their meditative silences intensified the humble business of their lives. They plowed fields and pulled their own vegetables for supper. They kept the grounds clean and grass low by swinging a scythe. The brothers looked for God in the soil of each and every moment of daily life, not just when praying and worshipping. It became living a life without division. Their chanted prayers at various times throughout the day, breathing the same breath, one person's breathing spread out among everyone there. Solomon romped through the fields that weekend and won the hearts of the monks, who allowed him to enter the monastery where at vespers the first evening, he laid down at the back of the sanctuary watching and listening in what appeared deep reverence and silence.

On Sunday I asked, “Father Lonegan, might I stay on here with the monks a bit longer. I'm happy to put in whatever work is necessary to make up for the burden of my presence and Solomon's.”

“They've already prepared a room for you. I intended to recommend the same

thing,” he said.

Each day offered no surprise and this comforted me: I rose early to matins and splashed my face with cold water; Solomon and I ate with the other brethren in utter silence, then I grabbed my scythe and set out across the damp grass of the fields where I worked alone, again in silence on three acres of pastureland allotted just to me, while Solomon stayed close by resting under a tree or occasionally followed the trail of some scent he had gotten whiff of.

By noon each day, I was nothing more than scythe and breath. On Wednesday, Brother Reginald brought cold water out to me in my field, just as he had done the previous days. As I took the drink from him, the water in my tin cup flashed the bright noonday sun onto my face and I suddenly remembered the wreck. Everything came flooding back to me as if it had just happened. I didn't try to analyze what I might have done differently; I allowed the memory to unfold. I saw myself at Sophia and Isabelle's funerals. I saw Sophia's mother, unbent, protecting her daughter's casket as if I could still do her harm, and I saw myself getting in my car and driving to Atlanta. Then I remembered something that I had forgotten.

It was in the early hours of the day after the funerals. The sun had just begun to pull a blue sky into focus, and I found myself rolling through a valley, the green fields unfurled themselves long across a flat expanse. Mountains on either side appeared. The feeling of peace was fleeting, only lasting a minute. But it had stood in such sharp contrast to the state I was in, I had made note of where I was. “Now Leaving Tom's Creek” whizzed past the windshield on a small, almost imperceptible sign. I was surprised I hadn't missed it. It was the only indication that I was ever there in the first

place and I didn't even know what state it was in. Resting on my scythe, the cool water purging the heat from my body, the image lingered, I felt as if I had passed back through. I wondered if I might set out to find it.

Later that evening, I felt a tug in my chest that didn't go away. The longer I worked in the fields, the more the shift to start living again and to make some firm decisions about what to do next made itself home inside of me. It stayed until Saturday when Father Lonagan came to pick me up for the return to Saint Matthias. Just as I had known with great certainty that staying on at the monastery for the past few months had been the right thing to do, I was certain now that I was being nudged, that it was time for me to move on. The thought of Tom's Creek burned in my mind.

On the return, we stopped for road construction in a little town, and through the passenger's window my gaze rested on an old Presbyterian church building from the turn of the last century. A plain, clapboard building with three or four steps leading up to its small chapel, its old iron bell still stood to the right of the door, an increasingly rare find. My boyhood memories of attending just such a church and my love of architecture stemmed from a very similar building, but late eighteenth-century coastal Virginia. I blinked to make sure I was seeing properly a figure walking to its doorway. For a moment, I thought it myself that I watched.

A man, my age, with my gait, dressed nearly identically to me that day, fumbled with keys to unlock the door. From the back seat, Solomon saw him, too, and barked. He looked at me and back at the man and whimpered in confusion. I leaned forward in my seat and rolled the car window down to get a better view. He dropped the keys and when he turned to pick them up I clearly saw it was someone I did not know. My heart beat fast

in my chest with relief, but I felt this was no accident and my heart refused to calm down. I felt frightened but in a way that energized me not terrified me; I believed and already knew I was being called to ministry.

Next day, I told Father Lonagan what I believed was being asked of me.

“How can I help?” was all he said.

Things moved quickly after that. That bank account of mine was finally going to go to good use. I arranged for my own apartment, one with a provision for a large dog in the lease, and enrolled in Columbia Theological Seminary for the Presbyterian ministry there in Atlanta. I spent two years under the tutelage of quietly passionate professors and I developed a particular attachment and engagement with the life of Paul, with whom I felt a deep understanding and kinship. I sent Sophia’s parents an invitation to my graduation, but only Father Lonagan and two of the monks came to the ceremony.

“What are your plans now that you've graduated?” Father Lonagan, who'd called to congratulate me, asked.

“I've thought I might try a place called Tom's Creek, it's just over the Alabama line, I believe, and see if I can't find a church there needing pastoring. I drove through there on the way from Kentucky and it's somehow stuck in my mind a place I'd like to try,” I told him, though hearing the words sounded like a shaky plan at best, founded on nothing more than a whim.

I couldn't yet tell him that I believed God spoke to me for the first time while passing through, that it was there He first made Himself known to me.

“My dream is to take the money from the sale of the house in Kentucky and build

a church among its fields,” I said, rolling and unrolling my sleeves so they matched exactly.

“Would you consider field work for Saint Matthias first?” he asked.

“More grass cutting, Father? Have I gone to school to minister to weeds?” I joked.

“Joe, we're developing an outreach ministry to a growing Latino population in Conyers. I wonder if you'd help get things started. ESL classes, steering immigrant workers toward citizenship, encouraging attendance at Saturday mass,” he said.

“You do realize I'm Presbyterian,” I said, and we both laughed, having spoken often of inter-denominational feuds, when there exists only one body of Christ.

But how could I refuse?

Before I knew it, another year had passed, one I had spent in the field, co-laborers in Christ with my Catholic brothers. I longed to teach and had found occasional work as a substitute pastor at several local churches. I grew close to the families I worked with at the outreach, and though my Spanish was sketchy at best, I understood the loss many of them faced, leaving families behind in search of opportunity. It was the guilt many of them suffered in leaving loved ones that they may never see again that I seem to minister to most. The guilt I understood best. I spoke over and over about forgiving oneself, of sacrificial living, until one day I woke and found I had started to believe it myself. The pain of losing Sophia and Isabelle followed me, would follow me the rest of my days, but I had moved into gratitude for their short, beautiful lives and had begun to forgive myself and let the slow unravel of the tether of guilt I still lugged with me begin.

One evening at the outreach center, a local man brought in someone who spoke very little English and who appeared lost. He had come to the U.S. from Mexico to find

his brother and had gotten off in Atlanta, thinking he was at the right stop. He was unable to read in Spanish, let alone English, having attended only the first few days of school in each grade from first grade through fifth. He carried a letter with him, from his brother that I had Lucía, our ESL instructor, translate for me:

Horacio,

I write to tell you about our life here in Alabama and encourage you to come and stay with us. I want to tell you it is not always easy, days are long but pay is good compared to work in Oaxaca. And there is much of it, if you are willing to work for the right price. As you may have heard, I send Mamá a portion regularly so she will not have to work. We have friends here, none from our state, though I have met several from Chiapas and Pueblo.

Things are not so different here. On Saturdays my wife, Constanacia, and my children, Hector, eight, and María Isabel, four, and I go to a trade day. It is very similar to the outdoor mercado we have in Oaxaca. It is possible to buy for my yard a goat or chickens or a pig (but they are dirty animals and require much trouble and care and in the town their smell carries). It is also possible to buy all the fruits and vegetables we need for a whole week and pay much less than the grocery. I have found there the tuna: the red fruits of the cactus. My wife burns off the tiny hairs that bite you and then mashes them to jelly. From that, she can make the sweetest, richest juice. Do you remember, when as children, we once drank a whole pitcher our own mother made for the next day's lunch? And do you remember she did not have to discipline us because we vomited from our indulgence all night?

Many different tempers exist at the mercado as they do in other places here. To some, we are invisible, yet others will nod and say 'Good morning.' All are happy to take our money. Though, there are vendedores who will not sell to us. Yesterday, Constanica sent Hector, who speaks English well, to ask the price for the yellow squash and to buy the soft peppermint sticks. When he gave the money for the candies to the old farmer, the man hid his hands in his pockets and shook his head 'no.' My Hector thought that he did not give this man the right amount of money. Hector asked him "How much are the candies?" and the old man said that they were not for sale. Hector was very confused and asked me to check the money in his hand. I took the money and counted it. It was correct. My Hector is muy inteligente. He has missed less than ten problems on his math tests all year. But, when I went to give the man the money, he took his hands from his pockets, shook a finger at me, pointed at my family and told us that he does not serve our kind and we should go back where we come from and quit stealing all the money and the jobs from his people.

I did not know this at first because I could not understand what he said, but I ask Hector. And Hector, who is a little man, told me without fear. He told me because he does not want to see his father get trouble or more shame by being confused.

On this day, my family and I left the mercado early. When we arrived at our car, Constanica had a hole in the bag of her potatoes. They spilled on the ground but I told her not to worry, that we could put them in the trunk. As I opened our car, I could see that someone had put his truck in the front of it. This made it difficult to go home because behind me was a ditch. Constanica gave everyone a few potatoes and we put them in our pockets. This day, my family and I walked home.

But I do not mean to go on about the bad things, there are many good things, too. We do the best we can to carry on the traditions that mean so much to our family. Constancia takes María Isabel into the kitchen with her almost always the way Mamá did when Ximena was a girl. After the mercado, I took Hector to the yard with me after I noticed he would not look at my face and did not want to be in a room with me. Outside, in the back, we have a small garden and I showed him how to use the machete to cut down the trees and the bushes behind the house to make room for more vegetables. It is in this way that I can show Hector who I am, so he can know who he is. If you were here, you could show him other ways to be a man, and he can confide in you the things he cannot tell me.

Sunsets here they rival the beauty of the ones at home. Our neighbors, Alejandro and his mother, are hondureños and we trade our peppers and tomatoes for their yellow squash. We also bring to them roses from my wife, so they can plant them at the front door to remember Our Lady of Guadalupe.

Last night, when the sky was all the way dark, Hector and I started our walk back to town for the car. At the car, we found everyone had gone for the day. Just as Hector closed his door, the night clouds moved across the sky and we saw the moon was full. It is a sign, I think, that fate is smiling down on us and that you will come and join our family. I smiled at Hector with the thought of your coming and in our in silence on the way home, I felt certain that you will come.

I wait here for you knowing that as soon as our sister Ximena and her family take Mamá in to live with them, you will find your way to your new home here with us. I have enclosed enough money for your journey. Call me when you get to town and I will find

you at the station. Pack lightly, we have everything here you will need. I am anxious for you to meet my family.

Con cariño,

*Tu hermano, Raúl
514 Henderson Drive
Tom's Creek, AL*

I am anxious for you to meet my family.

The words nearly made me weep, but it was the address that caught my eye:

Tom's Creek, Alabama.

“He’s destitute, of course,” Lucía told me. “He has no way to reach this brother of his, Raúl.”

But I’d already realized this latest chapter of my life was closing. This was my sign to move on.

“Yes, he does,” I declared. “I’ll take him there myself.”

HANNAH

IV

When I was younger, I liked to lie on my back beneath a chair in the kitchen watching Mother paint. My hands rested on my stomach as dabs of painted dots and lines became leaves and branches, and I swallowed hard with satisfaction at the marvel of her talent when it all came to life. Jolie took up the habit, too. She would lie beside her chair on the floor, her hands resting behind her head, mesmerized and comforted at the same time. As I got older, I would sit at the table with my head on my folded arms peering over Mother's shoulder, trying to guess what she intended before the form became obvious. She hummed with her contentment, and I was lulled by it.

Mother is tall and thin, still the local beauty with long, thick, dark hair that hangs at the back of her chair, and that pale, unblemished skin inherited from her father, a Southern man of Irish descent. I don't think of her that I don't think how, when others are around, she smiles the biggest and laughs the best. She puts everyone at ease. Take, for instance, last year at the Rourke County Fair over by the exhibits booths. We were at the juried art section looking to see if Mother's painting *Late Afternoon, Tom's Creek* had won any recognition. In the painting, the mist is just starting to rise over the creek that runs all the way through our town. Fireflies have come out, and a few light up one corner of the canvas. Anybody that saw that painting and knew anything at all about Tom's Creek would know that it wasn't one particular spot along the creek. It could be anywhere alongside it. It's just that she captured, perfectly, I think, that time of day around here just after the sun has set and some light lingers in the sky but the dark is settling in, too. Beside the painting hung a blue ribbon. Jolie shouted "Yes!" and stroked its blue silk. I held onto Mother's arm, "You won!" I shrieked in excitement. Just then, Jolie witnessed a passerby drawn to our commotion and stop to study the work for a moment. He remarked to his companion that the painting didn't deserve the prize because he recognized that particular spot and it was plain as day that the artist had left out Humboldt's Fill and Chill in the distance. Jolie got mad and pulled Mother by the hand right up next to him and ask would he like to repeat that because right here was the artist! The man, undone but not completely put off, explained uneasily what he thought, getting more and more brave in his explanation as he went along. Mother stood quiet in front of the picture for a moment before saying: "You know, you are so right." She then pulled out a small sketchpad she always keeps in her purse and began, while he watched, to bring Humboldt's into life.

He peered over her shoulder as she recaptured the whole thing right then and there in pencil. Even providing her with a few suggestions, which she gracefully accepted with enthusiasm. When she finished, she handed the sketch over to him, and said, "Here's the picture as it *should* be. Thank you." He left smiling.

Mother's creativity flourished after her win at the fair. She went to bed dreaming of and woke to brush and canvas daily. New paintings of Holiday appeared in the hall. In one, long shadows pull themselves across the front lawn, the interior windows glow with the outside waning light, and the salmon pink and orange bits of sunset hold on to their last minutes of color. In another, family members of Holiday, past and present, sit around a long picnic table heavy laden with food. In that one, a freshly married Bert Mama and Bert Daddy sit with Grandma and Grandpa Holiday, now long gone, and unknown guests mingle with children whose faces I have seen around Tom's Creek. One of the children chase Old Sam, Grandpa's favorite dog, up a low, slanted branch into the crook of a Catalpa tree, one of Old Sam's favorite tricks.

She painted murals on our bedroom walls. In mine, horses gallop at full speed among Holiday's fields. If you spin around and around the middle of the floor, they will run for you. In Jolie's, ladies and gents in Victorian dress stroll along a pier, like Coney Island; an old-fashioned roller coaster sails riders over its peak in the background, and a man in a red and white striped shirt hands a balloon to a little boy dressed in blue velvet who is accompanied by his grandmother. Too nice for Jolie, if you ask me. Mother emitted an inner light during that time that not even JP, who told her she lived in a fantasy world, could extinguish.

The day after Clara moved in, Mother rose early. Silverware rattled as she rummaged through drawers searching for paint tubes; closet doors knocked opened and closed as she searched for easels and canvas; and furniture knocked about the old floors echoing to the upstairs bedrooms where Jolie and I slept. I feared Clara, who had previously slept in a room at the end of the upstairs hall, but who had now reestablished herself in the bedroom at the top of the stairs, might rouse to attend Mother before I could get the chance to have her all to myself for a bit. I speculated Clara had chosen that room so she could watch Mother, whose room adjoined hers through a long closet that spanned the length of one wall. That closet was a favorite spot on the rainy days that Jolie and I played hide-and-seek; we could never catch each other there. If you hear footsteps approach, you simply crawl out the closet door into the next room and make a safe escape from your pursuer. I slipped out of bed without brushing my hair or changing out of my pajamas and tiptoed past Clara's room and down the stairs to find Mother.

As if by instinct, Mother was up just as the sun began to pour into the kitchen. She had turned in for bed early the previous night. The excitement of coming home, the energy of the Fourth of July, and Jolie's reaction to the news of Clara moving in had taken its toll on her. Mother had plodded to the base of the treehouse, Havis in tow, with Jolie to come down, but had given up after ten minutes, clear that Jolie, in her stubbornness, was giving them the silent treatment. Mother didn't have the energy to insist Jolie come down, and she eventually returned to the house to rest. She lay on her bed napping while I unpacked and put away her things, and in a little while, we heard Jolie's bedroom door slam, which brought a smile to Mother's face in her sleep, knowing Jolie had made enough peace with herself to come down from the treehouse, and she rolled over onto her

side, exhaling in relief.

That evening, Jolie showed up to supper on the back porch without speaking or looking at Clara as we ate Bert Daddy's ribs, some unsalted potato salad that Clara had concocted, and Higher Power's watermelon, which was pleasantly sweet and cold, and which invigorated us as we sat in our own silences, oppressed by a night air, thick with humidity. Breezes had stopped and nothing moved, sound production became a chore, so, we were grateful to let the cold watermelon and the glimpses of Tom's Creek's firework display fired from the courthouse in the middle of town do the talking for us.

As I ate the ribs, I thought about Florida. She was waiting for me to call her, but I couldn't make a phone call without alerting Clara. I had a bad feeling that the help she and Havis spoke about giving us had more to do with the church's interests than it did with Mother, Jolie, and me.

The next morning, I found Mother standing in the middle of the kitchen, hands latched behind her neck, lost in thought.

"Hannah? Did I wake you? I'm sorry. I can't seem to find any of my paints or brushes," she said. "I had the best dream last night, and I woke up feeling like painting. Do you know what's happened to them all?"

"Clara organized the house," I said. "Your supplies could be in the barn."

Mother and I walked across the yard, through the line of plums to the barn a few feet from the Chinaberry tree. Mother's galoshes squeaked wet in the morning grass, and dew splashed up my bare feet and around my ankles. The door, heavy with age, creaked opened to reveal an entire studio's worth of art material.

“Wow,” Mother said. “When it's all in one place, it's quite the collection. I didn't realize I had so much.”

She raised her eyebrows at me and said, “Now that's what I call a blessing,” and she laughed, profoundly happy to see it all. She must have felt she'd opened a treasure chest containing nothing but her heart's desires. Her laughter made my heart swell.

I helped Mother locate, then lug, a box of paints and brushes, an easel and canvas, and her old paint-splattered shirt she wore to paint in, to the back porch. I spread her things out while she fixed tea and toast for our breakfast. From the kitchen table, I watched as she began dabbing Burnt Sienna onto the canvas. The sound of footfall in the hallway brought a tightness in my throat, and I turned to see Jolie rubbing the sleep from her eyes. Relieved, I said, “Good morning, punk.” She smoothed her hair, wiry from the night's sleep, and scuffed over to the canvas.

“Good morning, Jolie,” Mother said sitting in front of her canvas, pressing a kiss onto her cheek.

She yawned then rasped her first words for the day: “What is it?”

“It's something I saw at the hospital,” she said. “Guess.”

“I don't know. Somebody in a wheelchair?” she yawned.

“No. It's not that,” I told her. “Wheelchairs don't have pointy ears.”

“Very good, Hannah,” Mother said. “It's a dog.”

“They don't have dogs at the hospital. They're not allowed,” Jolie said.

“This one was. He's a therapy dog. He lived on the floor with us the whole time. His name is Charlie,” Mother said.

Jolie says, “Why can't we have a dog? You always said that JP didn't like them.

But he's not here now. Can we get one? Please?" Jolie begged.

Mother stopped painting, looked at Jolie and whispered, "I tell you what, as soon as we can afford to feed one - then, yes."

"Hooray!" Jolie shouted, the news jolting her awake.

"Really?" I couldn't believe it.

Jolie rolled laughing onto the floor for no other reason than from the pure joy of hearing such a happy memory.

"You look like a dog yourself," I chided and pressed my foot into her side. She pulled her arms and legs up off the floor and panted, her tongue lolled out to one side. I bent and tickled her middle. Jolie barked.

"Quietly, girls. You may wake our guest," Mother said.

Jolie growled.

I have an early memory of standing on the back porch, watching JP putting up the swing set he had bought a few months before Jolie's birth. I remember trying to follow him into the back yard, but Mother told me I could watch from the porch and when it was ready we would try it out. She slung me across her hip, and we watched him together.

"We haven't had a dog in forever. His name was Casey, wasn't it, Mother?" I said.
"The dog. Our dog."

"You remember Casey?" Mother asked. Her face was so pale in the morning sun.

"JP said Casey got in the way of the swing set while he assembled it. Its legs weren't fully planted into the ground and it tipped over on top of Casey. Right? That's what happened, isn't it, Mother?"

Mother grew quiet, "Not quite."

She breathed a long, heavy sigh and instructed Jolie to fix herself a cup of tea.

“I had never seen him angry like that,” she said, as if in a daze. “My first instinct was to leave. Grab an overnight bag and take us both to stay with Bert Mama. Then, I told myself that I was overreacting and surely Casey wasn't badly hurt. Maybe it was an accident. Maybe JP hadn't meant to hit him so hard. But Casey died three days later. Your father wouldn't let me take him to the vet; he said we shouldn't spend the money. He knew that dog wouldn't make it, but he was afraid someone would find out the truth and risk having people talk.”

“I'm glad you didn't remember any of that, Hannah,” she said. “It would've been an ugly thing to carry this long.”

I had only vague recollection of the event, but while Mother told the story, I recalled the sound of poles flying and clanking to the ground, the sharp crack of a curse in the air and Mother's arms tightening around me. I remember Mother setting me on the floor and the confusion over the hurt dog, and JP yelling at Mother as he entered the back porch.

“My daddy wouldn't kill a dog,” Jolie said not heading for the tea, but instead intent on hearing the conversation. “He wouldn't hurt...” But she caught herself as she looked up at Mother for an answer and saw Mother's still damaged face.

“I'll bet JP needed help with that swing set,” I replied trying to smooth things over.

“I'm sure he did, Hannah. I'm sure we all needed a little help then. Something to get us to a better spot,” Mother said as she sipped her tea. She looked into her glass and asked aloud, “Is this Majestea?”

Jolie gasped, “My Dove!” and ran to the table where she last remembered leaving it.

“Oh, no. It's not here anywhere!” she wailed.

“Good morning,” we heard Clara call from the hallway. Mother got up to console Jolie, who fell against the wall crying into her knees. Clara surveyed the scene and seeing Jolie in the floor asked,

“What has happened here? Has the child fallen? Is she hurt?”

“She's lost something dear to her, I'm afraid. Not a very good way to start the day,” Mother said.

Jolie's body began to convulse with the tears, and she coughed like she might be sick. “Maybe you left it upstairs, honey,” Mother said. “Or in the treehouse? Where did you see it last?”

“It was right there,” Jolie pointed to the table. “I left it laying beside my glass of chocolate milk.”

“Are you sure? You were pretty upset yesterday.”

At first, Clara said nothing, but pressed at the bun freshly spun at the back of her neck, and let Mother guide the search. But she obviously couldn't help herself.

“Anger is a terrible master, young lady. What occurs in anger is always a loss,” she said to Jolie.

All the energy of the morning was seeping away. Mother, looking wan again, held onto the back of a chair and hurried to intervene before Jolie came back at Clara.

“Jolie, you have to calm down. Things don't just disappear. It has to be somewhere. Hannah, take Jolie out to the field and help her look for her Dove. She may

have dropped it on the way to the treehouse yesterday. I'll make us all some breakfast.”

To my surprise, Jolie went with me without another word.

I tried to lead Jolie around the outside of the house, but she refused to look. She said the only place it could be was the kitchen table.

“No, Hannah: I know I left it there. I did,” she said. Her eyebrows furrowed: Jolie’s deep-thought look.

We walked in the front door, and Jolie shot up the stairs toward the bedrooms.

“Jolie, where are you going?” I yelled after her. I heard a bedroom door slam again and left her to fume. She would not be reason with in her current state.

In the kitchen, Mother set a pot of coffee on to brew for Clara, a fresh pot of tea for Jolie, and soon was buttering toast for both. Clara brought her steaming mug to her lips and stopped short at the sight of Mother's workstation on the porch. Her chair scraped across the floor as she rose.

“Sister Mercy, do you really want to fall back into this pit?”

From the sink, Mother threw a dishtowel over her shoulder and turned to face Clara who was motioning toward the new painting.

Clara's syllables were chunked into small, loud units, and her face took on an expression much like that of her husband's when he was warning us all about the devil from his pulpit.

“Don't look back onto old ways. Remember what happened to Lot's wife? She looked back and was changed into a pillar of salt. It's narrow way that leads to life.”

Clara neared Mother's canvas, where the figure of Charlie the dog had just begun to come into view. She looked at it and shook her head.

“Summer's Revival services begin next week at Higher Power. You and the children will attend. I can't think of a better possible way to begin this new phase in your life than with revival. Trust that the Lord has put me here for such a time as this. And to help continue to get the physical state of things around here in shape, I took the liberty of calling Brother Harold Richmond about the broken doors and trim. He should be here around noon.”

I suddenly felt stifled, like the air has been sucked out of the room again, and that put me in mind of Florida. I hadn't kept my promise to call her. Now was the time.

I headed upstairs where I found Jolie had invading the front guest room, pulling musty-smelling skirts and dresses from the bureau drawers Clara had so carefully filled the previous afternoon. She turned out each drawer of the nightstand and shook out Clara's shoes. Her despair left nothing in Clara's bedroom unturned. I left her in the middle of her fury and to the phone Mother's room.

“Hello,” Florida answered.

“It's me,” I said.

“Why didn't you call me yesterday after your company left?” she asked. “I listened all evening for you.”

“The company never left,” I whispered.

“Never left? Why? Did your Mother invite them to stay?” she asked.

“No. And both of them aren't here,” I said, “just Clara. She says she's here to see us through this time of change, to readjust since JP left. She's bringing us food. I heard her say the church is paying the bills around here, too. I don't think she intends to leave. Ever.”

“Now, listen, Hannah...” Florida began.

A presence on the stairs startled me.

“I’ve got to go, Florida,” I said.

I dashed into Mother's closet and crawled through its length to Clara's closet at the other end.

“Jolie!” I hissed. “Get in. Someone's coming”

Jolie ducked into the closet, and we closed the door and headed out the other end.

We had barely escaped Clara's notice. She was not helping anyone readjust.

Already we had begun to feel like we did when JP was home, always on our guard and even in the way.

A week later, the Dove was still missing. Surprisingly Clara had said nothing about the state of her bedroom. Sunday evening, she invited the women of Higher Power to dinner at Holiday in an effort to broaden Mother's circle of church acquaintances and, I thought, to deepen her hold on Mother. Yet more of Higher Power's stocks from their food pantry arrived, and the house filled with the smells of unfamiliar dishes and a peculiar harsh, stunted lilt that characterized some of the women who attended Higher Power. Mother wandered through the house, lost among them, until she landed on the back porch next to Sister Joanna Weatherly.

It had been Sister Joanna who had comforted and befriended her our first visit to Higher Power. The rest of the women milled about the house and grounds looking everything over, commenting on the fields, the view and the house and its outbuildings, a barn, an old smokehouse, and a corn crib. Clara led a group of severe-looking women

with tall, coiffed hair around, pointing into the distances and asking them questions and their opinions on Holiday, its proximity to surrounding communities, and the benefits of living in such close contact with Creation – mainly how many biblical truths might be revealed to one who lived in harmony with the cycles of nature – sowing and reaping, for example.

Jolie stayed in the treehouse. I joined her halfway through the evening.

“Don't come up here,” she said.

I could hear the sound of plastic crumpling, and curious. I poked my head through the entrance.

Boxes and boxes of Majestea Brand Tea lay torn open, teabags spilling from every corner littered the treehouse floor.

“Where did you get all of these?” I asked.

“The food pantry had them. When I was there, helping load groceries into her car, I spied them. They don't give them out; they keep all the good stuff on a shelf in the back for themselves,” she said.

“That's stealing,” I said.

“Yeah,” Jolie said, willfully misunderstanding me. “They're a bunch of thieves.”

Her search hadn't turned up a Dove, though she had managed to find an ox and a rabbit to replace the ones that had broken.

“I'm getting out of here,” I said.

Inside the house, Mother began to show Sister Joanna around. As they walked through the hallway, Joanna slowed and scanned the wall of her paintings.

Joanna looked around before confiding in Mother.

“These are wonderful. You have a real knack for capturing a particular time of day. Just looking at this one of spring, I can smell the heat of the sun warming the earth after a long winter. I remember my grandmother, and I would plant buttercups in the late fall and on just such a day as the one you've captured here, their yellow heads would have just started to unfold,” she said. “I haven't thought of that in years.”

“You know, I used to dabble in pastels before I married and we started attending Higher Power. My art teacher in high school once told me I had real talent. I feel the tug to pick it up now and again, but I try to fight those urges. So much to do and there are so many others to think of, you know.”

“Sister Joanna, I want to ask you something. Why would we have such urges and talent if we weren't intended to use them?” Mother asked. “The feeling you got when you looked at my painting just then. Couldn't that count as a service of some kind? Didn't the memory of a happy time spent with your grandmother bring you good?” Mother asked.

Sister Joanna narrowed her eyes, and she studied Mother for a moment before moving in close to her. Looking around to make sure no one else could hear she said, “I have often thought the same thing myself. Grandmother, herself, used to tell me it's okay to be Martha as long as you also know when to be Mary.”

“Joanna, I have something I think you might like to see,” Mother replied.

Mother, moved toward the attic with the intention of showing Sister Rosanna her “secret” project, but froze on the stair as she heard Clara's voice coming down the hall followed by the high-pitched laughs of her entourage. They ascended anyway, but as Mother turned the knob, she found it locked.

Mother's grip tightened on the handle and her ears reddened, a clear sign she was

angry. I hadn't seen her angry in...well, I couldn't remember the last time, maybe years.

“Sister Mercy?” Clara called from the bottom of the stairs. “Won't you come down and join us? I have some people I'd like you to get better acquainted with.”

Mother moved to the top of the stairs and peered down at Clara surrounded by a smiling mob of coiffed sisters.

Seeing Mother angry put me in mind of Florida. Florida would never have stood for such a takeover. Florida would sweep these women, their smiles, their hair, their good intentions, their casseroles, out the door with a broom in a heartbeat.

“Sister Mercy, where are you going? We were just looking for you. I'd hoped to introduce you to other members of our growing congregation that you may have not yet met,” she said.

“I had intended to show Sister Joanna a project of mine, but the door to the attic is locked. The last time I remembered it locked I was a child being kept out of reach the of presents hidden at Christmastime,” Mother said. “Is there a reason it's locked now?”

The women behind Clara took a step forward. Clara touched her hair, then straightened her back, “There are rats, Mercy. I cleaned out nest after filthy nest. That and I've stored a box of things that belong to the church I felt needed to be kept under lock and key. There are still nests up there that I simply did not get to. It's no place for children,” Clara said.

Mother was silent for a moment. I saw Sister Joanna slide out from behind her and start toward the pack at the bottom of the stairs. Mother's grip on the banister tightened and in a cool, controlled tone replied, “You aren't to lock or move anything else in my house without my consent. I appreciate everything the church has done, but it's still

my home.”

As she spoke, Jolie burst into the foyer through the front door. In her hand, she balanced a stack of boxes of Majestea Brand tea, which she steadied with her chin. She had come in through the front door, having watched Clara and her group come through the back. She had miscalculated that they would have made it to the front parlor yet.

“What is this?” Clara asked.

Jolie froze as the door closed behind her. Mother moved down the stairs.

“Jolie,” she said. “Where did you get all those boxes of Majestea?” Mother's strength seemed to leave her.

Jolie dropped one of the boxes and in an effort to catch it, the rest tumbled to the floor. Mother moved to help her collect them.

“Jolie, where did you get these?” she whispered gently, handing her a few and taking some herself.

“I found them at the food pantry in the back,” she said.

“Stealing?” Clara asked incredulously. “Hasn't the church more than filled your cupboards? Why steal, child?”

The women behind her stood murmuring among themselves, satisfied that Clara's presence in our home was well-founded.

“She's the thief!” Jolie shouted and began to bawl.

“Jolie!” said Mother. “That's a serious accusation.”

I was embarrassed for Jolie. Between sobs, she sniffed, hiccuped and blubbered nonsensically about chocolate milk and the Dove, Mother's art supplies, and finally of Clara's socks and

undergarments. The red sparkles around Jolie's ponytail bobbed as she wept, and in her tight short-shorts and sparkly tank, she must have looked plain crazy to the churchwomen – while Mother must have lost all credence as a suitable caregiver. Between Jolie's hysteria and her impassioned mention of Clara's underwear, a few of the church ladies snickered aloud and began to talk among themselves. Jolie's bottom lip trembled before she dropped the boxes of tea again and turned to run out the front door.

“Jolie,” Mother called after her “there's no need to run away.” She repeated the sentiment more to herself than to anyone else: “Why are you and your father always running away? Blaming others for your misery?” she whispered.

Clara cleared her throat, “It's clear she is going through a very hard time right now with the breakup of the family and your recent illness. However, times of crisis tend to bring out the best in some people and the worst in others. I realize that my being here is new, too, but that doesn't excuse biting the hand that feeds you. Now, I am willing to overlook this offense, of course, but something must be done to control her. I don't think this isn't anything a little hard work and discipline won't cure. Train a child in the way he should go, Mercy. I recommend beginning the process by getting rid of all of the animals Jolie has collected until she is no longer mastered by them.”

“I couldn't do that, Clara. I wouldn't. It is her connection to her father. It would break her heart,” Mother said.

“It should not escape your notice that the Bible warns adults that unless they change and become like little children themselves, they will never enter the kingdom of heaven. Even adults from time to time must be trained and disciplined if necessary. Especially when their sins have, like yeast, given rise to sin in others,” Clara said.

Mother blushed at that and looked frail again. She watched without a word as Clara bid the ladies goodbye and they filed out past her through the front door.

“In the morning,” Clara said, “we work. All of us. No exceptions.”

I was the only one left standing in the foyer at the base of the stairs. The boxes of tea laid splayed open and spilled onto the floors in piles. I collected all the teabags, placing them individually in an oversized crock in the pantry. As I emptied the last box, a small red fox tumbled out.

I went to the treehouse to find her, but she wasn't there. Instead, I found her perched on the front porch swing.

“You missed this one,” I told her and handed her the figurine of the fox.

She took it from me and rolled it over in her hands studying it. “I have a plan,” she said. “I'm going to cut off her hair. Right before she attacks, she grabs her bun of hair. I'm going to cut it off. She'll lose her power.” Jolie said.

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“It worked when Samson lost his. It's worth a try,” she said.

“Don't look at me like that,” Jolie said. “I know what you're thinking – you think I'm crazy. Well, I know there's not any real power in her hair, but cutting it off would make her feel powerless. She wouldn't know her place anymore among those ladies at church who haven't cut their hair since they began attending Higher Power. Her hair is longer than anyone else because she's the preacher's wife. She would lose all her authority. She'd be powerless.” Jolie repeated.

She was right. Every woman who attended Higher Power eventually stopped cutting their hair. They let it grow long, and as a result, eventually all the women in the

congregation looked the same. They wore it up in a bun, like Clara, or they braided it and twisted it around their heads or some variation of the two. Mother stuck out like a sore thumb, and it was her difference that somehow seemed to give Clara sway over her.

“I think the only thing around here that about to be cut off,” I said, “is any possibility of any of us having any rest. Clara insists that all we need a hearty dose of discipline. We're all gonna need strength from now on, wherever we find it.”

V

Mother's hands shook as she ladled chicken and rice casserole onto plates as church members filed past the line of potluck dishes during Revival Week. After the fiasco of entertaining the church ladies at Holiday Sunday evening, Monday brought Clara rising with the sun and encouraging Mother do the same. Before the birds had even sung in the day, Clara had Mother sorting and mending donations of clothing for an up-and-coming Higher Power thrift store the church council had recently approved. Jolie and I spent the day picking plums.

In the evening, we drove all the way to Galena to Brother Lowell and Sister Dot Horton's house to kick off the beginning of Revival Week. Each night of Revival services took place in the home of a different church member instead of the sanctuary attached to Patel's Gas and Bait. They were outgrowing it. Word had gotten around that miracles were being performed at Higher Power. Two out-of-work fathers who had been looking for work in Galena for months had recently found jobs as truck drivers after attending as visitors the previous day; an indigent family of seven, regulars of the food pantry, came into a windfall of money after an estranged Aunt left an inheritance of five-thousand dollars to her eldest niece; Havis laid hands on a man who had one leg shorter than the other and folks swore that they watched it grow three-quarters of an inch during an empowered sermon Havis preached one Sunday morning on the sin of lack of faith. Clara even boasted that preachers from all around were visiting to catch Havis in action.

Clara directed Mother to oversee the potluck line each evening as a charity and as a thank you to the family hosting the service. We often worked until 11 p.m., washing dishes and cleaning up after everyone had left for the evening. At home, we fell into our beds, exhausted from trying to keep pace with Clara and her demands.

Jolie carried a pair of scissors wrapped in a hand towel which she stored in a backpack she took to carrying waiting for just the right opportunity to execute her plan against Clara. In the same backpack, she carried a first aid kit, some bottled water, and a list of emergency phone numbers - Florida's name at the top - so that if Clara happened to look in her pack, she might not become suspicious and ask questions about the scissors.

Florida had dropped by the house on Monday evening while we were out and left a note explaining she had dropped in to check on Mother to see how she was

recuperating. She said she had come by for a cup of coffee and would hold Mother to it until another time and, in the meantime, please call to let her know if she can do anything to help out in any way. Jolie had found the note when we came in and handed it over to Mother who promised aloud she would call the next day.

However, on Tuesday, Jolie and I woke to the smell of our plums stewing. By eight, Clara and Mother had already cooked and canned a dozen jars of jam which they added to the stocks in our pantry. By three in the afternoon, they had canned four dozen, and Mother still had not found the time to call Florida.

Mother canned each year, though she only ever picked enough plums to make a few jars for breakfast and for a few given as Christmas gifts, leaving enough for Florida, Bert Daddy or anyone else in the community who might feel inclined to take some.

“Leave some to glean,” she would say.

On the other hand, Clara instructed us to pick the trees nearly clean, and we had more jam than we could possibly use. Now, instead of full and welcoming, our trees looked ravished and defiled. The sight of them sparked the image of Mother on the floor covering her face after JP had attacked her and I burned with anger at Clara, JP, even Jolie, who I felt an obligation to protect, but whose selfish demand for attention kept tilting the world, when all any of us wanted was peace. After an entire day of canning, we dropped the surplus jars of jam off at Higher Power's food pantry on the way to the service. Mother didn't appear to mind donating them, but I swiped two jars to give to Florida and her daddy when no one was around.

That evening, we drove twelve miles to Brother Howell Tippett's in Holcomb, whose house smells exactly like he does: a big oily old man who needs a bath. Jolie and I

tried not to touch anything, sitting in the back of his converted garage on metal folding chairs that Havis had driven over in the church van. The only light in the room swung from a bare, exposed light bulb, and Jolie soon fell asleep from exhaustion and laid her head over onto my shoulder. I fought sleep myself and managed to stay awake by nudging Jolie as her snores grew louder. I watched Mother stifle continual yawns as she sat not really listening to the testimonies that evening. Clara had successfully kept everyone's hands busy, and Mother never made the call to Florida.

Wednesday morning, Jolie and I woke and found Mother and Clara putting price tags on items in the house - the rosewood secretary in Daddy's office, the Duncan Phyfe sofa in the living room, and the walnut hall tree in the foyer.

“We're having a tag sale this weekend,” Mother said with weight in her voice that I could neither assign to resignation or tiredness.

“School starts in a few weeks and you girls will need new shoes, clothing, and supplies. Especially Jolie, she's in great need of a few decent things to wear,” Clara said.

That morning, my sister wore a denim skirt with a pink leopard print ruffle at the knee, a white t-shirt, and JP's St. Christopher's necklace pulled from Mother's jewelry box, which Jolie had recently begun to explore. She spent thirty minutes in the bathroom that morning straightening her hair with the blow dryer and though it looked straight, instead of her normal frizz, it also looked thick and immobile, the texture of straw, and her hair shifted as one large unit when she moved. It was one of her more toned-down looks. She was learning to balance her outfits, and she carried herself with an increasing confidence which, combined with other attributes, was beginning to deepen my intolerance for her.

Mother turned to me, “They are only things, Hannah. They've served their purpose and now they'll serve another one, bringing us money for items we need.”

Clara handed me a box and instructed Jolie and me to head upstairs and purge our rooms of anything unwanted or outgrown. I didn't much feel like it and instead lay under my bed, the way I sometimes did when I was much younger, listening to the sounds of the house – the voices, the creaks in the floors, the sounds from the trees outside – allowing Holiday to hold and comfort me, take up residence inside me, and also to root and understand myself in relation each person, each sound, even the pine floor planks beneath me.

That evening, we left the house in a downpour. Thunder and lightning raged all around. In the car, several attempts were made to convince Clara to cancel the evening meeting by Mother and me.

“It's not the storms that rage on the outside that we need to fear,” she said, patting her freshly tightened hair, “It's the ones that rage inside that matter. Storms like these have a tendency to unhinge folks. No, the church is on duty. There will be no cancellations tonight.”

I couldn't have known how much truth that statement held. To begin with, Wednesday's service wasn't held in the home of a church member, but in the home of Tom's Creek locals, Render and Wanda James. Havis and others were busy unloading the folding chairs from the church van as Jolie and I ran for cover from the downpour. I almost tackled some guy wearing a wet plastic poncho, a guy who impossibly turned out to be Leo James, my one true crush since elementary school. Leo is not a member of Higher Power, but turns out his family had a close relationship with Clara and Havis.

How? I'll tell you: What is worse than showing up heavy with a mother still achy with heart pain and tired from no rest, an eleven-year-old belligerent sister who thinks she's 21, and a crazy Pentecostal woman dragging you to revival services in a stranger's house where something off-limits, like your one true crush, just happens to be? I'll tell you what is worse, finding out that Clara is Aunt Clara and that Havis Keeble is Uncle Havis to Leo, that's what. When Leo and I knocked into each other, a clap of thunder broke from the sky, and we stood facing each other equally stunned, waiting for the other to speak first. Instead, Leo ducked past me and headed back toward the van.

The place was crowded that night. Wanda James, Leo's mom (and Clara's sister!), and Render James, his dad, had invited a group from their own church, the non-denominational Soul Saving Station for Every Nation in Tom's Creek. Its preacher, along with a guest or two of his own, was also in attendance. The crowd was a distinct mix of social classes and opinions on faith. Somehow it energized the worship space. It definitely had Higher Power on its toes.

Inside, Leo and his Uncle Havis pushed a plaid couch and a pair of worn recliners back to one side of a large family room, leaving room to set up the rows of aluminum folding chairs that ended right next to the kitchen's breakfast bar. Mere feet away, I helped Mother uncover the inevitable casseroles, the greasy fried chicken, unidentifiable whipped salads and the nightly host of cakes and pies which came in wet and soggy.

After Havis pronounced a long-winded blessing over the food, folks crowded past the food filling their plates. After everyone else had passed through the line, Jolie pushed her way in front of me to get to the potluck dishes. She scooped up the last of a cheesy

hashbrown casserole I had my eye on since robust Sister Rosaline Franks came through the door with it. I joined Jolie at her table despite her meanness, and when she sat her plate down to refill her tea, I took half of what remained of the hash browns off her plate.

I hadn't seen Leo since he'd set up the chairs, but the back of my neck was hot and the hairs along my arms prickled. I knew he was in the room nearby somewhere.

After supper, the adults hovered in corners or sat sipping coffee, talking in small packs. A herd of little kids spilled from the kitchen, running across the linoleum floor of the kitchen and into another room, slamming the door on their laughter.

"Hannah, I need to ask you a favor, honey," Mother said. I had begun clearing and washing the dishes to help expedite our trip home at the close of the evening. I didn't look up from the dish I was washing, but remarked, "Okay, sure." I was more than a bit worried she was about to ask me to join in on the meeting. I hated doing that.

"There are so many young children here tonight and all the adults want to make sure not to miss this evening's preaching. I need you to oversee the children's room."

I breathed an audible sound of relief and said, "No problem."

Nothing could have made me happier than staying away from the adults while they prayed.

Clara had begun encouraging Mother to speak to me about my spiritual condition. I was the oldest and she probably thought me a more likely convert than Jolie. Plus, when you are part of these types of events, much is expected once you hit a certain age. Folks, who one minute sit laughing and telling you about a ballgame or good fishing will, minutes later, be struck with the Spirit and sail up and down the church aisles like they just can't help themselves. Sometimes it starts with singing a hymn – singing and

meditating on the same lines over and over again – and something will break loose inside of them, and they'll shriek or cry or find they're speaking in an unknown tongue. I have never been sure exactly where in the Bible Jesus got this animated, except for turning the tables over in a temple of the Most High where folks were using it to make money. I have heard of the day of Pentecost - my old Sunday school teacher from the Methodist church, Mrs. Highbanks, told us about it - when the Spirit of God descended on men and gave them tongues of flames over their heads, leading to the speaking in all kinds of languages. But those folks had people in their audience that could understand them. What good does speaking an unknown tongue do if there's no one in the audience that can fully grasp the message?

The days of Mrs. Highbanks were long gone. All the fire that Havis breathed made memories of Mrs. Highbanks a cooling balm to the soul. She wove magic bringing all those old stories to life. She would wave her hands about the room while she told them, and as she did, I would catch whiffs of the bacon she had fried mingled with the scent of her hairspray. It's a smell I've come to associate with Sundays, but also of summers of Florida braiding my hair so tight I'd develop a headache, followed by Mother sending us off to vacation Bible schools of vanilla cream cookies served with Kool-Aid and pledges to the Christian flag. In other words, all was right with the world, and I would give anything if a headache brought on by too-tightly woven braids were the only trouble I had.

Mrs. Highbanks told us stories of the power of true faith. Take the one about the three Jewish fellows who refused to bow down to Nebuchadnezzar. He was no god of theirs. Nebuchadnezzar was furious, of course, and condemned them to death by fire. But

a funny thing happened on the way to the furnace, the very soldiers who tried to lead them to their destruction were consumed in flames while the three fellows all bound together didn't even smell of smoke. A fourth man had appeared among those three bound, a man sent by God, to protect and rescue them. You know, even stubborn, prideful old Nebuchadnezzar left them alone after that.

Here, at Higher Power, the old men and women possessed a hardened, serious look, and like Nebuchadnezzar, suspicious of anybody and anything not aligned with their ways or thinking. I froze in fear under their gaze; they always seemed to be peering deep inside me, sensing I didn't approve of the demands their religion placed on a body. I believed nothing would wound Mother more than to let on that all that hollering and heat that fills the rooms bothered me or that I was ungrateful. Higher Power had paid our light bill and, as Clara continually reminded us, was keeping our food pantry stocked. Besides, emotionally, Mother was at wit's end with Jolie. She had snuck out of Sunday school and broken into the parish trailer through an opened window, located in the pasture behind Patel's. She said she was looking for the bathroom, but I know she believed Clara had hidden her Dove somewhere there for safe-keeping.

I dried my hands, put the rest of the dishes away, and headed for the children's room to see how many kids were in my charge that evening. Inside, the floor was scattered about with boy things: trains and tracks, metal cars, a foam football someone had taken a bite out of, dirty socks. A scattering of children, all different ages, played on the floor. Sister SaraBeth Ludlow's twin five-year-olds dug in a tall pine toy box, looking for extra lengths of track. One of them hung upside down inside the box, grunting as he

balanced his weight on his belly at its edge. Jolie had found a coloring book and a black magic marker and tried to trace the outline of a picture of Snow White with precision. Frustrated at her lack of artistic talent, she said “Stupid book,” and threw it across the floor to a corner of the room. Leo snickered at her outburst and she turned and eyed him.

As I closed the door behind me, I caught a glimpse of a picture frame with Leo in his baseball uniform and a baseball trophy sitting beside it. This was his room, and in the corner, he sat cross-legged on the floor working on a remote-controlled car, trying to steer clear of the little kids. Like me, he may have believed that being here was better than being with the adults. We caught each other's eyes, and he smiled briefly at me.

“Hey,” he said.

As far as I was concerned, he was kith and kin to the Devil himself. How could I allow myself feelings for him after knowing he was related to Clara and Havis? Still, a nervous feeling crept up in my gut, similar to the one I got whenever we competed for the right answers in class.

I managed half-smile and said, “I'm supposed to watch these kids, tonight.”

“Lucky you,” he said returned his gaze to the car in his lap.

As the meeting started, the children recognized its beginning silence, and without being told, immediately lowered their voices. Children who grow up attending these kinds of churches are sensitive to negotiating all aspects of these kinds of affairs. For example, they know that meetings often start with medium-sized laughs and murmurings among the adults. And as the preacher takes over, sounds dwindle away replaced by silence, which, when we first started attending these things, Jolie mistook for everyone holding their breath. She actually quit breathing at the first one, trying to go along with

the silence, until I noticed her cheeks filled to nearly bursting and her feet swung wildly under her chair. I elbowed her and she exhaled loudly, garnering stares and raised eyebrows from folks two or three rows in front of us.

For a small second, all was quiet in Leo's room as the children listened and waited for their cue. Then, as quickly as it came, the silence passed, broken by three-year-old Ella Wooten who asked loudly who took her red crayon and where did it go.

I looked around for something to occupy my time among all the boy things. I sat down next to Jolie, who was now pressing a wad of stretchy green goo onto her knee, "Let me have some of it, Jolie." I asked.

"There's not enough for you." she scowled.

"Yes there is. You got it spread way down past your knee." I whispered, knowing this wasn't even conversation really, just each of us stepping into our usual roles.

"Forget it." I said. I moved over near the twins who'd begun fighting over a train car. I steered their attention to laying track instead. As we worked, Havis' voice carried clear as a bell into the bedroom. This suddenly gave the children permission to talk a bit louder.

From across the room, I heard Leo testing out his remote-controlled car. It made a furious buzzing sound and sped across the floor for a brief second before dying again. With a quick flick of his head, he shook his bangs out of his way, something that used to drive me crazy in a good way, but now I did my best to ignore it. He mumbled something I couldn't hear, but that sounded like frustration, and sat back down in the floor to work on it again. I sensed his embarrassment and tried to pretend I didn't see or care.

I could tell things outside the bedroom with the adults were heating up. As Jolie

came back in from a suspicious trip to the bathroom, the front of her shirt wet, I caught a glimpse of a group of women who had separated from the men. I thought I heard “She'll Be Coming Around the Mountain” and cracked the bedroom door a little to see. The heat and noise level were jarring, and I closed the door until only a sliver could be seen.

Mother, Clara, and three other women had formed a small circle. Clara led them as they sang, “I rebuke you Satan in the name of the Lord” to the tune until finally two of the women caught up in the moment broke out in spontaneous praise, hands raised, eyes closed, and lips mumbling sincere but fevered sounds.

Thunder rumbled outside, and I closed the door on the image to see Jolie, one hand on her hip, posing beside Leo who was showing off his car, shaking the hair out of his eyes. I felt something like rage hit me in my gut and marched over and grabbed her arm.

“Come play Checks with me,” I said.

She wrangled my grip off her arm and headed to the stack of board games piled next to the door. I flashed a brief but cool smile at Leo who turned his back on me, letting his gaze follow the car, now fully working, across the floor.

“I'm going first,” Jolie ordered as she set the board up on the floor beside the bed.

Jolie and I settled into the game. The children were now loud enough to be heard by the grown-ups if they had been listening.

“You can't jump me there, Jolie. It's illegal,” I told her.

“Yes, I can. You did it to me a minute ago,” she contested.

“No, I didn't,” and she jumped another red checker defiantly.

Just as I stared to take my turn, a heavy thump shook the room. I knew what it

meant: someone had been taken with the Spirit and had fallen onto the floor. Right then, Havis bellowed, “Holy!” and someone sent out a plaintive cry for mercy.

Soothed by the moans of the wind and hum of rain outside, one of the twins had crawled up and onto Leo's bed and had fallen asleep with his mouth open. His breath rattled with congestion and mucous.

I almost felt happy. Supervising the kids had kept me safe and out of sight. Clara had insisted on the laying on of hands at every single church service since we started. Mother, Jolie, and I would face the congregation as several members came forth, rested their hands on us and prayed to relieve us from our situation. As far as I could tell, the whole spectacle drew out the problem and did not offer any comfort. It usually brought tears to Mother's eyes and I had even heard Jolie sniff as their prayers worked more to articulate our hurts instead of alleviate them. As a result, our wounds stayed fresh. In many respects, the pain was as raw as it ever was. We had begun to dwell in it, instead of moving on from it. It became our identity.

As the storm raged outside I feared, as Clara said, that folks would start to come unhinged and come looking to save me from myself or to pray another prayer of hurt over us. I thought it best to say my own prayer right then before someone else got the chance, so I'd be safe: *Lord, thank you for not letting them come and get me tonight. Please don't let Jolie be so mean to everybody. Give Mother strength to get us all out of this mess. And please send Leo to play checks with me so we can figure out once and for all who's smarter, and so I can decide whether or not I should keep on liking him. Amen.*

As soon as I opened my eyes, Leo's bedroom door opened and Mother, her eyes all red and her nose runny, appeared.

“Jolie, come here,” she said, motioning her to the door.

Jolie's eyes briefly opened wide in horror. Then she furrowed her brow.

“Where are we going?” she asked.

Come on, now,” Mother said, dabbing her nose with a tissue.

Jolie got up and moved toward Mother. “No!” she shouted and shoved the door closed on Mother, pressing her body's full weight against it. Jolie fumbled at the doorknob for a lock but it had none. Several of the older kids stopped what they were doing briefly to witness what happened. Mother tried the knob and pushed against the door.

“Jolie,” she knocked. “This is ridiculous. Let me in. Pastor Keeble just wants to pray for you. Open this door.”

“I'm not coming out! I hate him!” She folded her arms and stuck her tongue out at me. At me! Like I had done this to her.

Mother quit her knocking, and when Jolie deemed it safe, she cracked the door to make sure they had left and came back to our game. In another minute, Leo's door opened slowly. An arc of light shadowed over the dimness of the children's room. In the doorway, a darkened figure of a man loomed. This time, a hush fell over the room and all the children stopped their playing and looked up in awe. As the door closed behind him, we all recognized the bald, chubby head of Havis Keeble. For a few seconds, the deep, rattling breaths of the sleeping twin were all that could be heard.

Havis, followed by Clara and Mother, approached Jolie. Havis squatted down as Clara hovered behind him. He placed a hand on Jolie's head before she could resist. His words were soft but serious:

“There is a spirit of dissension that wants to take over here, and we're not going to let you have her!” he said, speaking directly to the devil on behalf of God.

Jolie's teeth clenched tight. Her head, bent under the weight of the preacher's hand, was pressed to her chest. Jolie cut her eyes toward me and I couldn't help thinking she looked like a trapped animal. As Havis' words gained momentum and strength, the children, so used to the disruption of spontaneous prayer, resumed their playing and chattering.

But across the room, Leo looked at Jolie and muffled a snicker with his hand. She saw him, of course, and with that, bucked her head away from Havis and kicked out at both him and Clara. “Jolie, what's the matter with you!” Mother shouted.

But Jolie was on the move. She slammed her knee into the middle of the checkerboard and ran for the door, which hit the wall with a crack sounding like thunder right there in the room, waking the congested child on the bed. The boy sat halfway up, breathing a gulp of raspy air, his arms and legs flaring out in shock, and he began to cry.

Havis, didn't miss a beat. His hand landed on the child's forehead, and speaking again to the devil, Havis attempted to coax the congestion out of the boy. The child relaxed back onto the bed, whimpered a few dying sobs and began the deep, regular breaths of sleep again.

Meanwhile, Jolie was on the run.

“Mother, she's heading to the kitchen,” I said. I could tell Leo was a bit shocked because I had snitched on her, but I only intervened to keep Havis and Clara's attention off of me. I was telling on Jolie, but it was for a good cause.

In the kitchen, Jolie was nowhere to be seen. The kitchen's only occupant was a

man I didn't recognize, carefully rolling up his sleeves, preparing to finish the kitchen clean-up. When Mother saw him plunge his hands into the sink of dishwater, she left off chasing Jolie and rushed to help. It was her assigned duty to relieve the host of this task. Clara would not be pleased to see a visitor at work.

“Here, let me do that,” she said to him.

“We'll work together,” the man said with a sudden radiant smile. “Everything goes faster that way.”

I didn't want to interrupt. Briefly, my mother relaxed. She actually looked happy as she picked up a dishcloth and began drying the plates the newcomer handed her.

“I'll find Jolie,” I told Havis and Clara back in the living room.

Havis and Clara followed me into a crowd of worshippers who prayed for one another, but Jolie hadn't hidden herself among them. After a brief search in the utility room, I returned and told Havis and Clara, “She's not there, either.” Havis laid his hand on my shoulder, and I began to feel a little sick at my stomach. At once, Clara and Havis began speaking at the same time; Havis leading a prayer with fervent eyes closed and Clara following with matching pleas.

Havis raised his hand, “These circumstances she finds herself in. They are not from above. Speak to the heart of this young woman. Let her know her responsibilities. Let her know we all have our cross to bear,” Havis said. I felt myself begin to sweat.

Mrs. Highbanks once told me that everyone wants to be part of something that matters and unless they are convinced that what they are doing is wrong, they will try to make you see their side of things. She also said some folks are just plain hard-headed and God has to teach them a lesson, like old Pharaoh who refused to set the Israelites free

from slavery. God sent ten different plagues before Pharaoh got the picture and let them go. Of course, old Pharaoh's hard head got the best of him and right after he left them go, he took up after them again and God had to part the Red Sea so the Israelites could get away. Pharaoh didn't make it, but the Israelites did. Sometimes when God opens a way, you have to take it, even if their way seems unlikely.

Suddenly, I realized what Clara and this man wanted: They wanted us, all of us to give in, to become one of them. Would I start to wear my hair in a bouffant top and a tight bun at the back? Would I only wear dark skirts that smelled of must? Would I give up Holiday and move into a trailer in a cow pasture at the back of a gas station?

It occurred to me that maybe God was trying to make a way. I don't know how He would work something good out of this, but I held my breath took a leap of faith that he might and followed Havis' lead.

What if I fell back on the floor and nobody caught me? I might have been knocked unconscious. I decided I'd have to wait for just the right minute, but if I didn't fall soon, I'd have to endure Havis Keeble, his hands, and his words longer.

Havis' voice dropped an octave lower than usual.

“We lift this young woman up to you and command the Spirit to move here tonight!”

He paused, and his uttering words dropped into a private prayerful-like state that no one else could hear.

I suddenly felt his hands holding my head, one at the front and one at the back. I felt like I was being held in a vice and was reminded of how Mother would grasp my head before I'd vomit. I swooned, and when I deemed the moment was right, I let myself

go, while Havis' hands guided me to the floor.

Lying there with my eyes closed, I tried to keep my eyelids from twitching. I felt exposed and hoped Leo wasn't gawking at me.

“Just one more minute and they'll leave me alone,” I thought. “This is how it's supposed to go: the preacher lays hands on you, prays for you. At the right minute, you faint, wait another minute, and then you're free to go.”

But the mood at tonight's revival service had somehow taken on a somber, serious tone, and prayers had become more ardent. The lights flickered off and on with the storm, but no one seemed to notice. The room pulsed with sweat, heat, and words.

Havis, riding the wave of the room's emotion, wouldn't leave me alone. He hovered over me and continued praying. Confused by the commotion, I was at an impasse, spiritually speaking. I couldn't think of what more was expected of me. I racked my brain for appropriate measures. I had closed my eyes and then passed out. What else did they want?

Another hand touch my foot, which spasmed unexpectedly. That hand was followed by another on my knee. I let my eyelashes flutter for a second or two, never fully opening my eyes, just enough to catch sight of what was going on around me. People gathered around me, kneeling beside me from every angle. Thunder roared. Then, Havis must have mistaken my fluttering eyelashes for some kind of sign because his voice pressed down hard on the room, and he laid his hand on my hair. I really wanted to cry now, but this is not what Havis and Clara wanted. Just as a tear welled up, I knew what he was asking for. He wanted the otherworldly right here on this floor.

Mustering up the memories I could of supplicants lapsing into an unknown

tongue, I let the made-up words float around in my mind until they became comfortable on my tongue.

The words flowed from me as if I had been planning them all along. I remembered Mrs. Highbanks having us memorize the books of the Bible and the sounds within them and created, “Habakkuk – Micah - Melchizedek – Shadrach – Rodenfa – Jehoshaphat – Surinam – Sharnelezah.”

I repeated this as in a round, but no one heard because all the adults stood over me proffering their own words. Those who couldn't reach me, crowded out by the mass, laid their hands on the backs of those who had. This caused a sudden chain reaction, like an electric shock, and two or three of the adults fell off me and onto the floor themselves. My voice rose louder and louder and I flailed my arms until I felt my mother beside me.

“Enough,” a man’s voice said. “Leave her alone now.”

Havis Keeble didn't miss a beat, and he got busy elsewhere then, and gradually I was left alone as he attended others. One by one, the adults trickled away. I stopped speaking, fluttered my eyelashes open, and, seeing the crowd dispersed, quietly, got up. I brushed myself off and the only thing that came to mind was: “I'm numb.”

“Hannah,” Mother began. She was still kneeling on the floor beside me, I realized.

“No,” I said, for once. “No.” I shook off her hand and fled.

The bathroom lock wouldn't catch properly, but I didn't care any more. I climbed into the tub, closing the shower curtain around me. I hugged my knees tight. I couldn't think straight, and when a soft knocking began at the door, I sat unmoving until the door slowly opened.

“Hello,” a friendly voice said. “Hannah, are you okay?”

A tall, angular-faced man, the one who had been washing dishes, waited for me to pull open the shower curtain. I hesitated, then pulled it aside part way; I wasn't Jolie after all. He didn't look like anyone I'd ever seen before at the Higher Power Tabernacle, and although I only wanted to go home, I found myself caught by his large, sympathetic eyes. I actually smiled at him. For a minute, I was filled with a rush of peace. It was like when Jesus said to the storm, “Peace. Be still,” and everything went quiet.

“You okay?” he repeated.

A shrill cry from one of the twins came from Leo's bedroom and I thought of how Clara would chastise Mother for neglecting my duties if I didn't stop whatever fight was underway. If she wanted to, Clara certainly could find more than enough reasons to chastise all of us this evening. With a twinge of regret, I left the stranger in the bathroom, stumbling over myself to get out and to Leo's room.

With red-rimmed eyes the twin sat inside the toy box. His brother stood outside the toy box, hitting him in the head with a plastic hammer, saying rhythmically, “Shut up. Be quiet. Shut up. Be quiet.”

The intensity of the rain had started to subside, though the wind still blew, and tree branches smacked the windows and the outside walls. Clara's prophesy of things coming unhinged rang in my ears. I longed to be by myself. I glimpsed Leo's closet and decided to duck into it until it was time to leave. I just wanted to be alone.

But when I opened the closet door, there was Leo sitting with Jolie, her arms thrown around his neck, both of them lost in a kiss. I felt a thing rise up in me. I say a “thing” because I could not identify it. It held on tight to my chest and crept its way up

into my throat until it escaped from my body with a loud scream that I had no control over.

Jolie's backpack lay at my feet and I dove for her scissors which were in my hand before Jolie knew what was happening. I grabbed a fistful of her perfectly straightened hair and held the open blades next to her scalp.

“Hannah,” I heard a man’s calm voice, and I knew it was the same man who’d helped Mother in the kitchen, the one who’d sought me out in the bathroom. I let go of Jolie’s hair and threw the scissors back towards her backpack, ignoring, for once, my sister’s stricken face.

Outside the closet, I wedged a chair under the doorknob so neither of them could get out right away and ran out of the children's room, slamming the door as hard as I could. On purpose.

I found myself outside in the pouring rain with no place to go. I just dropped to the step right outside of the front door and sobbed with my head on my knees. My own personal opinion on the matter was this: Everything that had begun spiraling out of control since the night JP left somehow found its culmination that night, and I was just now beginning to accept that I was along for the ride. I wasn't even sure God could make something good out of this.

The dying lightning flashed noiselessly in quick spurts across the sky, and I felt another hand on my shoulder and jumped up from where I sat and turned to face my accusers.

“Hannah,” he said, “C’mon, it’s time to go home.”

Behind him, Mother held Jolie by the shoulders. Jolie wouldn't look at me, and

Mother coaxed her from behind whispering something in her ear.

“Jolie has something she wants to tell you,” Mother said, “Right, Jolie?”

“I’m sorry,” Jolie mumbled under her breath.

I sensed the rains begin to sweep past the house and down the road, pulling a slow lumbering thunder along behind it. And suddenly, it didn't matter if Jolie didn't mean it. I felt better anyway.

“Where's Clara?” I asked looking behind Mother for her and Havis.

“She's not coming back with us right now,” she said. “I think a few hours to clear the air will do all of us a world of good.

I looked at the man from the kitchen wondering how he had ended up being the one to take us home and the thought occurred to me that Mother had chosen a complete stranger for the job.

“Hannah, this is Joe,” she said. “Joe, this is Hannah. She the oldest and always does a good job of keeping the peace.”

I reached deep to offer Joe the most sincere smile I could muster under the circumstances. It was obvious it was a bit strained, but acting like he couldn't tell, he reached out his hand for me to shake it. As I took it, he smiled warmly at me and I remembered the calming storm.

In a low, quick chuckle, he said, “You remind me of someone I once knew, or at least how I imagined that someone might have turned out. It's a real pleasure to meet you.”

His compliment caught me off guard, and I wanted to take a moment to let it sink in that he was speaking a sincere good word over me, but I could see someone else

waiting in the car this guy, Joe, was pointing out. My heart sank at the prospect of another church member along for the ride, but whoever it was, it wasn't stopping Jolie. She was squealing as she pulled the car door open, her intact hair frizzing in the humidity and drizzle.

“It's a dog,” she yelled. “He’s got a dog!”