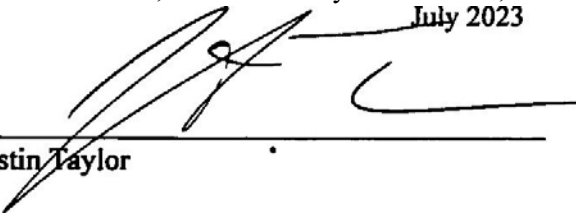







The Book of Secrets  
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## Abstract

*The Book of Secrets* tells the story of fathers, sons and grandsons struggling with who they are and who they are expected to be, versions of themselves that are at odds with one another. Victims of generational supposition and cultural seasons, the pith of the Preston men oozes out and creates a mess that the most unlikely of descendants will clean up.

Elliott, the family patriarch, is hardened by his rise out of poverty through the textile mills of Upstate South Carolina. His wife, Miriam, has disappointed him by birthing three girls. She then obsesses over her grandson, William, whose life she is determined to control. In the 1950s, when William is a teenager, he has his first gay encounter. While he knows it is a life he cannot pursue, temptation constantly appears around him, including at the military college where his father sends him to march the gay out of him. The burial of his authentic self causes many weeds to grow as he marries, bears children, and even becomes an Episcopal priest in attempts to become the man his grandmother demanded of him.

As William's life ends in dementia, his children wonder about their abusive childhood and come to an empathetic understanding of their father's lifelong angst.

*Following is a portion of the book, submitted for the M.F.A.*

## Part I

Love never ends. But as for prophecies, they will come to an end.

For tongues, they will cease;

As for knowledge, it will come to an end.

*Paul's first letter to the Corinthians*

1

1993

Business travel kept Andrew Preston busy; it was a fruitful time for software investments. After a long first-quarter stretch, he was eager to visit his mother, whom he had not seen since New Year's lunch when she had surprised him with Hoppin' John and collards, the south's spell cast for a happy and healthy new year. It must have worked, he thought, when Marilyn opened the door. Her skin was lighter and thicker, and her eyes clearer. Her hair had been cut short, close to her head, but he liked it; it modernized her. The shoulders of her dress hung a little low, as if she'd lost some weight. She stood up straighter, the hump in her upper back less noticeable. When Andrew hugged her, she felt frail, but she hugged him back, instead of looking for cigarettes as she usually did.

They sat at the table that had been wiped clean, set with two placemats for the chicken salad he always brought from the Main Street deli, her favorite. Iced tea was set at the tip of each knife, linen napkins tucked under the fork. Andrew looked at her as they ate, wondering what he was seeing.

"It's been a while, Mom. What's going on?"

"Not much. Bridge with the ladies in the complex a couple days a week."

"That all?"

"And I joined a Bible study, if you can believe that. Here at the clubhouse, too. One of the ladies from First Baptist leads it, but she's fine. Don't know if your father would approve. We're reading Esther."

"That's nice, Mom. Seems like this is a good place for you. You look really good."

"That's because I have a brain tumor," she said with a short laugh. She put her sandwich down.

Andrew laughed, too, then stopped when he saw the tear fall down her cheek, despite her smile.

“What?” He pushed out of his seat and moved around the table. He got down on one knee in front of her. He took both her hands in his and pressed them to his lips as tears fell down his cheeks, too. “Mom. What are we going to do?”

“*We* are going to do nothing, Andrew. I am going to do nothing.” She loosened her hands from his and cupped his cheeks, outlining the jaw that reminded her so much of his father. “It’s that bad kind, Andrew. The kind they can’t get to with scalpels or radiation. They just have to leave it there, until it kills me.”

“No, that can’t be right. There must be something we can do.” He held both of her hands.

“I really don’t want to do anything, really. I want to let it take me, Andrew. I want to go. This life has been enough for me.”

“What about Dad? Have you told him?”

“No. Not yet. I will, don’t worry. I’m just not ready yet.”

Marilyn had quit drinking the morning after the January doctor’s appointment that confirmed she had the tumor, a decision the doctor said would slow the growth of the cyst. She couldn’t give up the cigarettes, though, and tapped Andrew on the shoulder to shoo him back to his seat so she could light one to relieve the tension.

“What do the doctors say? Who are you seeing? Have you gotten a second opinion?”

“They say what they say, you know, which isn’t much I can understand. They’re good doctors, Andrew. I trust them.”

“Who’s been taking you to the doctor?”

“I take myself, mostly. Sometimes one of the ladies here will. They’re very sweet.”

“Does Uncle Eddie know?”

“Yes, I’ve told him. He wanted more doctors, second opinions, like you. And I’ve said no to him, too.”

“What do you need?”

She took a drag of her cigarette and looked under the bread of her sandwich.

“What I need is for you to find Sullivan. I haven’t heard from him since just after Betsy’s funeral. He was going to look for a place here in Greenville, I thought. Do you know where he is?”

“Mom, I don’t think Sullivan in is a place where he wants to be found.”

“What do you mean?”

He told her about the track marks and his passed-out wife, the fidgetiness and the lies he suspected Sully was telling at their grandmother’s funeral. And how he hasn’t heard from him since then. Marilyn started to cry again, this time for Sullivan.

“It’s my fault,” she said.

“What’s your fault?”

“Sullivan. He’s my fault. I should have protected him from your father. I should have protected all of you from him.”

Andrew took a deep breath.

“Why didn’t you? Why did you drink instead?”

“I thought life was going to be different. I felt so lucky. He picked me. Of all the girls he dated, that his grandmother insisted he date, he picked me. When your father and I met he worked at the bleachery and then we lived in a big house on Prentiss Avenue. You



know where that is now? You never knew it, of course. You weren't born yet, not even a thought of you, or any of you four. Your father and I would go to dinner at the club, we had a maid, and a gardener, and always brand-new cars. Your father worked, and it wasn't his ideal, I knew that, but your grandfather Poe provided for us. I had a fur stole to wear on chilly nights, and leather elbow-length gloves for the Cotillion and debutant balls. That's what I signed on for, Andrew. Material things aren't the end-all-be-all, but they can help you overlook some number of sins."

She paused to smash her cigarette.

"I know you're working to provide for your family, Andrew, and that's why you're working so hard. Because of the choices your father made without consulting me, we didn't have some things while you were growing up, did we? Like new bikes, and new clothes. You had to wear second-hand clothes from thrift shops and your dad tried to hide the rust on old bikes with spray paint."

"We knew they were rusty. And I'll admit, I did want a new bike, just once," he said with a little shame and a long sigh. "I want to be able to get my kids new bikes."

"Kids?" she said, smiling.

"Yeah, Margaret's pregnant again. I was going to tell you."

"Oh Andrew, that's so good," she said, another tear falling from her eye. She wiped it away and chuckled. "Ever since I quit drinking all I do is cry."

"That's good, Mom. That's ok."

"Your dad wanted a lot of kids. To please his grandmother. We used to *try* a lot in the very beginning," she said as she raised her eyebrows and smiled.

"Oh my god, Mom, gross!"

They laughed together, then her smile faded as her face darkened. She lowered her head and studied the napkin her hands twisted in her lap.

“Then, after you, we stopped. Never again. He never touched me again.”

Her lips quivered as she pursed them together. Tears spilled from her eyelids.

“What do you mean?”

“Your father would not, could not, be a husband to me. He...” Marilyn pressed her lips together. Her chest rose and fell with deep breaths. She looked up at Andrew. The tears had stopped and her face hardened for a moment, then a small smile softened it.

“You should have seen his face when you were born. He knew the minute you came out that you were special. I could never figure out why your father hated Sullivan so much and loved you so much. It was unfair, Andrew, how he favored you. It was hurtful to your siblings. And you didn’t tell him not to.”

“I know it was. But what was I supposed to do? I didn’t ask for that.”

“But you knew it. You have your own devilish streak, just like Sullivan does. Yours just manifests differently. You need to watch it. Be sure it doesn’t ruin you.”

Andrew finished his sandwich.

“I’ll be back Friday. We’ll talk about when you’re going to tell Dad.”

Andrew sat in his car and stared at the front door of his mother’s condo. A wreath with yellow flowers encircled the brass numbers nailed to the door. He felt as if he had just been reborn to a new mother, the mother he had always wanted, who advised him, loved him, criticized him and guided him. He felt the wetness of baptism and the image of his son, Ben, spasming when the baptismal water trickled through his hair popped into his head, and Andrew touched his own face and realized it was the wetness of his tears

that he felt. He laughed because he also felt thankful, and thanked a God he wasn't in regular communication with for his mother's cancer; because of its breach a mother had emerged. His mother. Inoperable brain cancer brought out the best in his mother. *Only his mother*, he laughed as he drove back to work.

That evening he called his uncle Eddie and family friend Freddie to confirm that they knew Marilyn had a tumor. They both laughed with Andrew about the irony of a brain tumor healing her. They had no counsel on when and how to tell William and advised Andrew to leave it to Marilyn. The little boy in Andrew hoped her sobriety and her cancer would reunite his parents and give him the childhood he had always dreamed of.

He arrived early for lunch the next Friday, again with chicken salad from the deli, afraid that what he saw had been a mirage; his mother, who had been drunk all his life, couldn't possibly have been sober, he thought. Or could remain sober, at the very least. It had to have been a fluke. His inner salesman pushed hope aside and he prepared himself for the haggard, hard woman who could not resist gin.

Marilyn opened the door and led him to her sunny kitchen with placemats and linen napkins for lunch. The apartment reeked of her remaining vice, stale and resonant with the cigarette smoke she wore like perfume, an odor that to Andrew smelled like home. He excitedly opened their sandwiches, preparing her plate as she smiled at his effort. She was the mom he had hoped for all his life, calm and present, slowly smoking a cigarette, having a meal with her son.

"Have you thought about when you're going to tell Dad?" he started, eager for a short, second childhood to begin.

"Andrew, we just talked about this Monday."

“Tuesday. It was Tuesday.”

“Tuesday, then,” she said, taking a small bite of her sandwich and swallowing. “The days are useless now. I have to cross them off the calendar each night so I can remember the days and get to my doctor’s appointments.”

“That’s just it, Mom, they’re not useless. Dad needs to know.”

“About what, Andrew?”

“Your cancer,” he said, hesitating. “And your sobriety. Mom, he needs to see you sober. Can you let him see?”

“That’s what I don’t know, Andrew, if I can maintain it for William.”

“Dad didn’t make you drink. You did that.”

Marilyn absorbed his accusation. She appreciated the numbness the tumor made her feel.

“Marriage is complicated, and you’re probably discovering that now. How long have you been married? Two years? You’re just getting started, and you’ve had a child from the get-go. From before the get-go. It’s what caused the get-go. I can do math. Do you love Margaret?”

Andrew was caught off-guard by the question, even more so when he realized he didn’t know how to answer it. It wouldn’t have been in the affirmative, but it wouldn’t be a negative; it would be a complex answer. He remembered his dad saying it had nothing to do with love. Marilyn let him think about his answer as she picked a piece of broccoli out of the side salad with her fork. She had thought she knew his answer, and his silence confirmed it. Andrew dopped his sandwich on his plate, no longer hungry.

“So you know,” she said, “that marriage is not so cut and dry. But there are certain things one should expect. They might vary from me to you to your sister or brothers, but if the very basics of respect, comfort and fidelity aren’t met, then it’s a very difficult road.”

“Are you saying Dad was unfaithful?” Andrew felt as if his parents were strangers.

“That’s a loaded word, unfaithful. First, you have to define faithful, and to what, to whom?” She took another bite of her sandwich. “And it’s funny you didn’t question if he was respectful, or provided comfort to me. What do you think about that?”

“Mom, I’m just your kid. You’re my parents. I get what you’re saying, I know he was hard. But why can’t you tell him?”

“It’s just not that simple, Andrew. It’s not entirely your father’s fault. He was raised and controlled by a family that wanted him to be something he could not. That’s why he ran away to the priesthood.”

“Ran away? What do you mean?”

“All those long cassocks and billowing robes to hide under. To be called Father, whether he earned the title or not.”

Marilyn paused to light a cigarette.

“What do you mean he didn’t earn it? He went to seminary, right?”

“That’s not what I mean, Andrew. And I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have complained to you. You’re our son, and we love you.”

“Why was Dad so hard?”

She took his hand and squeezed it. Andrew looked down at her veiny skin and yellowed nails.

“Miriam, his grandmother.”

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1944

Miriam knew as soon as her grandson could speak that he would be need to be managed or his life would percolate into a putrid mess. She was disappointed that his mother was incapable, suffering from her own reduction after her spiteful marriage to a man who was not equipped to properly regulate William’s disposition.

She had watched her peers as their boys struggled with maintaining clean hair and faces and nails. Every hair was always in place on William’s head. He wanted his shorts ironed, with a crease. He could sit still, for long periods of time, and paid attention to everything Miriam said. His need for everything to be *just so*, no matter what. Silverware in place. Napkin on the left. His articulation. Lips pressed together and popped open when he called for his Muth-a, his tongue curled under and pushed forward when he called Miriam’s name, *Grand-muth-a*. The way he would lean forward, jut out his chin and grind his teeth to express displeasure, but not lose his immature composure. His eyes would bore into his prey until they buckled, not wanting to know what might happen if he didn’t get his way. That’s how he bossed their maid around, and why his mother always acquiesced. Miriam let William have his way, too, as long as he did as she said as he sat on her couch and learned how to speak properly and exercise manners. He would gaze at her with wide eyes. He would ask questions, but he never questioned her. He knew she had all the answers, because that’s what she told him.

For all the reasons Miriam loved him, his father – whose approval he most ardently sought – disliked him. His fussiness and perfection were anathema to Dub, who wanted

him to go outside and throw a baseball. William was little, but he had no instinct when it came to things flying towards his face. He would look at them until they hit him in the nose, gushing blood and tears everywhere. Miriam suggested that he couldn't see the ball, to which Dub guffawed with a chase of brown liquor and a pull so long on his cigarette that the smoke curled into his eyes and made him squint out his reply. *He doesn't need glasses*, he said, *he just needs to use his frickin' head*. Dub even bought him a horse, hoping William could manage a sport that didn't involve contact with another person or a ball. William promptly fell off it and broke his arm.

Dub sent him to Miriam to recover from every injury; he couldn't bear to see his son cry and his mother was preoccupied with trying to prevent another miscarriage or drinking herself into a stupor because she'd had yet another. Miriam tended the bloody noses and the bruised forearms by cradling his thin frame against her falling bosom. He would bury his head in the placket of her shirtdress and cry for his mother. Miriam reminded him his grandmother was here for him, not his mother. William was much more at home in her parlor, with his legs crossed at the ankles, learning about books and bridge. She encouraged him to transfer his need for approval and acceptance to her, which she gave him freely, as long as he looked at her with those clear blue eyes and left his mouth slightly open at the end of her name. *We leave words open at the end*, she told him, *our lips slightly parted, to keep our audience quiet and in anticipation of what more we have to say*.

She eventually put a blue coverlet on one of the girls' old twin beds and bought him some pajamas to keep at her house. She put a toothbrush and a stack of Dixie cups in the bathroom at the end of the hall so he could feel at home.

Having a little boy in the house made it feel correctly formed. There was something about his subtle masculinity and his devotion to her that fulfilled Miriam in a way that not been met in decades. *What about that? What about this? How do you do that, grandmother? How should I do it?* He absorbed her answers with his blue eyes and smiled at her satisfaction. His mother remarked with some disgust once how much better behaved he was at her house than at home. *He won't do anything his father or I ask him to do*, she complained. Miriam suggested he live with her; it would be easier for their social schedule. Betsy finally agreed - just for the summer - after his second-grade year. He was eight years old and had begun to recognize the contempt in his father's eyes as his mother looked through him, the constant haze of alcohol clouding her view. His grandmother loved him regardless of his inability to catch a ball or ride a horse. He, in return, loved her and would do anything for her.



By June the cancer had begun to take its toll on Marilyn. Her speech was slower and her face wider, a result of the steroids meant to strengthen her immune system. She had become susceptible to common infections, which manifested more painfully in her compromised constitution. Andrew, Freddie or Eddie made sure to visit her every day. They often ran into each other.

“Don’t you think Mom should tell Dad soon?” Andrew asked Freddie in front of Marilyn when they were gathered for lunch. Freddie’s eyebrows shot up and he looked at Marilyn, his lips clamped shut.

“Freddie knows better than to get in on that, although you clearly don’t,” Marilyn said.

“I’m sorry, Mom, it’s just that...”

“It’s ok, Andrew,” she said in her tumor-affected speech. “I know you care. But it cannot be what you want it to be. You have to let go of that. I’m tired, and I must lay down.”

Freddie helped her into her bedroom then returned to the kitchen after closing her door quietly.

“Andrew, you have been a very good son to both Marilyn and William,” he said. “But this is a battle you cannot fight.”

“What is it about those two? Why did they even get married? They don’t love each other.”

“I’m sure you’ve heard your father say it’s not about love. It’s not even about self, which may be difficult to comprehend when discussing your father. He is not about self.

He would say it is about duty, and suffering that duty for someone to whom one owes much.”

“Who does he owe?”

“Your father’s childhood was, ironically, not unlike yours, with an alcoholic mother who could not set her *self* aside to tend to duty. I don’t mean to say that your mother was the same, though in some ways she was. Your father’s mothering was taken over by his grandmother, who had very stringent ideas about who your father was to be, and his duty to her would not allow him to veer from that path. Even now.”

“His grandmother wanted him to be a priest?”

“No, that’s where he did veer, the only place. She wanted him to be a great textile man, to run the bleachery and continue the legacy of money and society that she and her husband, the great Elliott Poe, began. There are many things in Greenville that exist because your grandparents made them so. And while William values those – the clubs of the elite – he could not bear the work of the textile industry. I think it was at The Citadel that he had some experience with the church that revealed to him an escape pod, under the cassocks of a priest, of all places!”

Freddie laughed at his own imagery.

“You’ve only known him as a priest and as your father, Andrew. But he was a striking young man, strong and opinionated and seeking. He was looking for his own path, and almost forged it, except for that the demands of his grandmother were too strong.”

“What demands?”

“Demands that he have a family. Progeny, he calls them. You’ve heard him use that word. That is the ghost of his grandmother passing through his lips. Much of his speech is. I hear it more the older he gets.”

“What’s so bad about having a family? Why wouldn’t he want one?”

“Families are not bad at all. That’s not what I mean. When we came up, we weren’t as free as you all are now to pick your own path. We were constricted by parents, expectations, and society. It was very cut-and-dried in 1958 when your father and I started at Wofford. When *you* went to Wofford, it was a much different place, I guarantee you. For one thing, they allowed women! I couldn’t even have thought of a co-education then. The girls went to Converse. It was better that way, separated. We focused on our studies, and cultivated lifelong friendships. Now, they’re probably living together in the dorms, bouncing from bed to bed. I cannot imagine!”

They laughed at Freddie’s old-fashioned mores.

“Not quite that together, but yeah, life was pretty liberal at Wofford.”

“Change is good, and I suppose women add to the academic canon at Wofford. I don’t oppose them. Though they haven’t been as excited to let men attend Converse. Girls have always needed additional protections. I don’t begrudge them that. But your father and I were brought up to obey, and not question. That was drilled into him at The Citadel as well. They cemented him there, I suppose. He has a path, and he has blinders on, and that’s that.”

“What about Mom? She’s dying. He should know that.”

“He will. When it’s time. They will both know when that time is. You are a good son.”

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William seemed excited to spend the summer in the room his grandmother had made for him, his mother's old room that Miriam stocked with his favorite books. She added a play table with a checkers game on top and found some puzzles she planned for them to do together. He was reticent, though, when she took him to the room with the small suitcase his mother sent along for the summer.

"Will Nancie iron my shorts, with a crease, just like Nellie does?" he said. Miriam put her hand on the top of his head and was surprised at the amount of Brylcreem that slithered through her fingers. William dipped his knees to separate from her and lifted his hand to correct any hairs her meddling had misplaced.

"Of course she will."

"I'll put them away then. I'd like to be left alone."

William was sullen his first night, picking at his food and not engaging in table conversation as Miriam had taught him. Elliott looked disappointed and left the dinner table before dessert. She heard the back door slam and the Oldsmobile 98 start up and leave the driveway.

"Where is grandfather going?"

"Back to work, I'm certain. Your grandfather works very hard."

She put her drink down as she lied to her grandson. Elliott worked hard, that was not a lie. She admired his work ethic and his determination to make a hard, grimy business successful. It was the fact that it made him a hard grimy man that disappointed her. She shook off her displeasure and puffed up her lungs with fresh air that hinted that her bosom could protrude on its own again.

She slept that night with her bedroom door open so she could hear Elliott's return and, more importantly, William if he needed her. He had slept over many times before, but that night felt loaded. Elliott was out, the third night in a row, an unusual bender even for him; Miriam thought his age would limit his libido but he was proving her wrong. And William's mood was disconcerting; she so badly wanted him to feel at home. She wanted him to choose her as his maternal lover who could soothe the pain that his parents were exacting on him. Her daughter's behavior weighed heavily on her but there was nothing Miriam could do about her now. She wanted William to understand that he was extraordinary because he was her grandson and that his life would be important and meaningful no matter what his ugly father said.

Miriam woke up just after midnight when the backdoor slammed shut. She stared at the ceiling as Elliott stomped up the stairs, his steps heavy with liquor and exhaustion. She had hoped with William in the house that Elliott would remember the father he had wanted to be, and that perhaps he could become that father, and her a worthy mother. Her anger rose. She propped up her pillows and turned on the light. Elliott paused at her door.

"You're up."

"You're back. Nice of you to come home to your grandson, reeking of alcohol and perfume and sex. You're disgusting. What is William supposed to think?"

"I think he's supposed to be in bed, is he not? It's late."

"You're goddammed right it's late. I was hoping you would behave while our grandson is here." She stood and put on her dressing gown, drawing it tightly across her deflated bosom. She saw Elliott wince.

“William has no idea what I’m doing, and I don’t think he cares. He’s not the son I hoped for, if that’s the scene you’re trying to script here. He’s not my son. He’s Betsy’s son, and you need to let her raise him. You need to stay out of their business. William is their son. He’s no concern of mine.”

She followed Elliott as he turned his back and walked toward the bedroom he occupied.

“He is our only hope of continuing this family. He must be raised correctly and his mother cannot do that.”

Elliott turned around so quickly she almost ran into his protruding belly.

“And whose fault is that? Your fault. What did you do all those years you were raising those girls? Why can they not do as they’re told? That’s your responsibility. You raised a bunch of airheads. They can’t make a good decision between them.”

Elliott stopped talking and looked behind her. Miriam turned and saw William standing in the hallway. She heard Elliott close his bedroom door as she went to William. His cheeks were wet but his jaw jutted forward and she could hear him grinding his teeth.

“What is grandfather talking about? Why is he so mean to you?”

“Mean to me?”

She took his face in her hands and massaged his jaw. His cheeks softened and his lips parted. Miriam’s shoulders fell as her breast warmed with the love her grandson expressed for her. No one had cared about her feelings in years, decades. Her eyelids drooped as her thumbs stroked his cheekbones. She leaned over and kissed his open mouth, then straightened as she brought his head to her bosom. He leaned into her and

wrapped his arms around her waist, unconcerned about how thick it was. She smelled his freshly washed hair, naked of the sticky cream, and ran her fingers through it.

“I don’t like the way he talks to you,” William said as he pulled away.

“That is very gallant of you. But Grandmother can take care of herself. It’s late. Back to bed.”

“Will you tuck me in?” She fluffed his pillow and cradled his head as she lowered him to a soft landing. She tightened the sheet and blanket across his shoulders, straightening the deep hem of the sheet that folded over the ivory blanket. “Leave the coverlet folded on my feet,” he said, “they get cold.” She patted his feet with pride that he knew how to make a bed with a European return, hospital corners, coverlet in the summer and duvet in the winter, when the coverlet was folded in thirds at the foot of the bed. She fingered the fly-away hairs she knew he would want put back in place, had his arms not been tucked in. The corners of his mouth turned up and his eyelids lowered as he raised his eyebrows to try to stay awake.

“What are we doing tomorrow?”

She ran her fingers across his light brown brows to release his eyelids. His straight lashes fell gently against one another and his mouth popped open as a deep exhale pushed out. She touched his lips and watched them pink with blood as she pressed them closed. She moved her hand to his chest, over his heart and lungs, where she could feel the rise and fall of his breath and the pumping of his heart. Miriam touched her own chest to breathe in rhythm with him. She closed her eyes as heat rose in her shoulders and throat, and the fingertips that lay on the blanket, above the sheet, above his small chest, warmed to the touch. She opened her eyes to take in the little boy who loved her unconditionally,

who wanted to defend her against a big unkind man. He made her feel like the teenager who met Elliott for the first time at the ballpark, distracted by and appreciative of the cleavage she showed him on purpose. Elliott had loved her when she was young and beautiful and unaware of how unfair life was going to be. Elliott had a paunch from Nancie's fried chicken which he asked the maid to cook three times a week, his nose was bright as a Christmas bulb from the alcohol and he wheezed from so many cigarettes, but young women still opened their legs to him in hopes their warm and wet comfort could convince him to hand over his fortune. No man was interested in excavating Miriam's long-ignored crevasses because she had nothing to offer. Her sex was no longer a form of currency.

William woke up and felt her hot breath on his neck. He recognized the smell, the juniper of gin topped by sour tobacco, laced with garlic from Nancie's scalloped potatoes. Her hand, its puffy fingers garnished with diamond and sapphire rings that never came off, rested on his hipbone, her elbow stretched across his chest. He remembered the night before, grandfather yelling at her, blaming her for his mother's incorrigibility. William hated him for that. His jaw tightened, which he couldn't help, but grandmother's sharp breath released it. He was glad for her presence. He knew she loved him.

"Grandmother, I have to pee," he whispered. The sun was coming up. Her eyes opened as she snorted, blinking as if to focus. She swung her legs off the bed, sat up, and looked down on him. Her lips pressed together and widened. Her hair was smashed and William knew she'd have to go to the beauty shop. She touched her head as he noticed it and they laughed together.



“Do I look a fright?” She cupped his face and kissed his forehead. Her dressing gown swished behind her as she left William’s bedroom.

That summer was a release from the disgust and disappointment William knew he caused his father. He relished the crisp white sheets of the bed his grandmother made for him, and loved snuggling in them with her as they read books at bedtime. He memorized the words that accompanied pictures of flowers in *A Child’s Garden of Verses*, animals from *Mother Goose*, and fire trucks and a zeppelin from *The Modern Story Book*. He knew the fire truck was red, the horse was brown, the dogs were black and white, and the goose was grey with a red-skirted woman riding its back.

When she bought him new chapter books midway through the summer, William sat silently as she handed him *Curious George*, the new book about a monkey.

“You’ve finished second grade. Surely you can read these now, William. Just like you and I read the picture books together. Don’t be shy. Read aloud to me.”

“I prefer you to read. Your voice is much prettier than mine.”

“Flattery will get you nowhere. Now do as I say and read me the first page.”

William brought up tears that he knew would distract her from the task. She put the book down and took off her reading glasses to look at him. She took his chin in her hand and shook his head.

“William Preston, you can’t read, can you? Is it because you can’t see? Can you read the letters in this book? Was I right? I told your father that’s why you can’t catch a ball and he ignored me. We’re going to the eye doctor.”

The next day they went to the doctor. A week later they went back to pick up his glasses, thick lenses with thick plastic black rims, *for a little boy who plays a lot*, the

optometrist said as he winked at William. They covered most of his face and made him feel like he was hiding behind something. Even though he could make out letters, and blades of grass, and the buttons on his shirt, he kept cocking his head to peer around the black corner of the glasses, as if they were an object he could subvert.

Miriam grabbed hold of his chin again and held it still.

“Stop moving your head around. You look like a lizard trying to eat a bug. Be still and hold your head straight.”

As he identified the letters he could then see, the words came quickly. He took advantage of the time he had to himself when Grandmother was playing bridge or eating lunch at the Club, reading through the juvenile books she left for him, and moved on quickly to her collection of the classics, though he read them slower than the easy books. As he read *Little Women* aloud they shared his pillow, lying side by side on the twin bed. She wrapped her arm around his shoulder and he snuggled into the crook of her arm, resting his head on the fatty pillow of her bicep. William loved the woody floral smell of her Chanel No. 5 and how it mixed with the peppery chemical scent of her hairspray. When she read aloud, the gin from her evening cocktails mixed in with Nancie’s dinner and emitted a rancid whiff and he turned his head away; she reached her hand across the book to push his chin back to the cradle of her arm and he endured her adult breath.

The summer heat got trapped on the second floor of the house that was ill-designed for seasonal ventilation. By mid-July the metal desk fan merely moved hot air around, so Miriam removed the blanket from William’s bed, and left the coverlet folded at the foot. To prevent night sweats, she brought her talcum powder to his room and they made a game of shaking the powder onto the big pink puff and dabbing it liberally on William’s

shoulders, underarms and chest, each holding their breath, because the first one to sneeze was *it*. William sneezed first, his small lungs unable to hold much oxygen, nor his spirit much patience. When he reached for his pajama top, Miriam took it from him, folded it, and put it back in the top drawer of the dresser. *It's too hot for this*, she told him. She loved the smell of the talcum powder that drifted up from William's naked torso as they read together.

When the book fell from his hands and the familiar puffs of sleep escaped his lips, she opened her robe and slid his head onto her naked breasts. She closed her eyes and remembered when they were fuller; she breathed deeply as if she could fill them with air. She pretended her nipples were still taut and pink, instead of brown and wrinkled. She cupped his bottom and easily slid him toward her so their hips met. Miriam stroked the smooth, white skin of his back and ran her hands along the seam of his pajama bottoms. She wanted him to be part of her, the part that was missing. She wanted to give herself to him as an offering of thanks for his admiration and desire. In his sleep, William wrapped his arm around Miriam's waist, and flung his leg across her hip. Miriam ran her fingers through his hair and fell asleep with him.

William often woke to his grandmother's disheveled hair. She shushed him with her fingertips as she walked silently to her room. He spread his fingers across the warm spot that she left and inhaled the remnants of her hairspray in his pillow.

He finished reading *Little Women* in early August, a few days before it was time to return home.

"William, what do you think about Jo wanting to tell everyone her story in *Little Women*?" Miriam asked as she set up the checkers game.

“I think Jo wrote a really good story,” he said. “I’d like to write my story like that one day.”

“What would you write?”

“I would write about how my father goes to work every day, how he comes home late because he works so hard. That he works with Grandfather, they both work very hard at the mill, and how I might work with them one day. And I would write about you, how much you love me, and I love you, and the time we spend together. That you make sure I can read, and that you got me glasses, because my mother can’t do that. And how we spend the night together, and snuggle in bed, and how I smell the spot on my pillow when you leave because it smells like you.”

The next morning at breakfast Miriam had a gift for William. It was beautifully wrapped, in paper with peonies and hydrangeas on it, tied with a lavender satin bow.

“May I open it?”

Miriam nodded.

He untied the ribbon, straightened it and wrapped it around his hand to create a circle of satin and placed on the table next to his plate. He picked the tape from both folded ends and slid the present out. It was an old brown book, thick and ordinary.

When he picked it up, though, it was lighter than he thought it would be. *The Boys’ Second Book of Great Detective Stories*.

He looked at his grandmother. “Open it,” she said.

William opened the book and stared at a book with a hollowed-out center in which a blue box had been nested, the letter “W” painted in yellow on the top of the box.

“What is this?”

“This is a secret book. It’s *our* book William, with our box of secrets hidden inside. Like when we sleep together and snuggle. Open the box.”

In the box was a curl of brown hair held together by a small green rubber band.

“That is my hair. That I cut from my head to show you how special you are to me.”

“Where did you cut it from?” He looked for a bald spot.

“From underneath,” she said, fingering the nape of her neck, “where no one else will know, but you and I. Do you understand?”

“I think so. We are secret.”

“Yes, you and I are secret. Our time together is secret. And you’ll have other secrets in your life, I imagine, and you can put them here, or some other place, depending on what they are. You must not tell anyone but Grandmother all your secrets, do you understand?”

“We are secret. Just me and you Grandmother. How wonderful!”

When William entered Marilyn's bedroom, the children held their collective breath. Marilyn felt the tension rise. Charlotte looked at Billy, Billy looked at Andrew, and Andrew looked at Marilyn.

"It's ok," she whispered. "I called. I told him to come."

William stood at the foot of the bed and stared at a wife he didn't recognize. The cancer had finally shriveled her as she was mostly unable to swallow or digest food. She was under the care of hospice for pain management and nutrition. The oncologist gave her a couple of weeks at most.

"Marilyn, I am here to reconcile," William announced. The adult children remained silent as Marilyn and William stared at one another, each not admitting that they barely recognized the other.

"Well, sit down William," Marilyn finally said. He pulled a chair clumsily to her bedside and took her hand, careful not to dislodge the IV that was pumping fluid into her veins in an effort to keep her blood circulating. He took her hand and laid his forehead on it.

"How did I not know you were sick?" He openly wept. "I thought you were drunk, Marilyn, I thought you didn't call because you were drunk."

"I would be, were it not for the cancer, so you've got that part right," she said.

"You've been sober?"

"Yes, for more than a year now."

"Oh, Marilyn, I never imagined." William's chest tightened for the time he had missed because his hope was so small.

“I tried to tell you Dad, to get her to tell you. Mom’s been sober,” Andrew said through tears that matched his father’s.

“Andrew, that’s enough,” Marilyn said. “Go. All of you. Go now.”

The siblings shuffled out of the room. Marilyn waited until the door closed.

“It’s been a grand time. I’ve been getting to know the children. Andrew quite well. He’s had lunch with me every week. Eddie and Freddie, too.”

“Freddie knew? The children? Why did no one tell me?”

“I asked them not to.”

“Why?”

Marilyn was finally ready to answer the question she had been asked repeatedly by Andrew, Eddie and Freddie.

“William, you cheated me.”

“Marilyn, I never cheated on you...”

“Shush,” she said, tapping his hand to quiet him. “Let me talk. You *cheated* me. Of the life I had been promised. Here, in Greenville, in society, in a big house, with a good job. But more than that, you discounted me by not even asking what *I* wanted, or needed, or hoped for. You never considered me. You plowed straight ahead, not even looking back to make sure I followed.”

“Of course I didn’t check on you. You were, are, my wife. You are supposed to follow me.”

“I *did* follow you, did you notice? I followed you to Tennessee, then to Charleston, then to even God-forsaken Florida. I never left you William. But it would have been nice to be considered, to make those decisions together.”

“Well, you had no stake, Marilyn, I had to....”

“And then, William,” she interrupted him, “you stopped being a husband to me. Not since Andrew was born, do you know that, William? Not since Andrew. He is 27 years old, William. You have not touched me as a husband should in 27 years.”

William stared at her. She let her throat rest and waited for him to sort it out.

“Yes, that is true,” he finally said. “I lost my...drive. I couldn’t bear to tell you. And you were drunk every night Marilyn, telling me that you hated me. What was I supposed to do?”

“I did hate you. I hated you for marrying me. You didn’t want to be married to me. You didn’t want to be married. You wanted to be...”

“I wanted to be with you Marilyn. I did. I did.”

Marilyn sighed heavily. Her throat hurt from the radiation. Her eyes closed and she fell asleep.

William sat with Marilyn during her last five days, her pain managed by the hospice nurse who stopped by daily to monitor morphine that constantly trickled into her veins. Marilyn mostly slept and said little, her throat raw and her mind groggy. She whispered inquiries about Sullivan to Andrew, who always shook his head no. She touched Charlotte’s swelling belly, and wept that she would miss the baby. She winced at the cries of Nora’s newborn when she and Billy visited. William said little when the children came and when he and Marilyn were alone, absorbing the silence between them, letting it speak for the loud, messy years they had spent yelling at and ignoring one another.

The sun was shrouded by clouds the morning she woke up dead. William had plugged the coffee in and put bread in the toaster and noticed how the winter sun had not yet



permeated her usual sunny kitchen. He put a jar of jam on the counter and stared out the widow, looking at nothing in her courtyard and listening to the hoot of a nearby owl. He went into Marilyn's bedroom and raised the shades before he looked at her. As he turned to her, the clouds dissipated and the morning sun broke through, illuminating her death. William breathed a sigh of relief that her pain was over, and that his was too. He had loved Marilyn, though not as he should have or could have, and he knew that was unfair to her. But it was, and now she was free, and he was thankful for that.

William counted on the clergy at Christ Church to tend to the liturgical needs of his family. Marilyn's funeral was held in the same chapel where Andrew was married and his children were baptized, and where William's mother was eulogized. He sat on edge in the front pew, waiting for the clamor he knew would come, and which did: the late arrival of Sullivan. When he heard it, William sat back in his seat to prepare for whatever chaos Sullivan was bent on bringing to the day.

As the pallbearers slid Marilyn's casket into the hearse, Sullivan approached William carrying a baby. An unfamiliar woman trailed behind him. He was skinnier than William remembered, his face droopy and skin sallow.

"Dad, I got here when I could."

William looked beyond him.

"You will not make a spectacle Sullivan. I suggest you take whoever that is and whatever that is behind you and leave immediately."

"This is my daughter, and that is my wife."

"I don't care who they are. You don't belong here."

"I want to talk to you about Mom."

“Your mother is dead. There is nothing to say. Please leave.”

Andrew stepped between the two.

“Sully, do want to follow us to the cemetery?”

William walked away.

“What the fuck, Andrew? I’m trying to talk to Dad.”

“Where have you been? Mom died.”

“You don’t think I fucking know that?”

“Watch your language, man. You’re holding a baby.”

Sullivan looked over his shoulder and watched his father get in a car. He turned back to Andrew and closed his eyes to breathe. He opened them and looked at the baby.

“Yeah, this is Eleanor.” He turned the baby toward Andrew. “This is your Uncle Andrew. He’s the only one grandfather loves, but we’ve come to see what we can get, because at least Mom loved me, too.”

“Nice, Sully.” Andrew smiled at the baby, then looked up at Sullivan. “What do you mean, what you can get?”

“I’m sure she had some kind of life insurance policy or something, didn’t she?”

“Are you kidding me? That’s why you’re here? Not to mourn the death of your mother, who you couldn’t even be bothered to visit for the last year she was dying? It took her a year to die, Sullivan, and you never visited? Where have you been, anyway?”

The woman behind him stepped up and took the baby, telling Sullivan they were going to find the bathroom. He didn’t introduce her.

“Me and Abby been working, that’s all. And we had a baby. And Abby’s got a son, too. So we’re busy. I can’t exactly drop everything like you can.”

Andrew noted his long-sleeve shirt, wrinkled and too big, tucked into stained pants.

“Where have you been working?”

Sullivan shook his head, looked at the ground, and jammed his hands into his pants pockets.

“You know, here and there, work’s hard to get.”

“No, I don’t know. How hard is work to get when you’re high?”

“Hey! I didn’t have the chance that you had. I didn’t get to go to college. I got shipped off to school and forgotten about. I been on my own since I was 15. Doing the best I can.”

“Sully, you got three kids, if that’s the right count. Where’s your other daughter? The one from the last funeral, the last time we saw you?”

“Her mom took her. They live...I don’t know where they are.”

“You don’t know where your daughter is. Nice. Look at yourself. You gotta clean up or those kids don’t have a chance.”

“Don’t judge me. They’re gonna be fine.”

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William’s peculiarity made life at school difficult for him. His disinterest in the playground won him no friends, and his teachers would not allow him to spend recess in the library. Boys who didn’t mind dirt laughed at his disdain for it. They took joy in tossing schoolyard dirt on his neatly pressed attire. Complaints to his mother went unheard. The maid promised to wash the dirt away. Miriam would call the school to demand the principal to remove the bully from William’s class. She would review the last names of his classmates, as well, instructing him on whom he was to befriend. He nodded

his head and did his best, not wanted to disappoint her, though friendships were not easy for him. He preferred the company of his grandmother.

She oversaw his homework in the afternoon when Betsy was too exhausted from managing Mary – the baby she finally managed to have, who was a rambunctious toddler with more energy than her mother could match. Miriam utilized William's ability to sit still to teach him to play bridge as a connection to society that she knew would serve him well and occupy his mind. Though he did not excel in math, his memory and critical thinking skills made him a competitive card player. He sat straight-backed, across the walnut card table from Miriam, breathing slowly to count her moves and plan his own. Miriam never let him win. She felt his embarrassment and frustration would make him a better player. At the end of a losing hand, he would stand next to her to watch the play again to understand where he went wrong. Miriam held her face close to his, breathing in his childish breath as she scolded him for missing a play. His obeisance thrilled her, an emotion that agitated her fingers as they held the hand in question. She touched his hands to quell her nerves, each holding tightly onto one another as they discussed how to count losers, lead trumps, think ahead for critical plays, establish tricks and lead attacking combinations.

William grew into a tall, thin teenager and became a stand-in for Elliott, escorting his grandmother to events and functions Elliott had long grown tired of. She would venerate him at the garden club luncheon or bridge game, for which he became a sought-after bridge partner. Miriam reveled in the envious looks and felicitous comments she received from ladies who didn't have such attentive grandsons. The William she built compensated for her disappointing daughters and buttressed her standing in the company

of women she led but among whom she felt counterfeit. She determined William would never feel that.

The part of William she knew would be a problem was the saunter of his carriage, the fluidity of his motions, his melodious diction and the snobbery of his assessments, things that Miriam knew could cost her control if she didn't manage them effectively.

William sensed his difference, but pushed it aside, distracted by the energy it took to please his grandmother. She trained him to present perfect manners and engage in articulate conversation, which charmed the mothers of the young women seeking dates to dances and dinners. Just as Elliott manufactured world-class textiles, Miriam constructed the most sought-after date in Greenville. And William accepted invitations only if they were approved or arranged by Miriam.

In order to direct William's development, Miriam had to attempt to manage Dub and Betsy as well.

"Betsy, you must be careful about your behavior when at the Club," she admonished her after a friend had called her to inquire about the fortitude of her daughter's marriage.

"What now, Mother? What did I do wrong?"

"When you and your husband order two drinks at a time and get so drunk you actually spit at one another and slam knives on plates at the club, it is noticed and it is embarrassing."

"Embarrassing to who, Mother? You? You weren't there. You didn't watch your husband's eyes wander all over the club, leering at the waitress, calling her 'hon,' following her ass all over the dining room."

“Betsy, there is no need to be vulgar. Do not be vulgar. It accomplishes nothing. I’m sure he does not want to do anything with a waitress.”

“Oh, he wants to do everything with anyone but me.”

Miriam laughed out loud.

“Oh, dear girl. I thought you were old enough to understand marriage by now. Had you hoped marriage would be a joyful sanctuary of trust and compassion? I don’t know what gave you that idea. You’ve been at the dinner table with your father. I thought you knew. Marriage is about status and stability, neither of which are what they seem. Status is out of our control, though we do everything we can to maintain it. Join the right clubs, attend the right church, lunch with the right ladies. These things we hope will maintain our status. Stability may very well be an illusion, but it is one you best keep up. Unfortunately, most of that responsibility falls on you. You must see to the needs of your husband and do what it takes to preserve our status, at least when you are out in public. If you want to behave disagreeably at home, that’s one thing, but to do it in public, and embarrass *me* is another matter. I must insist that you behave appropriately.”

“Mother, really?” Betsy remembered growing up in the mill village, playing in the dirt and eating from sparse dinner plates. “Our family is nothing but cotton pickers who figured out how to bleach cotton yarn.”

Miriam slapped Betsy’s cheek, leaving bloody streaks from the graze of her fingernails. Tears sprung from Betsy’s eyes as she cradled her face.

“You see, I can do that in my own home,” Miriam said. “Now you must stay in yours until that heals. We wouldn’t want anyone thinking that you upset your mother so much that she had to strike you. What kind of daughter would they think you are?”

William had heard their argument, as he heard many of his mother's tantrums. He understood Miriam's family logic, and was pleased that she punished his mother. He also had no doubt she had been drinking, or was still drunk from the night before.

Her condition was no better when she sauntered into his bedroom as he tied a twisted knot in his bow tie, getting ready for a date arranged by Miriam. He saw her scabby cheek but remained focused on tying the knot.

"Has *Grandmother* got you on a date this evening?" Betsy mocked his use of the hard D.

"I am escorting Miss Louise Haynsworth to her family dinner, with her parents and grandparents," he said, dropping the -er in dinner and replacing it with -ah, as Miriam, not Betsy, had taught him.

"You know she didn't always talk like that," Betsy said. "Like she's taught you to talk. You have no idea who she is."

William's face reddened and his jaw clenched. He turned to face his mother, a full head taller than her now, and held one finger inflexibly to her cheek, taunting the scratches Miriam had made. He spoke through gritted teeth, eyes bulging, having not yet mastered Miriam's lack of visible perturbation.

"I know exactly who my *Grandmother* is," he said, with extra emphasis on the D. "And you obviously do, too." He flicked her cheek with a filed fingernail, penetrating her wound just enough to sting again.

Betsy stepped back to let William pass her as he snatched his jacket from the back of the dressing chair. He took a moment to put it on, and, putting Miriam on in his mind, turned around and said to his mother, "You just will not do."

William was distracted that night as he picked up Louise, doing his best to straighten his back, square his chin and charm other people's mothers, as his grandmother had taught him to do. But nothing was abating his irritation. As a result, his voice pitched as he regaled stories of college applications (Wake Forest, Wofford), his most recent debate topic (essential military service) and how he hoped to join his father at his grandfather's finishing plant (which he most certainly did not). Eventually he could no longer stand the sound of his own voice and was overcome by nausea. He excused himself and found an exit door. He was short of breath and surprised himself by throwing up in the grass near the sidewalk, splashing sputum on his just-shined shoes.

"Oh shit," he said aloud to himself. "What is the matter with me?"

"That's nothing nobody else hasn't done out here," a voice said behind him. William turned around and the waiter who had been servicing their table handed him a clean linen napkin.

"Do I know you?" William said. "What is your name?"

"I'm Sam, your waiter." He touched the nametag on his left shoulder. "I've seen you here before. You come here lots. With your family."

"Well, I don't know you," William said, insulted by the intimacy that a service boy was attempting.

"Oh, I know you don't," the boy said, slurring his words together as they inched out of his mouth, which had curled up into a crooked smile. "But I know you. I seen you."

He moved closer to William and took the napkin from his hand to wipe the corner of his mouth. William let him, overtaken for a moment by his smell, of fried chicken and soap that made him embarrassed about his own odor of vomit that he knew the boy would



be able to smell, so closely. William snatched the napkin away from him and took a step back.

“I can wipe my own mouth, thank you,” he said, quieter than his previous insult.

“Well, it’s just that you have...” Sam pointed at William’s shirt, where William saw a regurgitated chunk of meat and two kernels of corn clinging to his starched white placket.

“Oh my god, this is so embarrassing,” William said, now humiliated. He swatted at his shirt with the napkin, knocking the bits to the grass. Still, there was a trail of pink vomit that he guessed was the tomato soup. “What am I to do?”

Sam gently took William’s wrist and led him toward the kitchen door. “Come with me.”

William’s hand felt as if it were on fire, flames licking up his arm and onto his cheek, warming his face and impeding his ability to breathe. He felt lightheaded and thought he might vomit again.

“Stop.” He pulled back on Sam’s hand, and let it drop. “Where are we going?” It wasn’t that William didn’t want to go wherever it was Sam was taking him; in fact, he wanted to go there more than he wanted to go anywhere, including back into that dining room as Louise’s date, or back to his grandmother’s parlor as her protégé. He was just confused as to why he wanted to go there.

“I’ll just get you a glass of water,” Sam said quietly. “So you can rinse out your mouth. Stay right here.”

Sam left him standing outside the kitchen door, from which William found himself unable to move. He continued to swipe at the stain on his shirt, as if the flick of his wrist would wipe away his constitutional rejection.

“Here you go,” Sam reappeared with a glass of ice water. “Take a sip and swish it around. Just spit it out.”

“Spit it out? How vulgar.”

He took a sip of the water and swallowed it, gagging on the taste of his own vomit. William kept eye contact with Sam to maintain dignity and in anticipation of what he would do next. He took another sip of water and handed the glass to Sam.

“Thank you, and what did you say your name was again?”

As Sam repeated his name he stepped toward William, allowing him to smell the piece of spearmint gum Sam had put in his mouth when he had gone to get the water. The sharp mint ignited William’s nostrils and brightened his eyes. He involuntarily opened his mouth and Sam’s proximity allowed William to taste Sam’s gum as he inhaled through his mouth.

“You want a piece?”

Sam didn’t wait for William’s answer as he leaned toward William, firmly gathering the back of his neck to bring William’s lips to meet his. Sam’s full moist lips engulfed William’s thin lips and William tasted the minty gum. Sam pulled away to look at William’s eyes that softened as they breathed together. Sam felt the muscles in William’s neck release and noticed that his shoulders fell as he exhaled. With the slightest tilt of his head William leaned in unassisted by the hand still on his neck, putting his own on Sam’s shoulder to steady himself and invite Sam back. Their mouths came together again, this time open to each other, their tongues entangling as they voraciously explored each other’s interior, their nostrils breathing noisily to support the effort.

William had kissed his dates goodnight, but never like that. He did what was expected, a peck on the cheek or even a pressing of their lips together. The hopeful look of his date always made him a bit nauseous, a feeling he had assigned to the unsuitability of the girl who wasn't from exactly the right family, or who was too thick in the waist, or whose hair was just mousy brown; there was always something not exactly right that prevented him from fully engaging with the girl. This boy was certainly not from the right family, and his disheveled hair could use a cut, and his ill-fitting shirt disguised his physique. Yet William had never felt compelled to probe deeper like he did with this waiter. When he felt Sam's zipper engage against his own William broke the embrace and stepped back to adjust his own penis, which had enlarged in an uncomfortable position. Sam reached his hand out to help and William pushed him away, embarrassed as he struggled to understand what was happening to him. Sam looked over his shoulder to check for other waiters taking a break. He put his hand on William's shoulder.

"Let's walk over here," he said as he guided William to a darker corner, away from the shining lights of the kitchen. William followed Sam's lead to the cover of darkness, walking awkwardly as he tried to manage his hard-on. Sam brought William to a stop in the shadows on the other side of the stairwell. He turned William toward him and kissing him again. William gave in and returned his passion, allowing Sam to handle his belt buckle. William's head swam with endorphins that impaired his ability to control his body or direct his will. He could only give in to what Sam was doing because he had never experienced such fervency. He floated up and above himself, away from the strict rule of his grandmother and the disinterest of his parents into a place that was just right, a place he didn't know existed, where he was himself, a self he didn't recognize but whom

he instantly knew when he met himself for the first time. That version of William was pure and real and concocted of nothing but who he was instead of a conglomeration of people building him into who they thought he should be. He let out a high-pitched moan as Sam's hand drew out his penis and stroked it, skin to skin. He came quickly, doubling over in surprise and putting a hand out to catch the ejaculate, pushing Sam away with his other hand.

The semen that dripped on his hand immediately dirtied his conscience and returned him to reality. He tucked his penis back into his underwear and zipped his pants, fumbling with the buckle. His buttocks were still shaking as he steadied himself on the wall surrounding the stairwell, wiping the sticky material onto the coarse brick. When Sam bent down to help him stand up, William pushed him away and hissed at him.

"Get away from me," William whispered loudly, aware of his surroundings and not wanting to draw attention to their tryst. "Don't touch me."

"I'm sorry, it's just that...here," Sam held out another napkin, indicating that William wipe his hands with it. William reached into his coat pocket to retrieve his ever-present handkerchief - as his grandmother had taught him - and wondered why he hadn't used it earlier, instead of taking one from the waiter, which got him into this mess. William unbent his knees and stood up slowly, returning his thoughts to the correctness in which he knew they needed to be ordered to please his grandmother as he wrapped each finger with the handkerchief to remove evidence of the offending action. As the memory of Sam touching him flashed through his mind his knees buckled slightly, not of the physicality of the act itself, but the authentic plane to which it had lifted him. He breathed easier in

the moment of its remembrance but stiffened his back and braced his shoulders to tamp the memory down.

“We shall not speak of this,” William said to Sam as he brushed past him, turning the corner and reentering the club as if he had been out for a cigarette. He went straight to the men’s room to complete his toilette, checking the tuck of his shirt in the mirror before washing his hands. He did not look himself in the eye. He splashed water on his face and looked in the sink as he dried his cheeks and patted his closed eyes to dry the cold water. He looked down at the stain on his shirt and pulled his jacket as close as he could to hide it.

He returned to the table, glad the adults were full of wine and liquor and barely noticed his return, except Louise, his date.

“Where have you been, William?” she whispered to him, looking at the stain on his white shirt. “And what happened?”

William was repulsed by her bouffant hair, held in place by so much hairspray the aerosol was visible and the way her lipstick had worn off during dinner, leaving a stained rim around her mouth where she had overapplied it.

“None of your concern,” he said harshly. Pity was the only emotion he could muster when her eyes filled with water at his irascibility. He instinctively reached in his coat for his handkerchief but stopped short when he realized it was crumpled up in his pocket, covered in his sperm. Sam had returned to the table to clear plates.

“Well, I must go,” William blurted out as he stood quickly. “Mr. and Mrs. Haynsworth, thank you for a lovely meal. Louise, it was delightful to be with you.” He

nodded to each of the family members, dropped his dinner napkin on the table, turned and left the dining room.

He sat in his grandmother's car, borrowed for most of his arranged dates, holding the steering wheel and tapping his forehead against it.

"What. Just. Happened." He whispered. Then he held still, opened his eyes and stared at his zipper. His breath quickened as he tried to envision a future as – *What? What am I?*

William had not considered his disdain for every date or his disinterest in doing anything other than kissing a girl goodnight on the cheek. *I've just been waiting on the right girl. I have no attraction to that waiter.* Then his mind returned to the feel of Sam's tongue in his mouth and he could not help but smile. He closed his eyes and touched his lips as his groin tingled. He lingered in the moment, feeling whole.

"William!" his grandmother's voice jarred him. His eyes jerked open. His head swung in the direction of the voice, then the opposite way. His grandmother was not there.

He thought he might retch again and grabbed the door handle. He froze at the sound of voices in the parking lot and swallowed the possibility of bile.

*I cannot be. There is no life.*

William didn't know anyone like Sam. There was reason for that. The American Psychiatric Association had classified homosexuality as a mental disorder, its sufferers treated with inpatient mental hospital stays, drugs and shock therapy. They were denied benefits in the workplace if they weren't fired.

The voices came closer, one car over. William slowly lowered his head to hide. He closed his eyes as if that would help. He heard their car door open, muffled voices and a woman's giddy squeal. The man and the woman laughed together.

"There's more where that came from," he said to her with a growly voice.

Their escapade amplified William's quandary. He was relieved when they drove away.

"You have betrayed me," he said as he grabbed his crotch and squeezed himself painfully, groaning through gritted teeth.

He heeded Miriam's demands to maintain status and stability, and drove home quickly to tell his grandmother about the evening before Mrs. Haynesworth did.

William returned often to the kitchen door of the Magnolia Club that summer, Sam smiling slyly when he saw him. William never spoke. He walked into the shadows and waited for Sam to follow. William kissed him with full-throated passion to taste the mint gum Sam always had in his mouth and reached aggressively for his belt buckle. Sam laughed and let William have his way, correcting him gently when he tugged too hard and spat on his hand when dry friction burned. William nodded his head and remembered the correction the next time he stopped by.

When checking for remnants of their tryst one night, William spotted something on the ground after Sam returned to work. He bent over and picked up Sam's nametag. He started towards the kitchen door to see if he could catch Sam, but stopped at the corner, looking at the white plastic tag in his hands. He closed his fingers over it and put it in his pocket. When he returned home, he pulled the innocuous *Detective Stories* book from his shelf and put Sam's nametag in the box hidden within it.





“Sullivan is just a disaster,” William complained to Freddie after the funeral. “Marilyn always hoped he would turn out alright, but he clearly did not. What an embarrassment.”

“William, can you be embarrassed of your children? Is that appropriate?”

“It is what it is, Freddie. You have no idea. You were not cursed with children. I abided my grandmother and created progeny and they have done nothing but cause me embarrassment. I’ve even lost hope for Andrew, who married that common girl whom I’m afraid is going to be just like Andrew’s mother, drunk and helpless. Did you see how many glasses of wine she drank at the funeral reception? And Charlotte’s been totally absorbed into the family of the plumber. Going to give birth to a child whose trajectory will be the same, I have no doubt. Who knows what will become of Billy, my namesake, that I should not have given away. He pays me no mind, living in Columbia. Why would anyone live there?”

“Oh William, is that all?” Freddie laughed so hard he made William laugh.

“I tried, Freddie, did I not? Why did my children not turn out like Grandmother wanted them to?”

“Did your grandmother’s girls turn out like she wanted them to?”

“Her girls were a disaster. Why do you think she depended on me?”

“Exactly, William. I am not a parent, you are correct, but I don’t think parents can tell their children what or who to be.”

“My grandmother told me who to be. And I did it.” He sighed and looked down at his hands, folded in his lap. “My grandmother instilled in me a sense of family, honor and

duty, and I have held to that. I never gave up on Marilyn, all those years, Freddie. All those years.”

“Yes, and you both suffered. More than you should have.”

“Suffering is our duty. But my children will not suffer me to do my bidding, which is a pity. They will not go to church, and they barely visit me. I suspect I will not see them at all now that their mother is gone.”

They sat quietly in the heaviness of his last sentence, suspecting its prophecy and conceding its truth.

“I am sad at her death,” William said. “I did love her, for being a mother, and a wife, though she couldn’t be either into its full stature. I didn’t entirely help matters, either, I know. I have come to terms with that. She and I talked about it. I admitted it, and she forgave me.”

“I’m glad to hear that, William.”

“From here on out I’m not sure what to do,” he said as he slapped his knees to arrest tears and move the moment forward. “Thank you for helping me today. I am going to go lay down now.”

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As William began his junior year in high school, Miriam arranged for him to escort a number of girls who were making their debuts in society at events where the girls were presented to society in extravagant white dresses framed by elbow-length calfskin gloves, practicing for their weddings that mothers and fathers hoped would soon follow. Miriam had been instrumental in starting The Society, a club of textile mill owners’ wives who wanted to ensure that their children married in their set, though it did her own daughters

no good, Miriam often thought bitterly. When the resentment of her disappointment in her daughters' choices raised its head, she redirected her focus on William, doggedly directing his every move to ensure his outcome was not similar.

William obeyed his grandmother, standing tall and firm in each tuxedo and lavishing the required number of appreciative glances and hand-holding on each girl. Many of the events took place at the Magnolia Club, where he expectantly surveyed the room for Sam, though he soon ceased that practice because he didn't appear again after that summer. William was both disappointed and relieved.

Miriam laughed off phone calls from mothers who were petulant that William never called their daughter again after what they thought was a successful date. Miriam quizzed William about the girl, receiving similar responses regarding their imperfections.

*That Elizabeth chewed her fingernails. It was unseemly.*

*Alice's teeth are crooked as a road map. I could not possibly date her again.*

*Betty was as dumb as a doornail. She just tittered at everything I said and contributed nothing to conversation.*

Miriam agreed that his reasons for not following up were valid, but as she watched William interact with his peers, she noticed his eyes did not follow the expected line of a teenage boy. Never did his gaze wander to a girl's bosom, or her bottom, where Miriam knew all boys' curiosities lie. And he only dated when she set up his dates. His obedience was appreciated but she knew he should be initiating his own relationships, if he was a normal 16-year-old boy.

After the season of parties and debuts and on a day when Miriam had started her evening cocktails early, she addressed the issue.

“William, do you masturbate?”

“I beg your pardon, grandmother?” He crossed his legs.

“Uncross your legs, William. I want to know if you think about girls and touch your penis because of it. I am your grandmother, and I am concerned about how your penis works. I need it to work in a particular way. I need progeny. You will need to marry a girl and have children.”

“I understand that, Grandmother.”

“Then why don’t you look at girls?”

“I do. I date all of the girls you ask me to.”

“Exactly, William. But you do not show initiative in dating girls.”

Miriam lit a cigarette, breathed in the nicotine, then balanced it on the side of the crystal ashtray. She stood, walked to the bookcase, and returned with two magazines from a door below the bookshelves. She placed them on the coffee table in front of William, pushing his teacup and saucer out of the way.

“William, look at those magazines.”

He looked at the front cover, a photograph of a naked woman partially hidden behind a drape of silky fabric.

“Go on,” Miriam said. “Open it up and look inside.”

William’s hand shook as he obeyed his grandmother and turned the pages of the magazine, his eyes moving quickly across the images. He came to the center picture, a two-page photograph of a completely naked woman lying on a bed, cupping her own breast with one hand and curling her other next to a manicured bush.

“Stop.” Miriam put her hand on the picture. “Look at that girl, William. Isn’t she beautiful, with her full bosom and tantalizing secret between her legs? Aren’t you curious about that?”

She could hear his short breaths, and hoped it was caused by the picture.

“Of course, Grandmother, she is beautiful.”

“Now touch your penis, and tell me what it’s doing right now.”

William touched the zipper of his pants lightly.

“It is activating my penis.” He kept his eye on the picture.

“Let me see.”

William didn’t move.

“It’s nothing I haven’t seen before, you know that.”

He took two deep breaths and pressed on his zipper, then unzipped his fly and pulled his hard penis out.

“Now, William, I want you to look at the picture of that girl and stroke it until you ejaculate.” She handed him her handkerchief. “Not on the carpet.”

Miriam hadn’t seen his penis since he grew pubic hair, and its size and appearance surprised her. She remembered his young head on her breast and the softness of his naked torso. She returned her focus to William’s ability to be aroused by a woman. Without it, there would be no heirs, and she would fail Elliott again, the thought of which fell into a pit in her stomach.

William looked silently at the photograph and did as Miriam commanded him. He ejaculated on her light blue handkerchief. William panted for breath that he had held and covered his mouth with the back of his other hand.

“Now William, I want you to take these magazines with you and practice. Do you understand?”

“I am deeply disappointed in this community I find myself in,” William bemoaned to Freddie, who had moved into a retirement community in Spartanburg. “I thought I could be left alone to play bridge and go to church, but the libidos of these women are just relentless. When do they stop wanting to paw at men? Why won’t they just let me be?”

“I know exactly what you’re talking about,” Freddie laughed, spreading his arms wide from his wingback chair in the small sitting room of his apartment. “There are halls and halls of widows here. I suppose the men die early because they are just so exhausted by it all.”

“My heavens,” William animatedly grasped at his chest, feigning a heart attack. “Maybe that is the answer. Why does our good Lord not just take us now?”

“I am not ready to go yet! I think there is much left to do.”

“What could there possibly be for us to do, wasting away in retirement? I can hardly see, and my hearing is fading, which may not be a bad thing. I just cannot listen to everything everyone has to say these days. I don’t know how much bridge is left in me, the cards are getting so hard to see, and the partners are so bad, these half-dead people trying to set a trick or play a suit. My standings have fallen and it’s embarrassing.”

“I didn’t take to bridge like you did. Thankfully my eyes still let me see, though,” Freddie said, indicating the shelves that displayed his pastime, paper modeling. He spent hours building replicas of English manor houses, Revolutionary-era homes, and world-famous cathedrals. Only upon close inspection was it clear that they were made of colored paper.

“I never understood that hobby, Freddie. Doesn’t it make you lonely, to sit all by yourself folding paper?”

“Keeps me out of trouble, mostly,” he said with a smile. “I’ll get more coffee.”

William sat quietly while Freddie went to the kitchenette. He looked out the picture window and watched as birds flew in and out of his peripheral vision, picking seeds from a number of birdfeeders perched along the tree line of the property. He stopped pumping his crossed leg, and his shoulders fell into the curves of the chair. His head fell against the inside wing and his eyes closed.

Freddie rounded the corner, ready to announce fresh coffee and suggest lunch, but closed his mouth when he saw that William had fallen asleep. He returned the coffee to the kitchen and then to his seat across from William. He looked out the window, then to William, whose mouth had popped open, the bottom lip quivering as he breathed. Freddie crossed his leg and entwined his own hands, gripping the adrenaline that was produced by William sleeping peacefully in his home.

He remembered his own parents, who through their simple life taught him that honoring and loving one’s self would transpose to an ability to love and honor another. William’s grandmother had it all wrong, Freddie thought, placing family above self, a concept that sounded noble but which, in the end, extinguished the unique parts of the individual, leaving nothing new to create. Remixing the same ingredients only makes a grey mess of sludge that can no longer support life and which eventually becomes toxic. Freddie worried for William’s children; he had been to Andrew’s house, where three children ran wild through a big house while their diluted mother drank too much and their father worked too much, blindly determined to compensate for his sparse childhood.



Sullivan had gone missing again, the child for whom William held no fatherly affection. And Billy and Charlotte continued to keep their distance from the caustic weaponry of their father.

“I don’t know what I see in you,” Freddie said quietly as he contemplated the hope he long-held for William.

William’s lips closed as his tongue smacked to rehydrate. His eyes floated open.

“I don’t know, Freddie. I am a sharp, bitter man.”

“Yes, you are,” Freddie smiled. “It’s not entirely your fault. And it’s not too late.”

“Don’t start that conversation with me, Freddie,” he said as he watched a squirrel shimmy up the base of a birdfeeder, only to be denied by an aluminum cap doing its job. “I am hard-wired against who I am. My grandmother did that to me. I am, in some ways thankful, because it is not an easy road in this society. But I will tell you that I know it has made it hard on people around me. I think about Marilyn a lot. Almost constantly. I did not understand, until the very end, how difficult it was for her. Did you know that? How hard her life was? I thought I had done it right. Given her children. A God to worship. Meals to cook. But she still hated me for what I could not give her.”

“I wish you two had had a different life. There was so much good in each of you, but you did not bring it out in each other.”

“There’s no good in me, Freddie. I cannot be redeemed. And I will not be redeemed through my children, nor their children. It is a sad legacy that I have left my grandmother. She saved me from my awful parents, and depended on me to atone for their inadequacies. But I could not. I am deeply embarrassed and ashamed of my life’s work. You were right not to procreate.”

“I encourage you not to lose hope, my old, old friend. I never have.”

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Miriam decided that William should attend Wofford College, a men’s college 45 minutes away in Spartanburg. Its new president, Pendleton Gaines, was pedigreed with an education from Woodberry Forrest and Washington and Lee, which he had put to good use in cultivating relationships with Spartanburg County’s textile families. Wofford was a small school: just 500 men strolled around a 180-acre campus on the outskirts of Spartanburg, a diminutive manufacturing town with a small but self-important society that was not as fashionable as Greenville because it did not care to be. It was the perfect fit for William, who needed to be influenced by the families of textile manufacturing. In polite conversation he would agree to the inheritance of the mills, but his tone wasn’t convincing. His Aunt Helen had remained unmarried, living an unobtrusive life assisting a professor at the University in Columbia. His Aunt Dotty married a Spartanburg textile man, but produced only girls, unsuitable for running bleacheries; they had their own worries about primogeniture.

At Wofford, William eschewed professors who attempted to engage him in discussion about the new calls for civil rights that were brewing in some larger cities. He was determined to live in the social structure his family had curated, eager to study Victorian literature - stories he had read to his grandmother - and criticize them with his starchy mores. In those discussions he found compatriots of like mind, smug young men who were feeling the strain of a new society pushing against the familial institutions that had indulged and corrupted them, from whom flowed a palpable sense of fear that they learned to tame with alcohol.

Two doors down from William's room was Freddie Kimball, a skinny boy from Edgefield, a small town on the western edge of South Carolina. Freddie was a bookworm who read a secondary source book for class because he had finished the assigned reading. His glasses sat on the end of his nose, tipping toward the book under review. William liked his smartness, admiring him for not only reading the assignments, but how he discussed the readings in class, pointing out nuances that the professor missed. Freddie wouldn't gloat in his cleverness, but William noticed the slightest sneer that registered when Freddie outmaneuvered a professor in a discourse, indicated only by the professor's vigorously flipping to the next page in the text.

William kept his door open so he could spot Freddie when he installed himself on one of the stained couches in their floor's reading lounge, which he did every Tuesday and Thursday at 10 a.m., when most of their classmates were just starting their academic day, and when William and Freddie were returning from their 8 a.m. class to begin the real work of college, encountering the essential nature of who they are.

William brought a book out to the study room, opened it and looked over the pages at Freddie, who stretched his long legs out to prop his feet on the dingy coffee table, marked by water stains and wandering pens of careless college boys. Putting his feet on a table was anathema to William, whipped by the stern manners of his grandmother, but his body yearned toward Freddie in a way that was not unfamiliar, his extremities reaching out on their own, as if they were teaching William how to be.

"Well, what are you studying?" William drew out his Ws, drooping his eyelids to affect boredom. He worked to control his breath, taking extraordinary effort to appear insouciant.

Freddie glanced at William. Freddie had been schooled to feign apathy when improper interest piqued, not by a governing grandmother but by schoolyard bullies. Freddie didn't blame his parents, who ran a small grocery store in Edgefield, for not protecting him, but he knew that although college was a place of wider variety, he also knew to hold his cards close to his chest.

“Ovid. *Metamorphoses*. Book 10. Don't suppose you've read it. You've been very busy going out at night. Dating Connie Converse, I suspect.”

William ignored Freddie's literary snub. He had not ventured to read anything as early as Ovid or the Greek philosophers and made a mental note to do so. His smile was triumphant though, because Freddie had noticed that he went out with girls. He ignored the embarrassed part of him that reminded him that they were dates his grandmother still arranged for him.

“Yes, well, I am in demand as a suitable escort to those girls at Converse. They need someone with manners and breeding, from a proper family.”

Freddie raised his book a bit and returned to reading.

“Do you date girls?” William asked clumsily. “I mean, have you been on many dates since you've been here?”

William felt suddenly conspicuous and patronizing, and he didn't want to be. He wanted Freddie to like him, to bond with him over their dislike of fraternity and masculinity and their affinity for erudition and perfection that, even though he knew little about Freddie, he sensed that he sought the same things.

“I don't particularly care to continue this conversation,” Freddie said as he snapped his book shut then stood.

Freddie moved around the table to leave the room, forcing William to remove his legs from the coffee table.

William remained in his seat and pretended to read his book. A cyclone of thoughts swirled in his head, clogging his throat and stuffing his lungs full of air he could not breathe. He closed his eyes in an attempt to sort through why his limbs felt numb. No one - except his grandmother - had ever reproached him in such a manner. It spoke to the fundamental part of him that needed to be told what to do, because his grandmother had shown him that he could not be left to his own devices.

William stood, then marched into Freddie's room.

"I don't care who you date, William," Freddie said without looking up from his book. "I'm not here to find a wife. I'm here to learn more about who I can be. Why are you here?"

William exhaled the breath with which he was going to berate Freddie. Freddie looked up from his book and took his glasses off, waving them at the empty chair in an invitation for William to sit. William could see Freddie's blue eyes clearly as he lowered himself into the chair, a yardstick away from Freddie. William exhaled his fear.

"I don't know why I am here. I don't need to find out who I am because my family has told me. I am to marry a girl, make babies and run my grandfather's mills, none of which I want to do. I don't know who I am, but I know I am not that, but that is what I am to become."

They sat in the silence of his confession. William held his breath, surprised by his own admission. He swallowed saliva that gathered in his nervous mouth. He felt

suddenly weak and vulnerable, but unafraid. Freddie held his gaze until William's breath returned.

"I don't know why I just told you that. I know who I am. I know what I have to do."

"You don't *have* to do that," Freddie said. "You can do and be what and who you want."

William chuckled and waved Freddie's notion away with his long, thin fingers.

"No, Freddie, I cannot. It's not that simple. I must do what my grandmother asks of me."

"Why? What about your mother? Your father?"

"My mother!" William's voice pitched. "My mother is not a mother, first of all. She is the vague semblance of a mother only because she expelled me from her body. That is about all she had to do with me. She was much more interested in hating my father and engaging in activities that would make him hate her. That was their main occupation, not parenting me or my sister. Had my grandmother not stepped in I would have been raised by the colored maid. My sister has practically been raised by horses. Mother has basically left her on a horse farm for the entirety of her childhood. My grandmother saved me from the wretchedness of my mother and father. *That* is why I must do what she asks of me."

"And what does she ask of you?"

"First, Grandmother doesn't ask, she *expects*. She expects me to carry on the legacy she and grandfather have worked so hard to create. One of society, propriety and place. My mother and her sisters could do little to advance the Poe line because that is not the work of women. They do that work for their husband's family. And my father's family is of no count. They were grocers whose progeny were as irresponsible as my mother.

Grandfather has tried to fold my father into the role of progenitor, but he is more interested in screwing his secretaries than he is creating a legacy for me. So it has fallen on me and my grandmother to rescue two families from this disastrous lot. And what am I to do with that?"

Freddie leaned forward in his chair and stretched out his hand to William's knee.

"Their future is not your responsibility, William. No wonder you're so mean. You're all tied up in someone else's story. You're not even yourself. You need to become who you are, not who she is telling you you are."

"Mean? You think I'm mean?" William laughed at his diagnosis.

"You scare the shit out of those little fraternity boys in class, I've seen it. If your words were knives they'd be in pieces on the floor!"

"Of course they would, because most of them are ridiculously stupid morons," William laughed.

"Well, yes, I agree with that. I have been surprised at how stupid so many of them are. How did Wofford admit them?"

"I hate to think this, but I am sure they are from families of note, as am I. But I assure you I earned my admittance here."

"I am *not* from a family of note, I will admit. And I don't understand all this family nonsense. It seems rather pointless to me."

"Pointless?" William's voice pitched again. "Family is the key to immortality. So that we will not fade from memory. Memory is all we have. And only rich families of importance are remembered and celebrated because their names are on things, like mills

and villages and colleges. Isn't that a grand way to live forever? I should think that is what Mr. Wofford thought."

"I thought immortality was up to God, if you believe in that sort of thing," Freddie said.

"God has nothing to do with this," William again waved away the thought with his hand. "You know who you are because of who you have come from. More importantly, it lets other people know who you are."

"But your parents are adulterous drunks, from the way you tell it. Is that what you are to be?"

William bristled at Freddie's stark description of his ancestry.

"Absolutely not. That is what my grandmother has rescued me from, and that is why I must conform to her notion of propriety, and not cause a spectacle, as my parents have."

William regularly did his best to convince Freddie of the importance of family, while Freddie did his best to free William from the notion. They lived between them a regimen of seclusion and concealment in plain sight. They leaned into each other as they dispersed humours, hot and cold ideas passed between them as inside jokes buffered by times apart, and when the argument held, barely acknowledging being in the same place. For a while they didn't notice themselves, twin masses of iron pulled from a puddling furnace pounded into new shapes, intermittent in their development, still unsure of what they were to become. William appreciated Freddie's mind and his deep knowledge of literature that belied the place in which he had been raised, which led to lively repartee that William sometimes raced to keep up with. Being with Freddie was like being home; not William's childhood home, or even his grandmother's house, but the home he should



have had, that he wanted, where he felt comfort and belonging. William would get trapped in Freddie's lidded eyes as Freddie discoursed the misunderstood and underrepresented themes of the Latin love elegists in the academic corpus; his passion for elegiac couplets and dactylic hexameter ignited nearly violent outbursts that enthralled William into an equally vehement apostle of the same, though it wasn't so much the poetry that William championed but the vigor with which Freddie so enthusiastically defended poetry nearing two millennia old. William felt stronger when he was with Freddie; he stood straighter, as if Freddie were a brace for the spine his grandmother had built, and which he was now learning to maintain.

Miriam's hand was not far, though. She still contrived dates for him with Converse girls, and her reach had begun to wear on William. He began to fabricate reasons he could not date every weekend, exhausted by the energy it was taking to be charming and at the same time discouraging to the poor girls who looked dreamily at him, already envisioning their wedding day when he arrived perfectly coiffed to escort them to the dinner of the day. His anima ached for the comradery he was experiencing on the Wofford campus, in the dormitory lounges where only men were allowed.

As the Southern political machine was trying to defeat integration, William tried to evade the will of his grandmother. Freddie had not met her, and had no particular desire to do so, but did not decline the invitation to have Easter supper at their home that spring. Part of him wanted to put eyes on the specter that controlled William, hoping that he could find a way to defeat it and disabuse William once and for all of the patrilineal notions he held so tightly.

They drove by strawberry fields dotted with berries and flowering peach trees. They cracked the windows to let their cigarette smoke escape. They didn't listen to the radio; William couldn't stand the sh-boo-bop and falsetto voices of Frankie Valli or the crooners like Perry Como and Tony Martin. He could withstand Rosemary Clooney, but wasn't willing to risk hearing the others if the radio was on.

When they pulled in the driveway of his grandmother's house, a white two-story Georgian with six columns across the front, Freddie had not imagined such a structure, but didn't let on to William. It was the sixth oldest house in the neighborhood, William announced proudly, commissioned by his grandfather after he opened his first bleachery.

"What exactly happens at a bleachery?" Freddie realized they had never discussed the operations of the textile business.

"Just like it sounds. Cotton looks white and beautiful in the field, but once it's been turned into yarn, it's gray and dingy and has to be made that beautiful bright white again. That's what my grandfather does, makes beautiful bright white."

"So, he's responsible for my undershirts?"

William closed his eyes and laughed.

"Please don't ever mention your underclothes again. But yes, I suppose we are responsible for your bright whites."

"What about my tight-y whities?"

Even though William spit out a laugh, Freddie noticed that his knuckles were white on the steering wheel even though the car was in park and the engine was off. William looked down at his lap and released the steering wheel. He reached over and put his hand

across Freddie's and squeezed it. His cheeks fell and his eyes darkened as he looked at Freddie.

"You must never speak again," he said, and smiled as he let go of his hand.

He recognized William's admonition as a joke, but Freddie felt fear in that moment; not of William, but of what lay behind the double doors of the big white house.

As they crossed the threshold, though, William became himself again, flamboyant and high-pitched as he exorted the art, the Oriental rugs, the gilded mirrors and the jade bric-a-brac as he walked Freddie down the great hall. Miriam stepped out of a room on the right, catching William's hand mid-air. Even though he had never seen her, Freddie knew from her stiff back and steely eyes who she was.

"William!" she blurted in a loud whisper.

His arm escaped her grasp, flew up in the air, and landed on her shoulders.

"Oh Grandmother! It's *so* good to see you!" he sang, kissing her soundly but quickly on the mouth then turning her shoulders to Freddie. "I want you to meet Freddie, my classmate."

Freddie attempted a smile as he took Miriam's extended hand. When he looked at her, her red lips smudged by William's reckless kiss and pursed into a flat smile punctuated by hardened cheekbones and flinty eyes, Freddie felt the same cold rush of fear that shortened his breath and drew the blood from his face when the Edgefield bullies had approached him.

Miriam's flat smile turned smug as she dropped Freddie's hand and turned her back to him, linking her arm in William's to lead them to the dining room. William seemed ecstatic to see her. He was charged with energy and strength that nearly imploded the

room. Freddie was confused by the hold his grandmother had on him, a bond exponentially stronger than the complaints William regularly lodged about her in the dorm. Freddie wondered what that bond was made of.

Miriam steered them into Elliott's library, where his family sat in quiet submission, already sucking greedily on icy highballs to reduce the hardness of family. Dub paced along the window, squinting into the sun outside. Elliott sat stiffly in a wing back chair, staring across the coffee table at Betsy, who tended annoyingly to Mary's hair, trying to rearrange the pixie cut she had gotten without Betsy's knowledge or permission. Mary swatted her hand away and pulled at her too-short bangs self-consciously. She screamed when she saw William, making both Elliott and Miriam wince at the teenage girl's lack of decorum. Mary wrenched away from her mother's attention to jump up and embrace William.

"Oh Willie, you're here!" she squawked in a funny little voice. She stood on her tiptoes to hang her arms around William's neck and tug him close. "It's so awful when you're not here," she said into his chest.

"Don't call me that, and don't be so bleak," he said sternly as he took hold of her wrists to loosen her grasp on him. She smiled with disappointment when he turned her toward Freddie, introducing him again with enthusiasm. Freddie shook Mary's hand, which trembled.

Betsy popped up off the couch, so enthusiastically that lost her balance, a noticeable wobble sustained by a deep lean on the back of the couch; she overcorrected and fell into Freddie's extended hand, the grip of which prevented her complete collapse. He covered their tight grip gently with his other hand to assure her steadiness, noting apology and

shame in her eyes. Miriam chided Elliott to stand for a cursory handshake, his resolute fingers crushing Freddie's slight knuckles with only a nod of acknowledgement. Miriam took charge of Freddie and led him to the window, where William's father waited.

"Dub, this is William's friend, Freddie," she said, stepping back a half-step as if to avoid blood spatter. Dub kept his hands occupied by a tumbler of bourbon and an ashy cigarette, its red tip glowing under grey cinders allowed to prevail by Dub's inertia.

Freddie remained still, his breath shallow, feeling as exposed as a lamb in a lion's den. William choked on his own breath and wriggled free from Mary's grip on his arm to step quickly around Elliott's wingback to intervene. Miriam caught his elbow in an attempt to hold him back, but he shook her reprisal and stood next to Freddie.

"Father, Freddie is in my English Literature class and we study often together," William said, his nervousness exacerbating his drawl.

Dub's cloudy eyes wandered over Freddie. William leaned in to try to get his father's attention, his right hand touching the placket of his button-down shirt nervously, his mouth contorting into a smile as he continued to wait for his father's approval. He had also put his left hand on Freddie's forearm to draw the fortitude he knew Freddie's proximity would yield to him, a movement Dub's gaze followed. William's hand jerked from Freddie's arm and he stuffed it in his coat pocket.

"I know who you are," Dub growled at Freddie.

Then he turned his glare on William. "And this ends right here. Now."

William looked at his mother. Betsy looked down at her empty glass, then around the room for a refresher.

“What are you talking about, Father?” William said, his panic audible. “Freddie and I study together and we are at the top of our class...”

“I don’t want to hear about what you do together!” Dub roared. “I’ve heard enough. I’ve seen enough. Is that it Miriam, is that what you wanted me to see, William and his queer friend? This is what you’ve made, Miriam, he’s your doing. He’s not my son. I didn’t do that.” He jabbed the air with his cigarette, sending ashes scattering on William’s white cotton oxford.

“Do what, father?” William pleaded, looking back at his grandmother again.

“Make you a fucking queer, that’s what,” Dub said.

William retreated to his grandmother. She wrapped one arm around William’s waist and the other reached for Freddie, who shirked her advance, stepping just out of her reach.

“Now Dub, there’s no need to be vulgar,” Miriam reproached him, gently. “William’s just brought a friend home from Wofford. There’s no need to be ugly.”

William stepped forward to address his father.

“Father, I think you misunderstand...”

“No, William, you misunderstand. You are leaving that namby-pamby school and you are going to the Citadel where they will make a man out of you,” he said.

Betsy made a noise as if to interrupt.

“Shut-up Betsy,” he slurred at her. “This is your goddam fault, too. That boy is a fucking pansy and I won’t have it.”

Elliott smirked from his wingback chair.

“Dub, that boy is as much your fault as he is Betsy’s,” he said as he rose calmly from the chair. “So you’d better take responsibility and see that he’s not an embarrassment to this family. One embarrassment is enough.” He looked hard at Dub and walked out to the hall, turning towards the dining room. Dub dropped his cigarette into the last of the bourbon in his glass and slammed it on the console table.

“Betsy, we’re going home,” he said. “You too, Mary. Come on.”

Betsy looked at William, who was staring at the space Dub had left, pleading with a ghost who disappeared long before that moment. Her hands shook as she straightened her skirt, not knowing what to say to her son. Miriam dismissed her with a nod of her head, and Betsy turned to follow Dub.

“Daddy, I want to stay with William,” Mary drew from her anger to complain.

“Get in the goddam car,” he yelled from the library threshold, so loudly that it frightened her. She ran to William and lifted up on her toes to hug his neck. He held his arms out but did not embrace her.

“Now, Mary,” Dub yelled again. She turned to leave, crying openly, dodging her mother’s outstretched arms.

“Grandmother, I don’t understand,” William said, looking at his hands as if they were covered in blood. He looked at Freddie. “What has just happened?”

“William, it’s important that you get on the right track, and your father just does not think that Wofford is the place for you,” Miriam said as she turned her head to look at Freddie out of the corner of her eye. “We are simply worried about the influences you are under there. Remember what we talked about. The magazines, William. You must find a proper girl to marry and I’m worried that’s not happening at Wofford.”

“I would not, I am not,” William gulped a sob as he took his grandmother’s hands to his cheek. “I will not do anything to disappoint you. I just want to be...”

William took a deep breath and straightened his spine. He put Miriam’s hands down and held her at arm’s length.

“I want to please you, Grandmother, that’s all I want to do.”

Miriam smiled, exposing her yellowed teeth. She touched his cheek.

“My dear William, your grandmother loves you very much. You are my favorite boy.”

William sighed as his cheek sunk into her hand.

“That’s why you must do as your father says. You will finish the year at Wofford, but you must behave William, do you hear me? You must not get into trouble. This summer we will send you down to the Citadel so you can catch up on what you missed.”

William did not acknowledge her orders but snuggled deeper into her hand, as if his redemption were there. He did not look at Freddie. Miriam did.

“Freddie, I apologize for that scene, but I think you had better return to school. I’ll have Nancie fix you a plate.”

Miriam deposited William into the room from which she had emerged when they first arrived. She left Freddie near the front door. A small black man with a cap appeared with a foil-wrapped plate. He handed it to Freddie then told him he would drive him back to campus. The irony of the lamb dinner did not escape Freddie. He threw it away as soon as he returned to his room.



William returned to Wofford two days later, but never appeared again the in the common area, in the study carrels, or the dining hall. Freddie wasn't sure that he ate or went to the bathroom.

As Freddie finished the semester, he struggled to complete papers and engaged less in class. He was wondered about Dub's accusation. He wasn't certain. Of anything. He was 18 years old. He didn't know anything about who and what and how to love. That's why he went to college.

Andrew was not completely surprised when a strange man knocked on his door one Sunday morning to confess that he had been having sex with Margaret. If Andrew unlocked the past decade of a multitude of unexplained absences, days in a row of silence, and the abuse of alcohol, then he would see clearly that Margaret had never been faithful to him. She remained stone-faced as the man stood in their yard and cried, telling Andrew it was okay if he wanted to hit him. Andrew wasn't angry; he was more relieved that the enigma that was his marriage was solved. His heart fell when he turned around to go back in the house and saw the faces of his three children at the glass door.

He took a deep breath and thought about his seldom-remembered childhood and reminded himself what he had promised he wouldn't allow his children to endure. They grew up in a big house, each with their own room, new clothes every August and new bikes every Christmas, everything he thought would make a happy home. His shoulders slouched as he realized he had it all wrong. He had focused on the exterior, forgetting that the interior was where a family really lived, whether it was painted with truth and honor or papered over with deceit and disregard.

"Margaret, you'd better get your things together. You'll need to move out," he said calmly.

"Are you kidding me? Where am I going to go? I'm not going anywhere. This is not my problem."

Andrew steeled himself for battle but decided to fight it later. Margaret pressed passed him, ran up the stairs, and pushed through the children. Andrew heard their bedroom door slam as he put his hand on Ben's shoulder and ushered the other two into the living room. They sat wide-eyed, all three burgeoning teenagers who were old enough

to understand what had just transpired. As Andrew sat opposite them, he admitted to himself that there were things he had done and things he had left undone in the marriage, all of which led to that moment. He did not cheat on Margaret, but conceded he had not been an indefectible husband. *How could I*, he thought. He had no example on which to model himself.

“Kids, your mom and I love you very much,” he said unemotionally to salve the immediate wound. “I don’t know what’s going to happen exactly, but I do know your mom and I are getting a divorce.”

The boys’ lips quivered. Andrew felt their strength, though he wished they had let themselves cry. Amelia was 10 and still enamored of her parents. Her tears flowed freely. She ran to her mother’s bedroom and pounded on the locked door. Daniel nodded his head and went downstairs to his basement bedroom, where he hoarded Ninja Turtles and Power Rangers from his younger days, still reluctant to let them go even as he hoped to begin driving soon.

Ben stayed on the couch and looked seriously at Andrew. He leaned forward and put his elbows on his knees. He hung his head and studied the floor. Andrew sat with him, listening to Amelia sobbing and yelling at her mother.

“Dad, something weird happened last year. You should know.”

“What?”

“Mom was ... well ... last winter we were in the garage, and she was pretty drunk. And, honestly so was I, you know?”

Andrew fell back into the chair to fully absorb Ben's story. Ben drinking wasn't a surprise; Andrew had even given him a beer on Saturdays while they watched college football. His burden increased.

"And she was...complaining about you. I don't remember what had or hadn't happened, but she was pretty pissed about something. And she said she wasn't even sure that you were my father. That she married you because she was pregnant, and the other guy didn't ask her."

Ben started to cry.

"So, I like, don't know if you're my dad."

Andrew got up and sat next to Ben on the garish blue floral couch he had never liked. He put his left arm around Ben and held his face in his right hand.

"I'm so sorry she said that to you, Ben. I'm sorry you got drunk with your mom when you were 15 years old. I didn't mean for this to happen. I don't know how this happened."

Ben shrugged off his hold and wiped his tears and the mucus running out of his nose with the back of his hand.

"Are you my dad? I mean, I have blue eyes. And I'm short. Daniel's really tall."

"Of course I'm your dad, Ben. No matter what, I'm your dad."

Margaret went into a tailspin of Ambien and alcohol. She remained locked in the bedroom for days at a time while Andrew fed the kids and got them to school. Their sulking matched hers, uncertain of what was happening or was going to happen in their home. Andrew continued to try to reason with Margaret and asked her to go to her mother's house or a friend's. She continued to blame Andrew, hurling innuendo and

baseless accusations in slurred verbiage that reminded him of his mother. Andrew listened unresponsively, as his father had, but when Margaret became unpredictable and volatile Andrew took her by the shoulders and put her outside and closed the door. The police arrived 20 minutes later. Margaret accused him of assaulting her, showing them the impressions of his thumbs on her upper arms. The police handcuffed Andrew. His children watched him drive off in the back of a police car.

William posted his \$500 bail and suggested they get something to eat. Andrew felt like he hadn't eaten in days. He wasn't even sure what day it was, or what time of day. It was dark and he did not have the stamina to endure an interrogative from his father, but hoped food would help. They stopped at the Waffle House and ordered coffee, eggs, hash browns and waffles. Andrew became suspect of his silence, and the food had calmed him.

“How did you do it, Dad?”

“How did I do what?”

“Deal with mom for so long?”

“I let it go on much longer than I should have, son. I should have let her go. That's why you've hung on to that woman for so long. Because that's what I taught you. Even though I told you in the first place she would not do. Do you remember that?”

“Yes, Dad, I do.”

“You should never have married her.”

“Do you wish you never married mom?”

“I do not. She was my stalwart and my companion. We did everything together. She was steadfast and loyal to me.”

“But, Dad,” Andrew started.

“Your mother was seized by the alcohol. There was just nothing I could do about it. I quit drinking when I saw what it did to me, but she could not. She never quit.”

“She did quit.”

“That was the cancer. It was the best thing for her, that cancer. She had beautiful, sober days at the end.”

Andrew stifled the bitterness that erupted in the back of his throat as his dad romanticized the death of his mother. He returned his thoughts to his own marriage.

“I might have to come and stay at your house for a bit, until we sort this thing out. It’s not going like I hoped.”

“Nothing ever does.”

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Because he had missed the ritual initiation and consequential submission that first-year students were harshly subjected to at the military college, William reported to summer camp in June to race through a compressed 8-week trial along with 60 other young men who were making a similar correction – or having it made for them – a year late, begging the institution to reform their judgement, realign their spine and retract their history. Vigorous physical exercise in the unrelenting Lowcountry heat and oppressive humidity combined with ceaseless degradation broke the refractory troop within days, and 20 boys returned home to seek other avenues of restitution for their errors. William stayed not because he liked it, but because he could lose himself to it: the pain of running in military boots that rubbed his feet raw with popped blisters, the endless repetition of crunches, pushups and jumping jacks, and the rigor of learning to walk in a straight line, to articulate a weapon in singular perfection and in concert with a platoon of other men

who were fighting their own personal wars, arguing with their memory or sometimes on the pay phone in the corridor, late at night. The physical pain, torrid heat and liturgical humiliation occupied William's mind and alleviated his sorrow during the day. At night, though, laying on his bunk, sweltering in the stillness of the barracks that blockaded the ocean breeze, William allowed the tears to come silently as his chest sank with grief for a life he knew he could not fully live.

He returned home at the end of the summer, holding his breath as he knocked on the front door of his childhood home, unsure of what to do and how to be in a place that never felt like home. Betsy answered the door, unsteady already at 3 p.m., her eyes watering as her breath caught at the sight of a different William than the one she had abandoned to Dub and Elliott that spring. He was taller and harder, not just across his shoulders but in his eyes. William could not look at his mother, for fear that he would crumple into nothingness, depending on the white belt with gleaming brass buckle cinched around his 28-inch waist to keep his sentiment from spilling out and making another mess of things.

"William! I'm so surprised to see you. I wasn't expecting you home," she slurred as she hung on to the doorknob, awkwardly tucking an errant strand of hair behind her ear. William remained at attention, waiting for his next order. His mother seemed lost, as if she didn't know where she was, or who he was, and he wondered for a moment if he had the right house, and the right mother.

"Why did you ring the doorbell? This is your home. Come in," Betsy said as if she just woke up from a dream, realizing he was her child standing on the stoop of his own home.

She opened the door wider to allow him through, her spine folding as he passed by her, dwarfed by his strength. He put his one bag on the floor next to the chest in the hallway. Betsy closed the door and kept her distance.

“May I have a glass of water?” William said. The strangeness of his return was exhausting every pore of his body, in a way that laboring in the heat of the Citadel’s parade grounds didn’t come close to fatiguing. Instead of working just his legs on a run, or his arms in a pushup, every muscle was contracted to keep him upright, and they began to scream in revolt, wanting to be released from constant employment. But William knew this was how it was going to be from this moment forward, steeling every atom as a way to prevent escape from the prison to which he was now confined.

“Yes, yes, let’s go into the kitchen,” Betsy stuttered, showing him the way as if he did not know. “I’ll get Nellie to get us some lemonade.”

The remembrance of Nellie was grievous to him; a reminder of the home that had betrayed him, that had served him up to the misanthropes who made sure that everyone within their reach either obeyed or suffered, the difference between which was indiscernible: to obey was to suffer, the wounds of which were medicated with alcohol and bitterness administered under a brittle façade of genteel Southern sublimity. He greeted Nellie with the same coldness he drizzled on his mother, so palpable that she arrested her hug offering mid-air, circling her arms back to the double pocket on the front of her apron.

Nellie glanced at his bag in the hallway.

“Do you have any laundry I can do for you, William?”



“No, do not touch my things. I will take them to my room. When will father be home?”

William was apprehensive yet unafraid of meeting with him. The summer’s rigors had strengthened both his tenement and his steadfastness, enabling him to fulfill his duties as grandson to Miriam Poe while condemning his parents. Still, the little boy in William wanted to show his father he was good, one of the most general and frequently used adjectives of commendation in the English language, conveying that he was of at least satisfactory quality, useful for some purpose and worthy of approval.

“I’ll call him and let him know you’re here,” Betsy said. “I’m sure he’ll find a way to come home early. He works so hard at the mill, you know. They’ve been very busy this summer and your father has been just overwhelmed with managing it all.”

She breathed heavily and reached for a cigarette.

William grunted with dismissal. He knew his father regarded the mills with disgust, for both their filthy environs and the fact that Elliott Poe, who made him work there, had never left the mill, keeping an office bigger than Dub’s and occupied more often, from which he continued to bluster orders. Dub wasn’t really in charge: Elliott wouldn’t let him do it because he didn’t think him good enough. William took some satisfaction in that.

“Is Mary home?”

“No, she’s gone to Landrum for the summer to ride horses,” Betsy answered, rolling her eyes and turning to the kitchen window, as if the horse pasture was beyond it. “She’s really fallen in love with those stinky things. I don’t know how she stands it. She’s staying with the Jensens, who own a farm there. Been gone all summer.”

“Gone all summer?” William parroted her with judgment. He looked purposefully at Nellie then back at his mother and at the liquor drink that habitually found itself in her hand on its way to her lips. “What do you do all day then?”

“Do you need more lemonade?”

“No,” William said as he turned away. “I’ll be in my room. Please call me for supper.”

Dub did not come home early to see his son, as both Betsy and William knew he would not. Mother and son ate in relative silence at the mahogany table, the silver candelabra unlighted in the luminous summer evening. Betsy asked how long he would be home. “On leave,” he corrected her, and told her he only had a 48-hour pass, which was a lie. He wasn’t due back for two weeks, but he knew he would not be able to bear the bleakness of Dub and Betsy’s asylum for that long. He wasn’t sure where he would go, but he knew he couldn’t stay at home without his sister there.

“Will you see your grandmother?” Betsy asked, unable to mask her sadness that his affection was supplanted by her own mother.

“Of course, she and I will breakfast tomorrow, then I must get back to Charleston.”

“That’s not a 48-hour visit.”

“I know. But that is how it is to be.”

Dub came home well after supper, his feet heavy in the hallway. William was sitting in the formal living room on the Edwardian sofa, his twiggy legs crossed at the knee, right over left, the right ankle bobbing up and down nervously, his finicky fingers quickly turning pages of a book he wasn’t reading.

“Well look at what the cat dragged in,” Dub said slow and low, the temperance of his voice enough to frighten William. He snapped the book shut and stood quickly, vexed by his own agitation. He braced, as he’d been taught at the Citadel, which meant standing at attention with arms tucked, shoulders down, blades together, head back, chin down, eyes up, a confluence of a contradictory dissection. Dub looked impressed but kept his distance. He reserved judgment with silence. William met the silence, eyes forward, now trained not to speak unless spoken to, though he panicked when he realized he was holding his breath. Dub slowly walked over to the liquor cabinet, concealed in a Queen Anne hutch William didn’t recognize, hidden in the shadow of the room. William used the opportunity to catch his breath, though not to release his brace, using it to shore up his uneasiness.

Dub poured a drink. With his back to William, he swallowed the whiskey he poured and slowly refilled the cut crystal highball, breathing deeply to let the dose begin its work of warming his torso, dulling his mind and invigorating his enmity. He lit a cigarette and turned toward William, exhaling a plume of smoke.

“Looks like you learned somethin’ there,” Dub said in the drawl of the mill village, revealing that this drink was not the first of the evening.

“Yes sir,” William said, the only acceptable response of a Citadel cadet.

Dub wobbled closer to William, emboldened by the liquor that William could now smell.

“I see they gave you a neck,” noting the growing thickness in William’s anatomy, despite the thinness of his waist. “They teaching you what it means to be a man?”

“I can now walk in a straight line and fire a gun, along with a lot of other *men*,” William said. “I have found that I actually prefer it there. Many cadets are from outstanding families in South Carolina. I suppose it will be helpful when I return to help with the mills.”

“You? You’re going to work in the mills?” Dub lifted his head and tried to focus on William.

“Yes, Grandmother and I have discussed my entering the business.”

“Your grandmother doesn’t work there. I do. And your grandfather, Elliott. You remember him, right?”

“Of course I do.”

“Elliott doesn’t put up with incompetent work. I’m not sure you’ll fit in.”

“I’m certain I can learn. That’s why I’m at The Citadel, is it not? To learn how to fit in?”

“I suppose,” Dub said, taking a heavy draw on his cigarette. “Truth be told, I never gave much thought to what you were gonna do. Isn’t that what all this going to college is about? It doesn’t take a college education to run the mill, William. It takes work. And I just can’t see you doing that.”

William blinked his eyes to process Dub’s estimation of himself.

“I have learned to obey. Is that not enough?”

“It might be,” Dub said. “We’ll see.”

“Military dress parades are every Friday during school, if you’d like to come down and see how we march in formation.”

“I won’t be coming to any parade. Don’t have time for that. I’ll just take your word that you’re walking correctly. Keep it up.”

Dub turned and left the room. William exhaled and looked at the convex federalist mirror over the fireplace. He saw his reflection, his torso contorted and stretched. He dropped his shoulders and lengthened his thickening neck to further the illusion, then pressed on his chest with one hand to smash the pectoral muscles developed by a summer of pushups. He barely recognized himself.

The next morning William met Miriam for breakfast at 8:30, before his mother dragged herself out of bed, and after Dub left for work. He had been awake since 4:30, sitting on the side of his bed, waiting for the day to end. He had carried his ruck sack to his grandmother’s house, just down the street, so he could go to the bus station from there. Miriam addressed his gaunt appearance with a request to the maid to bring another plate of eggs.

“William, are they feeding you enough?”

Miriam didn’t touch her food.

“Yes, Grandmother, they feed us plenty,” he said, delicately wiping the corners of his mouth with the linen napkin.

“Do you have a roommate?”

“I do, Martin Ovington, of the Hartsville Ovingtons, who own three newspapers.”

“I’m glad to hear that,” she said. “It’s good that you’re meeting proper young men down there.”

“Father says I am not expected to work at the mill. Do you know anything about that?”

“I’m not sure how suitable your father is to the work. I’m certain your grandfather will need your help. You just need to study hard and do well at The Citadel. It looks like you are adapting quite well.”

“I am. I am the very definition of adaptable, am I not?”

William ate two more forkfuls of eggs under her stare, then put his fork down, wiped both corners of his mouth again, and replaced his napkin to his lap.

“Father isn’t suitable? What do you mean by that?”

Miriam picked her fork up and considered a bit of egg.

“Your grandfather is difficult to work for, is all. I suppose no one is up to snuff for him.”

“Are you? Up to his snuff?”

Miriam laid her fork across the egg on her plate and put her napkin to its left.

“I don’t know what you’ve learned at The Citadel but this behavior seems a bit out of sorts for you,” she said. She licked her lips and pressed them together.

William put his fork and knife across his plate.

“Yes, well, it’s time for me to go. I must get to the bus station.”

“Already? It’s so early. Where are you going?”

“I apologize. But I must return to Charleston. I have a lot of work to do before school starts.”

William swallowed hard as lied to his grandmother. He wanted to stay and bask in her sturdy countenance but the remnant of bitterness left from his excoriation that spring was too present. His father had wounded him but she stood mutely by, and time was beginning to wonder why.

At the bus station, he considered where to go. Hope filled him as he saw Edgefield on the bus schedule.

Andrew had to install the internet at William's house when he moved in to allow him to continue running his small sales consultancy while he negotiated the property settlement and child custody agreements. William had not had a computer, but was interested in learning how to send emails to his sister and the bridge club, which had been pestering him to get online; he was the only player they had to mail the schedule to. Andrew enjoyed the distraction of teaching his father how to use the internet, explaining to him how the words *inbox* and *search* had taken on new meaning. William appreciated the ability to enlarge a picture or text that allowed him to see more clearly through his increasingly cloudy eyes. He began to email and search with rabid intensity.

Andrew begrudgingly attended church at his father's request. The yellow stucco church was perched on a short hill, an ascending graveyard leading the way to its arched wooden door. The thin air of the dark wood interior of the church was a welcome change from the thickness of the humid summer outside, palpable even in the mountains. As he walked into the 175-year-old church, Andrew felt like a heavy coat had been lifted from his shoulders. He even turned around to see if someone had touched him. He stared at the empty vestibule until William whispered loudly at him to *come on*, as he wanted Andrew to enter the box pew first.

Andrew recited the liturgy from the long-stored memory of his childhood, when he and Sullivan served as acolytes in his father's churches. The words to the Nicene Creed, the confession of sins and the Lord's Prayer flowed through his lips without effort. He closed his eyes and sang the Sanctus, the Fraction Anthem and the Christ Our Passover, a smile turning the corners of his mouth as he remembered carrying the cross as a kid,



sitting interminably as his father preached and said the Eucharistic prayer, which consecrated the thin wafers and strong wine and acknowledged the sacrifice of Jesus Christ for the many sins of mankind – and him. Andrew began to remember his sins, of his mischievous childhood when he got away with pranks and shenanigans because he was his father’s favorite, of his college days when he spent more time drinking and snorting coke than he did studying, of his marriage, entered into solely because of his carnal urges, and of his misplaced regard for his father, a flawed man who hurt his mother, on whom he blamed an often grim childhood.

Andrew was jolted awake early one morning by a landline ringtone. He picked up the cordless phone when he realized his father couldn’t hear it.

“Dad?”

“Ben, is that you? What’s the matter?”

“Ben? No, this is Sullivan, Dad. Sullivan.”

“Sullivan. Sullivan, no, this isn’t Dad. This is Andrew. Sorry. I thought you were Ben.”

“Did I dial the wrong number?”

“No. I’m staying at Dad’s for a while.”

“What do you mean? Why?”

Andrew took a moment to weigh humiliation against truth.

“I’m divorcing Margaret. The marriage is over. I’m just here until the paperwork clears.”

“Oh man, I’m sorry about that. Really. Sorry.”

“Thanks. Why are you calling here? Why are you calling Dad?”

“I’m in the hospital. In Winston Salem. I overdosed. They might have to take my arm off.”

Andrew’s pulse quickened. The thought of his brother dying scared him more than he thought it would.

“So I called to say I’m sorry. I need you to forgive me.” Sullivan’s voice was low and infirm.

“For what?” Andrew said quietly, absorbing the panic that underlied his brother’s voice.

“I’m sorry for everything. For being a really shitty brother. For tying you up. For trying to drown you a thousand times. For leaving you with Dad.”

Andrew had forgotten those things.

“Of course. You’re forgiven. You’re my brother.”

“Thanks man.”

The line went dead.

Andrew looked at the phone as if his brother lay inside it. It rang again, the shrill tone making him jump.

“Hello?”

“Is Dad there? I need to talk to him.”

“Yeah. Let me get him.”

Andrew walked into the kitchen, where William was measuring coffee. He held out the phone.

“It’s Sullivan.”

William looked at the phone but did not take it.

“I have no need to talk to him.”

“Dad. He’s in the hospital. He needs to talk to you.”

William squinted his eyes at Andrew but took the phone.

“Hello?”

“Dad, I just want to say I’m sorry. I’m sorry for being such a crappy kid. And for not helping Mom enough. And for asking you for her money. I’ve done so many things I shouldn’t a done. I don’t know what’s wrong with me, but I’m going to fix it. I’m done being that person, Dad. I know it’s made your life hard, and I’m sorry. Dad, I want to be your son.”

William was crying, but his voice did not shake.

“I would like you to be my son, but those drugs are not welcome in our lives. Do you understand that?”

“Yessir, I do. Thank you. I love you, Dad.”

“Goodbye then.”

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“I can see why you would want to become someone else,” William said to the back of Freddie, who was squatting in front of the canned goods cleaning the shelves of his parents’ grocery store. “This just will not do.”

Freddie began laughing before he turned around. His laugh quieted when he laid eyes on William, recognizable but transformed.

“Oh my god, you look like a ball point pen,” Freddie said. “Thin and gray with just enough hair to look like you drew it with a marker. What in the world did they do to you down there?”

“I cannot even tell you.”

William worked to maintain a flat smile.

They did not touch, but their eyes glittered each other with brightness. The sight of William thawed Freddie’s extremities, his mind recalling the hours they spent agreeing and disagreeing with one another. Neither mentioned the last time they saw each other, or what had happened to the plate of lamb.

“I have a few days leave until I have to return,” William said. “May I spend them with you?”

“I’m certain my parents will not mind, though father may require you to help me clean grocery shelves. I have to get it done before I return to Wofford in a couple weeks.”

William shook his head *no*, though he smiled in acquiescence.

“Let me introduce you.” Freddie put his hand on William’s shoulder to direct him to the front of the store, where his father sat in a cubby tapping numbers into an adding machine. Hitting the plus sign three times, he knocked the pencil on the table then tapped it against his head. “The answers aren’t there, Dad, they’re on the machine.”

His father looked up and laughed at his son’s joke, then stood quickly as he stuck out his hand.

“You must be William,” Martin Kimball said. “Freddie said one of his classmates transferred to the Citadel, and that looks like you, in your uniform there.”

“Yes. Right,” William said as he looked at Freddie. “I’ve just finished the summer course and am returning to start my sophomore year in a week.”

“Dad, he’s come for a surprise visit. Would it be ok if he bunked with us for a couple days?” He looked at William. “That’s what you would call it at The Citadel, is it not? Bunking?”

William laughed.

“Yes, that’s probably what we would call it. It is another language, the military, and a way of life.”

“Do they not feed you there?” Martin said. “You and Freddie both, so skinny. Emily will get you fattened up, a little bit, anyway. Of course, you can stay with us. Freddie, you still have work to do though. I need you to get your tasks finished before you leave.”

“Of course. It’s my life’s mission to be the best shelf cleaner Wofford ever produced.” Freddie turned to William. “Let’s put these muscles to work. You can carry the cases of canned corn for me. Will you be okay if this sparkling uniform gets a little dirty?”

“Cadets specialize in laundry and uniform maintenance. I cannot tell you how hard I have to work to shine this buckle,” he said, fingering the brass buckle that held his white belt in place. “You’d be surprised at what kind of stains I can make disappear.”

Freddie and William spent mornings in the store for a week working joyfully for Freddie’s father, who was patient with the slowing pace at which they worked while they talked.

“Your parents are so kind, Freddie,” William said as they were clearing and cleaning shelves. “Do they not want you to take over this business?”

“Oh my god, no,” Freddie rolled his eyes. “This business is terrible, you know that. I mean, it’s necessary that people buy food, because we all eat. But there’s no challenge in

it, no creativity. Just the same old people, coming in day after day, buying beans and corn and pork shoulder and bananas. It's enough to make anyone lose their mind. I can't stand it."

"But you do it with such joy, as does your father."

"Well, frankly, my father is not very smart," Freddie said as he lowered his voice. "It's not his fault, he's just not very bright is all. Neither is my mother. And they know it. They often joke about where I came from. Neither of them went to college. They're content to live here and sell cans of beans. I, however, am not. I cannot wait to return to Wofford."

William looked down the aisle, as if Wofford were in the next section.

"It will be different without you, though," Freddie said, as he touched William's elbow. William flinched, then slowed the motion as he held his elbow to his side. Freddie reached out to straighten a can. "Who else will I complain to about all the stupid morons there?"

"You think the fellows at Wofford are stupid? You cannot imagine what I will have to deal with at The Citadel."

They laughed together.

"How do you like it there, really?"

"It's fine," William took a breath and pushed it out. "Really, it is. I can now do 50 pushups, and I couldn't do one before, so that's something. And I can take apart a rifle and put it back together before you can say Bob's your uncle. I'm certain that will come in handy one day."

"Did you see your father on break?"

“Leave, we call it leave,” William said automatically. “Yes, I saw Father, just before I came here. And my good-for-nothing mother, who can’t breathe without inhaling gin. Father just as much, but his is whiskey. Vile. Trying to have a conversation with them is pointless. Mother is pickled and father is bitter. Sounds like a drink doesn’t it? I’ll have a bitter and pickled please!”

He and Freddie laughed at the darkness of his parents, which they had never done before. The laughter fit well in both their mouths.

“And how’s your grandmother? Does she know you’re here?”

Bitterness returned to Freddie’s mouth.

“She does not.”

“You know she’s the one who orchestrated that whole scene, don’t you, William?”

Freddie did not want to broach the subject but his anger sprang out. “She knew your father would react the way he did to you and I. She set you up. She set me up.”

“Freddie, I am sorry my father hurt you. But my grandmother would never hurt me like that. How could she have known he would react that way? Or that I was even bringing you? I didn’t tell her. She just asked me to invite a friend.”

“You told me yourself, your grandmother knows everything. No surprises. Do you think she was surprised when I showed up, or when your father reacted the way he did? William, she was not surprised. She was pleased.”

“Freddie, I really don’t know what you’re talking about and I’ll thank you never to mention it again.”

William wiped his hands on the denim apron he’d worn as they cleaned, then lifted it off his neck. He quickly folded it and put it on top of the case of potted meat he left in the

aisle. He turned on his heel and walked past the tuna and beef stew, then pushed through the glass exit door.

Freddie wondered if he had pushed his friend too far again, but reassured himself of his own value, and that it was not dependent on what William Preston of the Greenville textile Prestons thought of him. He only wanted to be William's friend, and in that he wanted William to be happy, complete, and authentic. He decided that, should William return, he would be his friend through any trial and tribulation, because he knew that William was not going to find another friend at the Citadel, or anywhere else, for that matter, who would remain by his side, no matter what.

When William returned to the Citadel he found himself situated among academics who reminded him of Freddie: smart, quick-witted and impertinent. They would spend hours in the library, where they took sanctuary from the physical harshness of military life, mocking the ease of academic assignments and engaging in subtle courses of inquiry regarding off-campus get-togethers. William mostly declined offers to attend unsanctioned events that he knew would lead to tribulations he was not equipped to withstand. In the reality shaped by his family, his instincts would be pressed into a compact black box tucked away in the marrow of the bones he used to walk himself to class, carry a lunch tray and fire a weapon.

When he was invited to the off-campus home of Colonel Lucius T. Wright, his military history professor, he went because it was required, not because he was interested. He was also instructed to *bring a bottle*, which William hoped would enliven what he was expecting to be an insipid evening.



William entered the Colonel's row house in his Class B uniform and duty jacket, polished and shined as was always expected. A room full of similarly shaved heads swiveled to see him arrive, smirking slightly at his overthinking the evening. They turned back to the rather rowdy game of cards that had clearly been in play for quite some time by a small group of casually dressed upperclassmen, some with shirts untucked, sprawled about on three well-worn leather couches that took up most of the room. A small fire simmered behind wrought iron grates in the fireplace underneath a bronze reduction of Myron's Discobolus, the naked discus thrower that was reflected for an exhaustive view by the oversized mirror that sat behind it on the mantle. Two of his library allies stood close together in a doorway engaged in a somber exchange that was not interrupted by William's entrance. Every wall was covered in art that rendered a story of ancient ruin and military victory from the floor to the 16-foot ceiling. A third cadet, Jim Stevens, whom he recognized from his calculus class, stood awkwardly on the edge of the game, shoulders rounded and absentmindedly picking at his nails. William became aware of the scrutiny of the Colonel, who stood a breath away, exhaling a brown aroma of meat, bourbon and the cigar that made its way regularly between the cradle of his fingers and his lips that were swollen by decades of dependency on the insidious depravities the South had to offer. He patted William on the back and relieved him of his brown-bagged bottle.

"It's alright, Preston," he said. "Come on in, take your jacket off. It's okay here."

William relinquished his jacket, feeling conspicuous and uncomfortable in an atmosphere that lacked the rules that had protected William from himself. He was afraid

to ask what was *okay here* that wasn't elsewhere because he was afraid of the answer to the question.

"Gentlemen," Colonel announced to the card-playing group on the couch. They obeyed his tone and stood to greet William. "This is Preston. He's new this year, a sophomore. From Greenville, right?"

William nodded his head. He shook the hand of each cadet as Colonel listed their names.

"That's Simpleton, who doesn't live up to his name, so if you need help with class, he's pretty smart. Jones, as average as he sounds. Trace, as in, not a trace of him left at the end of the night. Jordan doesn't look like much, but he's a wrestler and will pin you down before you can call your momma. Sharpe, whom I recommend you do not play cards with; he cheats. That's Peterson, he's from Edgefield, the town on the edge of nowhere."

William held on to Peterson's hand for an extra beat, then pushed it away along with an impulse to ask if he knew Freddie.

"And that's Stevens, who's a math whiz, and Leon and Strazky in the doorway working out their salvation, I guess."

William nodded at them, too far to shake their hand.

"Come on, we'll deal you in," the cadet named Trace said. "Especially if Colonel hands over that bottle you brought."

Colonel surrendered William's bottle of bourbon over the top of the couch as William worked his way around to a seat. He paused as he brushed by Jim Stevens.

“Do we have calculus together?” William asked. Jim nodded his head. “Then I’ll definitely need your help. Would you mind?”

“Yes, I mean, no...sure, I’d be glad to help,” Jim said, awkwardly stuffing his hands in his pockets.

“Thank you. We’ll get together after class next week.” William continued around the couch and sat in the seat Trace created for him. Trace exuded energy as the untapped leader of the group, with a square jaw and toothy smile.

“Stevens is the guy we need over here,” Trace taunted him. “Math whiz, but can you count cards?”

Jim didn’t answer his question. Trace raised his dark eyebrows and smiled suggestively at him, then turned his attention to William, leaning towards him conspiratorially. William could smell the bourbon as slurry words rolled out of his wide mouth.

“We play five-card draw. It’s fast and it’s as high as some of us can count,” he joked as he glanced at Jordan, the wrestler.

“I just need to count to one, one dick, because that’s all that matters,” Jordan said as he grabbed his crotch and leered at Trace. William blushed at his vulgar humor but was infected by the rest of the group as they roared in laughter.

“What does one dick matter if it doesn’t work?” Trace hurled back.

“It worked when I stuck it in your momma,” Jordan said. The boys continued to laugh, but quieted as they looked to Trace for his comeback.

“I don’t know how that worked cause she’s dead,” he said, with a smile that diminished a bit, though his raised eyebrow invited more.

“All the better. She didn’t put up a fight,” Jordan rallied, and the boys covered their mouths and howled in exaggerated horror.

Trace looked at William and leaned in again.

“It’s alright, my *momma is* dead,” he told William. “But Jordan’s *momma* is a whore, so we’re even.”

William had never heard such lowbrow humor and didn’t know what was supposed to be funny. Trace saw the vacancy on his face and jabbed him with his elbow as he dealt cards.

“We’re kidding, Preston. My *momma’s* not dead,” he said as the group quieted to watch him deal. “But I did fuck Jordan’s *momma*.”

The group cackled and Jordan threw his cards at Trace, who broke into expansive laughter at himself and the look on William’s face. Trace threw his cards on the table, too.

“Oh man,” he said. “Where is my cup, and why is it empty?”

Jordan unscrewed the top from the bottle William brought and the group refilled their drinks. Colonel handed William a glass, which he held across the table for Jordan to fill. He took a long sip and a deep breath. William felt the masculine comradery among the group. Their playfulness was guileless and childlike, skirting close to flirtation that floated around the room like a breeze.

William was terrible at poker, having only been versed in bridge by his grandmother. The bourbon gave him an infrequent sense of humor at himself and he let the boys chide him about his ineptitude when he put down hands of cards that didn’t amount to anything.

“Preston, what the fuck is that supposed to be?” Trace said when William put down an array of mismatched face cards.

“Are face cards not good?” William said, giggling at himself courtesy of the third bourbon. “This game doesn’t make any sense. I can’t remember a thing.”

Trace’s smile dropped and he tipped his head to the side. He knocked his knee into William’s.

“That’s good to know,” he said quietly. He looked away from William but moved toward him so their hips touched, a disclosure that broke through the fog the bourbon had created. He felt translucent, but in different skin than when he had first arrived. Behind his eyes he felt comfortable illumination, as if he was in the right place. His grandmother tried to intrude to remind him of his place, to which he responded by holding out his empty glass for a refill.

The fourth bourbon put his grandmother in her place.

A few more rounds of bad poker later, Jordan rolled back into the deep couch and balanced his glass on his belly. He closed his eyes and began to snore. Peterson punched him in the arm to wake him up. He lifted him to standing. His knees buckled and Simpleton popped up to grab his other arm. William’s own eyelids were drooping, and he noticed Jim Stevens had disappeared.

“He may be a wrestler, but he’s a lightweight,” Peterson said about Jordan. “Come on, let’s get him back to barracks.”

Simpleton nodded and the three conferred with Colonel at the door before they left.

“Yup, time to go,” said Sharpe, the cheater, whom William had not noticed cheating, or winning for that matter, though the group didn’t bet or keep score, he just realized. In

bridge he remembered, it's all about scores, moves and strategy. That had not been the case with this game. At least not the kind of strategy you can outline in a rulebook. "You ready, Trace?"

Trace looked up at Sharpe, a palpable history passing between them.

"Naw, you go ahead," he said. "I'm going to hang out here for a minute."

Sharpe didn't move. He looked down at William, who was unsure of the moment but whose bourbon-fed fortitude was pushing forward on its own.

"Alright," Sharpe said. "See ya."

Colonel gathered up the glasses from the table after Sharpe shut the door.

"Clean up those cards, Trace. Don't leave a mess. I'm going to bed. Church tomorrow."

"Yessir," Trace said as he looked hard at William.

The two sat in silence for a few moments. Trace reached for the bottle to refill William's glass. William shook his head no, and watched Trace down one last drink.

"What are you doing here, Preston?" Trace asked him.

"I was invited by Colonel ..."

"Not that," Trace interrupted. "I mean, here, on this couch, right now."

William decided to give in to the bourbon.

"I'm here, on this couch, wondering what you're doing, on this couch."

Trace laughed and leaned back into the sofa. He stroked his own zipper to readjust the hard-on that had developed quickly. The sight of it enlarged William as well, though he did not move to meet Trace. Trace kept an eye on William as he unzipped his own pants and pulled out his penis.

“You see this cock?” he said. “This is the cock I fucked Jordan’s mother with.”

He drunkenly laughed at his own joke and William noticed the lust and confusion in Trace’s expression. Trace’s eyes closed as he stroked himself. William watched as his mouth became dry.

“Problem is,” Trace slurred, “it doesn’t always work like it should. Does yours? Let me see yours.”

William was hesitant, but his body responded to Trace’s hand when it landed softly on his knee.

“Come on, Preston, I’ve showed you mine, show me yours. It’s okay.”

Trace sat up to meet William as he unzipped his pants. His eyes closed as his blood resettled and he put his right hand on William’s shoulder for balance. He reopened his eyes and lowered them to William’s abdomen, watching William’s hand shake as he handled himself. Trace dropped his hand to William’s, encircling both his penis and his trembling hand in his own.

“It’s okay,” he whispered. “It’s just us boys here.”

Despite their intoxication both boys ejaculated quickly. Trace burst into laughter as they fumbled with themselves.

“Oh man, no girl is going to appreciate that,” he said.

Trace wiped himself with the tail of his shirt, indicating William do the same. They stood up, wobbling from the liquor and nonplussed by their interplay.

“Guess we gotta get back to campus,” Trace said. William agreed, looking for his coat.

Colonel's house, with its contradictions as clear as the naked man on the mantle and the basket of *Playboy* magazines next to the toilet in the bathroom, became a refuge for William, who could pass but didn't fit fully into the mold of cadet.



Margaret's alcohol abuse continued and gave the judge an easy choice regarding custody. She seemed not even to care, agreeing to drop the domestic violence charges and leave the house, installing herself in a small apartment unencumbered by three children who were in constant need. Andrew considered his father's advice about alcohol, and quit drinking and smoking. Life became complex as he saw it clearly, but it also exuded joy in a full night's sleep and the headaches he did not miss. His patience and empathy for the children expanded, and he endured their lashing out. He found a church near their home, a suburban congregation not distracted by institutional memory and familial mythology, and found it provided respite and refueling for the challenges he faced during the week as the owner of small business and dad of three grieving teenagers.

He and Sullivan began to talk regularly about sobriety and children. Sullivan had amassed a total of four daughters and a stepson by that time, though he was unsure of where the first daughter was; her mother, too, had wandered off into a maze of drugs and alcohol, but had taken her daughter along. Though his children were missing their mother, Andrew was thankful he had been able to prevent them from being solely under her care. Custodial visits to her apartment were always followed by emotional outbursts that were untethered by reality. Sullivan had preserved his marriage, joined by his wife in sobriety, and they told their story regularly to their children.

"That's the thing about our childhood, I guess, our parents didn't hide much from us, so we don't hide it from the kids," Sullivan said in the North Carolina twang he had picked up in Winston-Salem.

“Yup, my kids heard everything,” Andrew laughed. “They know what their mom did, though I’m pretty sure she blames me for it. Which is fine, just as long as this is over. They just gotta heal now.”

“Like we did?”

“We’re weren’t so lucky, were we? We had to endure Mom until the end. Sullivan, you should have known Mom at the end. She was sober, and clear, and calm. She was the mom you never knew.”

“I know. I’m tore up about that. You’re right, I didn’t know Mom like that, and I’m jealous that you got to know her that way. But you always got everything you wanted.”

“Sullivan, I’ve worked for everything I’ve gotten. Hard. I endured Mom and Dad in the worst of it, too.”

“I guess I got mom’s genes. Drugs were just so much better than real life, even though they made real life even harder. This is hard now, me and Abby got four kids here at home, and trying to stay sober. I’ve been working but I’m thinking about starting a recovery center for men like me. There’s just not enough out there, you know?”

“That’s a great idea, Sully. I’m glad you and Abby are sober together.”

“Yeah, well, that’s one thing I did learn from Mom and Dad, is that you both gotta be sober. I remember when Dad quit drinking, but Mom didn’t. So it didn’t really make anything better. I want it to be better for my kids.”

“Do you talk to Dad?”

“Yeah, we talk every now and then. It’s hard. We don’t have that much to say. He usually asks me if I’m still on drugs and I have to remind him I’m not. Have you noticed that? That he’s not remembering stuff?”

“He’s always been like that. I think he remembers what he wants to and feigns ignorance when it’s something he doesn’t want to talk about, or something he wants to remind you of. He keeps asking me if I’ve divorced Margaret yet, and it’s been a year since we divorced. But he also asked me that our entire marriage. It’s hard to know what he’s putting on and what he knows. That’s always been his schtick. Remember when we used to ask him what he was going to preach about, and he’d always say ‘*sex and free love*’?”

Sullivan and Andrew belly laughed at the memory.

Later in 2009 Sullivan quit the roofing job that was hard on his drug-addled joints, enrolled in on-line college and started a non-profit recovery program while living on school loans, food stamps and housing assistance. Abby worked as a teacher’s aide in a church pre-school so she could be at home for their kids after school. Sully and Abby were proud of their work and their sober life, which he shared with William on a long-distance call a year later after he’d received a government grant to lease space to house his program.

“That certainly is a lot – school work, parenting, volunteering, all while remaining sober. How can you do all that and work?” William said.

“That is my work, Dad. I’m helping other men get and stay sober. When I get my degree in counseling, I’ll be able to set up a professional practice.”

“How do you pay for all of that? Does Abby’s job as a teacher fully support you?”

“We get housing assistance because Abby’s not a teacher, she’s an aide. She doesn’t have a degree.”

“Why doesn’t she have a degree?”

Sullivan's pulse quickened. He recognized William's pattern of criticism through what he claimed was innocent fact finding. Sullivan knew it was designed to impose guilt and shame, but he had learned in his recovery to acknowledge the past and leave it behind, and tried to pass through that moment. He also knew that sometimes he reverted to old patterns based in the obscurity of alcohol and preemptive wounding that were designed to disable the opponent before the fight had even begun. Most of his relationship with Andrew was predicated on that premise, a tactic Sullivan had come to realize he had apprenticed at the foot of his father.

"We're planning to come see Andrew for spring break. Maybe we'll see you then?"

"Perhaps, if I'm still alive."

"Love you, Dad."

"Goodbye, Sullivan."

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William and Jim Stevens met up each week after calculus. They also ran into each other regularly in the library. William appreciated Jim's mind and needed help in the math courses he opted for instead of vexatious science classes, so he was willing to forgo Jim's lack of pedigree in exchange for kind explanations of calculus and trigonometry. Jim was from rural Georgia attending on an academic scholarship. Shorter than average and uninclined athletically, Jim persevered his knob year with the help of classmates who were challenged by their upperclassmen torturers to protect and encourage him, a common solution to preserving the academic students needed to shore up the school's profile. Although Jim was book-smart, he also knew when on a Sunday afternoon later

that winter William broke down into tears over an equation, it wasn't math that was making him cry.

They sat in the library, heads hung over math textbooks as Jim explained an algorithm. William quickly swept away a tear, though it was followed by more dropping on the pages in front of them. Jim stopped talking about math as William wept, hiding his eyes with the palm of his hand.

"You're not *that* bad at math," Jim laughed awkwardly.

William snapped his head up with a vigorous inspire that cleared the emotion draining from his cavities. He ground his teeth together and his jaw jutted forward. He slammed the book shut.

"On Mondays, I go to chapel," Jim said. "It's cool, because you get out of mess and they feed you real food after the service. It's a break from all this. It helps."

"Help with what? My math assignments?"

"No, I just meant...It just helps."

William hadn't thought about religion as an auxiliary. His grandmother was a member at Fourth Presbyterian, a brick building with whitewashed pews and a red carpet that led to a plain-suited pastor who preached and prayed alternately with a costumed choir when they went for baptisms and weddings. His grandmother had not used church as a method of deliverance, however; that was achieved with a stiffer spine, harsh rejection and a narrative that better suited, veracity unconsulted.

A couple weeks later that winter William found himself pressing across the parade ground, headed for chapel, led by the Episcopalians on Monday nights at Summerall Chapel, a non-denominational church with the words *Remember now thy creator in the*

*days of thy youth* chiseled above the triple-arched entryway. Every cadet passed the yellow stucco building each time they marched, exercised or went to class, so its presence was not obscured on the campus full of fledging young men, most of whom did not consider it as a possibility for reinforcement during challenging days at the Citadel. William entered from the middle door, scooping up a bulletin from an unattended table, and entered the inner doors into the chapel, pausing to assess the room, or *look for Jim*, which he immediately denied to his inner voice. As if conjured, Jim appeared in his line of vision, on the gospel side, third row, middle; William immediately headed to the epistle side, sixth row, far left, which enabled him to turn comfortably towards the aisle, drape his left leg over right and fold his hands right over left, setting his defenses casually but firmly. He was prepared to reject all that he would hear or see, and even began to second-guess his decision, which he couldn't remember making, and he began to wonder how he even got here. He had little memory of walking in the dim light of winter, bracing against the stubborn February wind, to the chapel, or what he was doing before he decided to do that. *This was a mistake*, he thought, motivated by some kind of trickery that Jim Stevens had put on him. He hadn't met up again with Jim after that scene in the library, the embarrassment of which William was going to have to get over because his grades were already slipping in math; William wasn't sure what his embarrassment was about anyway. *So what if Jim recommended church?* He'd ignored William's sniveling over school work and just suggested he'd get a grip, that's all.

He didn't realize he'd been staring at Jim, boring holes into the back of his head until he turned around to acknowledge William with a small wave, which William received with a flinch as if it stung him. His legs uncrossed and dropped noisily on the stone floor

and he put his hands on his knees and stood as if up to leave, which the rest of the dozen or so gathered did at the exact same moment as the organ declared the beginning of the service. Wide-eyed and unsure of what was happening, William turned around to see a processional that outnumbered the cadets who were tentatively singing along with the organ, which had quieted down enough so their humble voices could be heard. A cadet from his English class led the procession, dressed in a red robe with a white topper, swinging a brass thurible from which smoke billowed when he extended the chain far enough to fly up and all the way around, circling on each side as if he were the wheels of the spectacle that was making its way down the aisle. The sharp smell of the incense pierced the back of William's throat causing him to cough and his eyes to water. The cadet looked left without moving his head to see who was coughing and smirked with victory. He winked at William, who then used every muscle in his body to suppress the constrictions of his throat. Another cadet in a white robe tied at the waist carried a bronze cross hand over hand, and more red and white-robed cadets followed behind carrying lighted candles. Yet another group followed in black robes covered by white coverlets with delicately laced cuffs and hems. The priest was covered in a plain white robe covered by a brilliantly embroidered cape that reflected the light from the myriad of octet chandeliers that dripped deeply from the chapel's ceiling. The altar party was its own choir, singing emphatically along with the organ, carrying sound down the aisle. William was transfixed by the order of the procession, the hierarchy of the ceremony, the formality of organization. Everything and every person had a place in the procession.

As the priest began reciting the opening prayer, William retrieved the bulletin from the pew where he had tossed it and saw that the service was ordered as well. Every prayer

was prescribed, every response stipulated, every reading predetermined and printed in a book for all to see; nothing was left to chance, whim, or ego in the service. There was no place for anyone to make a momentary decision, pass judgement or make an exclusion. The vestments identified the responsibilities of its wearer but hid what was underneath, much like his uniform and its stripes, but even more so, William thought, frocks that covered chin to floor and shining as if they were basking in the glow of the gaze of God.

He put both feet on the floor, hands holding the Book of Common Prayer on his lap, and intently followed the order of service. He listened to the readings of the day from the Old Testament, the New Testament, the Gospels and Psalms. He read every word along with the lector, stood when directed, kneeled when indicated, responded when appropriate.

During a short sermon, the priest exhorted the cadets to “draw near to the throne of grace, so that you may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need,” he quoted the day’s reading from the book of Hebrews. “And by throne, Paul the Apostle did not mean the toilet, where I’m certain a few of you young men spend a fair amount of time, for a variety of reasons.”

He paused to let the small group laugh at themselves. William looked around quickly, thinking the priest was speaking directly to him. He reddened with embarrassment until he heard the communal chuckle.

“Mercy and grace are two concepts you don’t experience much here at El Cid, do you?” he asked. “Mercy is compassion, shown to a person in a position of subjection. That’s kind of the opposite of what happens here, isn’t it? And grace is a favor bestowed



upon someone, often without asking. Has anyone ever done you a favor here without asking? And haven't we all been in a time of need?"

The church was noticeably still as each cadet felt the private hardship of life at The Citadel, of living in a country in the middle of a *police action*, of being unsure of who he is. William's breath was shallow.

"What I want you to realize is that you don't have to depend on your roommate, or your squad leader or your cadre to be merciful in your time of need. Because odds are, they're not going to be. But Jesus will be, from his throne of grace. God sent his Son Jesus to us, to die on the cross for us, to show you that God will always be compassionate, shower you with blessings, and, in the ultimate act of grace, grant you eternal salvation. You don't even have to ask for it, you don't have to earn it, you don't have to qualify. Imagine that: generosity, kindness, and charity, without one single pushup!"

William let out a heavy breath and realized he was crying as his chest continued to heave. He tried to slow his breathing down. He opened his eyes wide as tears spilled over his lids.

"The challenge for you is to think beyond this moment, because it won't last forever. In fact, it will be over remarkably soon," he said as the congregation let out a collective sigh. "That's a relief to know, isn't it? School is just a temporary thing. The grace and mercy offered by Jesus, the Son of God, is forever. I invite you to receive it. Amen."

William attended dinner in the church basement afterward, homemade by members of a nearby Episcopal church. He queued up in the line for a dinner that definitely smelled more appetizing than what they were served in the mess hall. He took his plate and

headed in the direction of the black-clad priest, who had just entered the small room.

William wanted to understand how he had become. Jim caught him by the arm. William tried to shrug him off, but Jim wouldn't let go of his arm.

“William,” Jim said more strongly than he ever had. “Your captain is looking for you. You've had a call from home.”

Calls from home were bad news. Death. William put his dinner down, abandoned his search for the priest, grabbed his coat, and ran across the parade ground to find his captain. He was instructed to call his grandmother.

William's knees almost buckled in relief; his grandmother wasn't dead. He assumed it was Elliott, which would mean leave for a funeral and then back to class. He took his time as he headed back the barracks, and waited in line to use the payphone.

Miriam picked up on the first ring.

“William, you must come home. Your father's been killed. Ran straight into the back of a laundry truck and severed his own goddamned head off.”

Sullivan, Abby and the three girls visited Andrew in the spring of 2011, the first time they had seen each other since their mother's funeral. Andrew had begun dating a sober, divorced woman he met at church, a single mom of one who also found her salvation in a church community.

Time had grown the families of William Preston's children, 19 of whom attended the Saturday barbeque at Andrew's house. Time had also ruptured the spirit of many of them. Andrew's teenagers broken by the divorce of their parents had little space for social gratuities and sat awkwardly with their unfamiliar cousins: Sullivan's teenagers who were raised in a household steeped in the revelry of drug abuse and recovery and Charlotte's blue-collar pre-teens who sported Bosephus t-shirts and wanted to talk hunting. Billy's two children were missing, as was his wife, which he cleared up by announcing their divorce on account of her infidelity.

"Well aren't we a messy lot?" William said as he chewed pulled pork. The adult children eyed one another across the table.

"I'm just glad we're alive," Sullivan said.

"Yes, you should be," William agreed. "You almost drugged yourself to death."

"No, I meant I'm glad we survived our childhood," he said, laughing out loud at himself, which encouraged his siblings to laugh harder as a measure of relief in the solidarity of survival.

"Your childhood was just fine," William said as he lifted a forkful of slaw to his mouth.

"Oh really?" Sullivan said. "Is that how you remember it Andrew?"

William looked at Andrew. Andrew looked at Sullivan.

“Don’t drag me into this, Sully. Our childhood was what it was, and now we got a table full of disgruntled teenagers out in the kitchen eating barbeque together. That’s what we need to focus on.”

“Yes, your children are all a disaster,” William said as he spooned baked beans. “Not a one of my grandchildren has accomplished anything yet, except Ben, who is a cadet at the Citadel, my alma mater. I am so proud of him, Andrew. Thank you for producing at least one grandchild who will be of note.”

“There you go,” Sullivan said. “Always the favorite. Not much has changed. What about the rest of us, Dad?”

“What about you?” William said, wiping the corners of his mouth with his napkin, folding it symmetrically and dropping it on his empty plate. “You are on government assistance, Billy is divorcing a woman we don’t even know, and Charlotte is married to a plumber. That is the rest of you. An unimpressive lot.”

Charlotte and Henry stood and took their plates to the kitchen. Andrew smirked into his napkin and Billy drained his tea. Abby held Sullivan’s hand under the table and closed her eyes. Eliana, Andrew’s new girlfriend, stared wide-eyed at Andrew from the other end of the table.

“Dad, I’m in discernment to go to seminary,” Billy announced. Every head swiveled to him. “I’ve been a deacon at several small churches for the past few years. That’s one of the reasons Nora and I are getting divorced. She doesn’t believe in God in the same way I do.”

“I remember that altar you had in your room at Cocoa,” Sullivan said. “Yeah, I see it now. That’s great Billy. You’ll be a great priest.”

“Good for you Billy,” Andrew said. “When do you go?”

“Soon, I hope. Maybe in the fall.”

“Well that’s certainly hopeful. I assume you’ll go to my alma mater, Sewanee?”

William said.

“That’s where the bishop likes to send people, so I think so,” he said.

“I shall look forward to that then,” William said. “Andrew, is your business going well? Are you successful?”

“It’s fine, Dad,” Andrew said, distracted by Billy’s plan to become a priest.

Something in his announcement discomfited Andrew, not for Billy, but for himself. He shifted in his seat, wondering if he was sitting wrong and pinched a nerve. He looked across the table at Eliana, who noted his discomfort.

“Abby started making jewelry,” Sullivan said. “She’s going to craft fairs and stuff. People seem to like it.”

“That’s good, Abby,” Eliana said. “Did you bring some, will you show me?”

The two women left Andrew, William, Billy and Sullivan at the dining room table.

“I must return to Mountain Lake now. It’s been good seeing you all,” William said. “Billy, do let me know when you go to seminary. And perhaps the next time I see you, Sullivan, you’ll have a job.”

“I have a...” Sullivan stopped himself. “Good to see you, Dad. Love you.”

Six months after William left without telling Sullivan he loved him, too, William called Andrew.

“Andrew, your brother has just called me to tell me Abby died this morning,”

William said as soon as Andrew answered the phone.

“Of what, Dad?” Andrew feared a relapse.

“Apparently she got up out of bed, and fell down dead.”

“What? That doesn’t make any sense, Dad. I’ll call you back.”

Andrew thought William must have been confused. He placed a call to Sullivan.

“She’s dead. She’s dead. She’s dead,” was all Sullivan could say when he answered the phone.

“We’ll be right there,” Andrew said.

He stopped in Mountain Lake to pick up William and they drove three hours without stopping to Sullivan’s house in Winston-Salem. Abby had already been taken away by the coroner, and Eleanor, Natalie, and Lana sat with their dad on the couch as he tried to hold each of the girls closely. Neighbors and friends from their recovery community were moving around quietly in the kitchen. The house smelled of disinfectant and coffee, the humidity of tears punctuating the cool air of the spring morning.

“Sullivan,” William said, and opened his arms as soon as he crossed the threshold. Sullivan untangled from the girls and yielded to his father’s embrace. He expelled a full throat of emotion into his shoulder and muffled his agony on William’s lapel.

The girls each gave their Uncle Andrew a one-armed hug, their faces downcast to hide the swelling and stupor from their mother’s sudden death hours prior. The girls wandered into the kitchen and to their rooms as Sullivan’s cries subsided and the three men sat on the worn upholstered furniture. Sullivan sat on the couch next to William, holding his father’s hand.

“She woke up, like normal. We were going to get the kids up. She had been joking about skipping school. She was tired. We’re all tired. But she knows they gotta go to school,” he said, then hiccupped a cry. “She knew. She knew. She’s gone. She stood up outta bed, and just fell down. I thought she was playing, pretending like she couldn’t even stand up to get the kids up, and get to work. We needed Saturday. We really needed a Saturday. So I laughed at her. Told her to get up and get my coffee, that I wasn’t going to get out of bed until she got my coffee. I was laughing. Pretending like she was going to do my biddin’. Which of course, she never would. I always make the coffee. She makes terrible coffee. She don’t even drink coffee.”

“What happened, Sullivan?” Andrew said. Sullivan wiped his eyes and looked at the ceiling, through the drywall to the room above where his wife had just died.

“We don’t know. Eleanor came in, she heard me screaming when I realized she didn’t look right, all crumpled up on the floor. Her arms and legs in the wrong place for someone who’s kidding, you know? It’s like Eleanor knew, and she started doing CPR. She had a class in it at school. She knew what to do. But it didn’t help. She was yelling at me, I was yelling at her, and I hadn’t even thought to call EMS. I couldn’t even, I couldn’t even think. She had to have Natalie call 911. Then me and the girls just stood there looking at her, holding her head, willing her to breathe. But she wouldn’t. She never breathed again.”

“But, I don’t understand, Sullivan, what happened? Did she hit her head?”

William flicked Andrew’s head with his middle finger, the sting from which vibrated through his arms. William let go of Sullivan to grab Andrew by the arm. He stood up and at the same time lifted Andrew out of his chair as if he were an 8-year-old boy. William

turned him toward the door and put him outside on the front porch. He released him and stuck his finger in his face.

“And don’t you come back in until you can be quiet.”

Andrew stayed on the concrete porch. He stuck his hands in his pockets and fished out his phone to call Eliana with an update.

William returned to Sullivan and sat next to him on the couch. He remembered the death of Marilyn, the emptiness left by the absence of their imperfect union, a hole that remained no matter what he tried to fill it with. His chest felt crushed by emotion he had not anticipated, 14 years after her death. He put his arm around Sullivan’s shoulder and immersed himself in Sullivan’s pain. The agony felt satisfactory to him, a reminder that she had stood by him throughout their marriage. He could not have been better to her, he knew without regret; the sharpness honed by his grandmother could not be dulled, and was necessary to prevent infiltration. So when William remembered Marilyn, he remembered her in the blessed memory she earned during their marriage, which he could not give her then. He would, though, give it to her posthumously, because there was no exposure in reframing the past when there was no one to refute it.

“What am I going to do, Dad?” Sullivan whispered through closed eyes.

“You are going miss her every single day of your life, and you are going to be consumed with grief. You are going to wonder why she died and left you here all alone. And you are going to be angry, son, so, so angry. And there is nothing you can do about it.”

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William returned to The Citadel after three days at home, which was enough time to attend the graveside service but not enough time to grieve; when he looked in the mirror to adjust his collar before he headed out to the parade ground for the Friday formation, he realized he hadn't yet cried. The reflection that looked back through his thick glasses was dull but familiar – he recognized the features of his father, narrow lips that formed an unconvincing smile and broad forehead that led to a knobby skull that was already beginning to shed its hair. His shoulders fell as he realized his likeness. He squinted in anger at the mirror, daring his father to emerge.

“Damn you.”

The quiet condemnation empowered him, and he squared his shoulders.

“Damn you.”

His lip quivered and tears erupted from his eyes, rolling to his nose and mouth, intermingling with mucus and spit. Saliva dripped from his lip as he yelled.

“Damn you...Damn you...God Damn you!”

With the final expletive he smashed his fist into the mirror, bursting a knuckle and smearing blood on his reflection. Disappointed in his effort to shatter the glass, he pounded on the mirror with the palm of his hand.

He tried to comprehend why Dub had discarded him from consideration. William had an empty reliquary that a father was supposed to have filled with knowledge, advice, tricks, inside jokes, and even discipline and corrections. It was sealed shut by his death, an empty memory, and it lolled around him, requiring careful management so that he didn't trip over it. He had done everything he thought a son was supposed to do: stand

tall, sit straight, obey commands. It was the dictum of his father to attend The Citadel that he obeyed without question, despite the silent paroxysm it brought on.

William fell back into the prescribed life of the Citadel with great relief: marching in the Friday parade as if sleepwalking, he executed turns, salutes and the presentation of arms without thinking, while watching only the back of the service cap in front of him. It was a relief to be told every muscle to move.

Out of the corner of his eye, though, he saw Summerall Chapel, grazing the edge of the parade ground, momentarily distracting him, as if it were someone he recognized. The church stole his rhythm, and he tapped the black oxford dress shoe of the cadet in front of him, who hissed at William to adjust his concentration. Though he fell back in line, his body responding intuitively to the rhythmic cadence of orders, his mind stayed at the church, remembering the near elation he experienced Monday night, which now felt like weeks ago.

After dinner in the mess hall, Jim Stevens fell in step beside William as he walked nowhere.

“Sorry about your dad,” Jim offered. William stared straight ahead.

“You have nothing to be sorry about. He was rather a waste. He would not do.”

“Yeah but, still, he was your father. You must miss him a little.”

William stopped walking and turned on his heel to face him, their faces close enough in the winter darkness for Jim to feel the caefaction of William’s breath.

“I do not miss him, and I shall never think of him again,” William articulated every syllable. “And we will not speak of this again. Ever.”

The next night he headed for the Colonel's house, his interior taking over his exterior. He brought a bottle as usual, though on this night he had already relieved a portion of its weight as he was burying the memory of his father with it. He arrived in angry spirits, emboldened to live his life with as much flagrancy as the brown liquor would allow. William came to depend on the brown liquor, just as his father had, metered out carefully to tamp down desire or let it out, depending on the person he needed to be.

On Sunday he woke with regret that purged itself from the basement of his being in the barrack's latrine, a racket of retching that could be heard across the quad. William laid his cheek on the tile floor for its cool comfort between spasmodic episodes, breathing in the ever-present aroma of bleach hoping it would remove the intolerable burden of his sin. As on most Sunday mornings, he castigated himself for engaging in such risky, self-indulgent behavior and promised himself never to do it again.

William opened his eyes to a hand with a wet white washcloth wagging at him from under the adjoining stall. He wanted to accept it, but taking the cloth would be acknowledging that he was lying on the floor unable to control his own circumstance.

"No thank you, I'm fine," he said.

"Come on William, take it," Jim Stevens said.

William didn't understand why that Georgia redneck wouldn't leave him alone.

"I said I'm fine."

The hand dropped the cloth on the floor just as the next wave of dry heaves began, as William was finally void of any substance. His body continued to spasm, painfully purging what wasn't there. He cried out, moaning with the pain of nothingness, his eyes bulging from the pressure of expulsion, his gut cramping at the effort.

The emptiness was excruciating, and the search to fill it was exhausting him. He could not be who he was to the satisfaction of his parents or grandparents, each of whom wanted him to be a different person: a legacy, an executive, a boy, a man. He had tried to be all of those but none felt like who he was, whom he could not find, either. The emptiness allowed him to follow orders but without sustenance he could not endure any substantive version of himself.

A short Dixie cup of water appeared on the floor.

“Come on, William, let’s go,” Jim said.

Depleted and reeking of bourbon and cigarettes that no amount of toothpaste would cover or Ivory soap would wash away, William followed Jim’s order and put on his duty uniform. His pants hung loosely, so he cinched his belt tighter, folding over the gaping waistline and tucking it deftly into the webbing of his belt.

“Where are we going?”

William hopped a step to keep up with Jim’s pace.

“You’ll see. Come on.”

They walked briskly through the neighborhoods of Charleston that changed from decrepit single houses with shuttered windows to pastel painted grand homes with double porches and clear windows that exposed antiques. Live oaks protected every street, the Spanish moss dripping as familiar currency despite the disparity that lived so closely together in Charleston. William kept his eyes down on the cobblestone streets, which had to be watched for the unevenness caused by 300 years of earth pressing against the submission of bricks laid by humans who thought the source of all that is could be tamed and formulated into something that served their needs. The weight of the oppression

caused the streets to buckle and wave, reaching up to register grievance against those who either didn't notice or didn't care, continuing to trod upon them because they paved the way, and so many others before had taken this way, so it must be the way to get there, wherever there is. One street after another looked the same as the toe of his perfectly polished shoes stepped one in front of the other, as so many had done before him on this street, then the next, then the next, then the next. He stomped on manhole covers pressed by the Sumter foundry 200 years prior, covering the smelly underbelly of gracious homes and allowing necessary access to the gross connectors of shit and urine. Built on a shallow peninsula that reaches out into the Atlantic Ocean, Charleston was frequently reminded that the briny water could easily overtake it when too much rain fell or a hurricane threatened, and the hidden excrement would rise to the surface, soiling their perfectly curated lives, reminding them of who was in charge and what was hidden not far beneath. A light rain had begun to fall, and William hadn't brought his rain jacket. His vigilance and effort were beginning to tire him, and he stopped like a petulant toddler in the cold rain to complain to Jim.

"I demand to know where we are going," he said as he stomped to a halt and clenched his fists. He gritted his teeth and jutted out his chin, looking for Jim. As Jim ignored him and turned the next corner, William determined he would return to campus, but as he looked around, he realized he didn't know where he was. Each street looked like the next, and all he had seen was cobblestone. He ran to catch up with Jim, turning the corner in time to see him on the walkway to the front doors of Grace Church, the 115-year-old Episcopal church that provided priests for the Monday night Episcopalian services he had attended at Summerall Chapel. William stopped as quickly as if he had run into an

invisible wall and held his breath as he surveyed the Gothic Revival church, with its plain stone exterior topped by ornate spires that guarded an exposed bell ringing the start of services. William had been hoping they were going to get eggs to satiate his belly that had begun to grumble on the long walk, but as he proceeded through the arched wooden doors, he no longer remembered he was hungry.

He ran into the back of the procession, the white alb-clad assemblage of acolytes, thurifers, cross-bearers and priests that followed the copious cassocks of the stentorian choir, which was leading the congregation in the singing of a hymn that rolled around the voluminous nave, up to the clerestory stained-glass windows that manifested the life of Jesus, from birth to ascension. William's elbow was tugged by a white-haired usher who silently handed him a service bulletin and led him toward a side aisle as he smiled gently to encourage him to find a seat. The church was full, but a community long used to looking out for skinny, homesick cadets readily made room for William, who accepted the aisle seat next to a young family that in no way reminded him of his own. He accepted the hymnal from the gloved hands of the doting mother, open to the up tempo 19<sup>th</sup> century anthem about *God in man made manifest*. He stared at the page of music and words, four stanzas of marching quarter notes covering quickly the life of Jesus from birth to the wedding in Cana and ending at Easter day. After the hymn ended, the unseeable celebrant boomed from the altar: *Blessed be God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit*. The voice of 250 congregants returned: *And blessed be his kingdom, now and for ever. Amen*. William tried to follow along, juggling the hymnal, the Book of Common Prayer and the service bulletin; they hadn't printed out the service like they did at Summerall, and he got lost in between books and pages that everyone else seemed to know by heart.

He still found the work of this prescribed worship appealing. The children next to him recited responses and prayers from memory, encouraged by their mother and rewarded with a squeeze, highly valued by the little hands that took her face to bring it in close for a kiss. The organ and its 4,600 pipes played resoundingly and often, its voice wrapping around the eight marble columns that dissected the pews, keeping the two-story roof aloft, the congregation standing as it heralded in the next exposition in the order of worship. As they sat, readers from the congregation approached the lectern to read from the Bible, and William got distracted by the lines of the arches that took his eye to the altar, a miniature steeple and façade in relief along the wall, topped by segmented arches of stained glass rising into the ceiling that curved over the chancel as if it were protecting the members of the altar party gathered together each Sunday. Black panels flanked either side of the widow, looming over the altar and engraved in gold with words of the Lord's Prayer and the Apostle's Creed on one side, and the 10 Commandments on the other, demonstratively and without apology outlining the tenets of their faith. A priest sat below each, in a steepled chair that echoed the tops of the instructive panels, on either side of the marble altar, which was in turn protected by brass and wood railings. A 35-member choir split the chancel and somehow chanted in unison the Psalm of the day, the repeated tones of which settled in the back of William's throat as his eyes shifted from side to side listening for his ears.

William was a beat behind the congregation, who knew to stand when the altar Gospeller, acolytes and thurifer stood to retrieve the Gospel book, a portion of the Bible bound in an ornate brass cover and held overhead as they processed down the center aisle into the congregation to read the Gospel for the day, which was, on the day William

happened into Grace Episcopal Church, Transfiguration Sunday. William followed along on the bulletin insert the story in the book of Matthew in which Jesus takes Peter, James and John up a mountain, where Jesus was transfigured into a shiny white light, after which Old Testament prophets Moses and Elijah appear. Then another voice joins the group from a cloud and says: *This is my Son, the Beloved, with him I am well pleased.*

William fell away from the room, from the family next to him, from the shuffle of feet, the shushing of children, the turning of pages, as if he and the voice were alone in the room together. The voice that spoke those words was not the gravelly voice of the aging deacon who had been reading just a moment before, but a clear, kind voice that William had never heard but which was explicitly recognizable. Had he heard it on the radio? Maybe it was a professor's voice, or just the familiar inflection of a classmate. He closed his eyes tightly as if doing so would open his ears more to help him discern who he had just heard. He felt a hand land lightly on his shoulder and he opened his eyes to look there, just as the Deacon read *...and do not be afraid...* where he saw the tiny hand of the four-year-old boy who had earlier recited the responses with his mother, his head on his mother's shoulder smiling at William, as if he knew something was about to happen. His palm rested on William's shoulder and four of his little fingers patted up and down, three times. William flinched, but the boy remained in contact with him, and his smile got wider, revealing a row of little teeth and liberating a giggle. His mother turned her head and saw his hand on William and gathered it in, mouthing a silent apology and shifting the child to her other hip. William shook his head to dismiss the apology, and almost reached out for the child, but a near drop of the book he was holding kept his hands to himself. He continued to listen for the voice he heard, not noticing that the



reading had finished and the congregation had seated. The priest had elevated to the pulpit, a circular marble base that hovered over the congregation by a few steps, and surrounded him in a perfectly shined ornate brass balustrade and perfectly polished wood handrail. He looked across the congregation to William, not impatient for him to sit down, as if he knew William needed to finish listening to whatever it was he heard. William felt a tug at his hip, and looked down to see the little boy smiling at him again, instructing him to sit.

After church, William followed the exodus to the fellowship hall, where there was a collation with cookies and coffee, thinking he might find Jim near the food. A hand landed on his back and another turned him by his elbow. He found himself face to face with Colonel.

“Preston, I’m glad you found church. How did you get here?” he said as his hand remained on William’s elbow.

“Jim, sir, uh, Stevens,” he stuttered. His stomach lurched, and he was afraid the morning’s nausea was returning, and his head filled with guilt and panic. He suddenly felt conspicuous. He looked for the door but was locked in place by Colonel’s hold on his arm, which reminded him of Colonel’s house, and what went on there. “Why are you here?” William was immediately regretful for speaking to an officer that way, but he was unable to mask his surprise at seeing him at church. Colonel could smell the bourbon on William’s breath. He leaned in so that William could smell his breath, too.

“Church is a good place for *anyone* to be,” he said. “Make sure you come back. It’s good for you.”

Colonel smiled and clapped his back, feeling his sharp shoulder blades.

“God, Preston, and eat some cookies. You’re too thin.”

Sullivan slept on the couch most of the summer, unable to return to the bedroom where Abby had died of an aneurism. He spent most days on the couch as well, unable to lift himself from the pit of his father's predicted grief. The morning of her death replayed itself over and over in his mind. He couldn't stop the anger that arose when he remembered thinking that she was pretending, and how, if he had taken her seriously, he might have been able to save her in those extra seconds that she might have still been breathing. The doctor had told him that wasn't true, that she had died as soon as the blood vessel popped in her head, but Sullivan thought there must have been three spare seconds in which he could have saved her and didn't. They had survived so much together, years of drug use, births of children, miscarriages of others, ex-spouses who were erratic abusers, and childhoods that provided little foundation for the healthy life they were just beginning to build. They had even found a church that ministered to recovering addicts, and his work with men in the program he was building fed both of their souls. Abby calmed him when William criticized him, and he lauded her when her mother was passive aggressive. On their limited income she always made sure the girls had dresses for church and clothes for school; he thought no one could guess how little money they actually lived on, and was proud of their resourcefulness and fortitude.

He would stack all of those things on top of one another and fail to understand how Abby died, leaving him to manage it. He couldn't see a way out. He couldn't even open his eyes to get off the couch. Behind closed eyes was the only place where Abby existed, and he wouldn't open his eyes and leave her there.

15-year-old Eleanor helped with meals and kept track of the younger girls throughout the summer, and ladies from church stopped in to check on them. As school approached, she became anxious about how they would function once school started. Eleanor wanted a normal junior year, not to be mom to her sisters, who were still in elementary school. She panicked when Sullivan stopped speaking in early August, and called Andrew.

“Uncle Andrew, I don’t know what to do,” Eleanor said as her voice trembled. “Dad won’t get up. He won’t talk to us. He won’t look at us. There’s a lady who’s been helping us, but she told me to call you. It’s bad.”

“Put him on the phone,” Andrew said.

“He won’t come to the phone. I don’t know what to do.” She started crying.

“It’s alright, Eleanor, I’m coming. I’ll be there tomorrow.”

Andrew and Eliana had a houseful of empty rooms, with Amelia and Daniel living away and Ben in Charleston, working for a beer distributor after graduating from the Citadel. The downstairs had a small kitchenette and den, with an extra bedroom they could all squeeze into, Eliana suggested, until he gets back on his feet. The thought of living with the brother who tortured him in childhood gave Andrew pause, but Eliana reminded him there were dependent children who need guidance that Sullivan was incapable of, for the time being.

Sullivan was in the same place Andrew left him three months earlier, when he and William were the last ones out after the funeral and reception at their house. Sullivan had seemed fine then, but had become unrecognizable. Long hair, unwashed, and an unkempt beard framed a hollow face that withered with melancholy. His lidded eyes blinked in recognition of a visitor, but Andrew wasn’t convinced Sullivan recognized him. He heard

the girls bickering in the kitchen. He left Sullivan in place and headed around the corner to take in a kitchen that was littered with empty cereal boxes, oily pizza boxes and ice cream bar wrappers. A dog licked the floor around the overflowing trashcan, pawing at the white flap to access more scraps.

Eleanor recognized him and dropped the washcloth and dishes she was working on and ran to him, hugging his middle, unable to hold her tears. The other two girls followed suit.

“Ok girls, let’s bag up this trash,” he said, looking around for more trash bags. They followed his instructions, and he noted scratches on their forearms. They worked together slowly and methodically around the house, collecting trash and stacking laundry. By evening they had cleaned the kitchen, vacuumed and started one of many loads of necessary laundry. Sullivan hadn’t moved. Andrew took the girls to dinner, then started a movie for them to watch in Eleanor’s bedroom so he could try to rustle Sullivan.

“Hey, Sully,” he said as he sat down on the chair next to the couch. A plume a dust floated as he settled back, starting a succession of voluminous sneezes that eventually opened Sullivan’s eyes. He sat up and watched Andrew as he sneezed, cones of tiny droplets of spittle forcefully landing on the dusty coffee table between them.

“Gross,” Sullivan said, his voice scratchy from little use.

“I know, right? Eliana says my sneezes are a medical marvel.”

“She’s right.”

Andrew waited for Sullivan’s eyes to remain open. Sullivan looked around the room, then focused back on Andrew.

“What are you doing here?”

“Eleanor called me. School starts soon.”

“What? What day is it?”

“It’s August 5, Sully.”

“What? How long have I been...” he started to cry, then started to fall over. Andrew caught him and righted him.

“Nope, no, no, not going to lay back down. We gotta get you up. You’ve got three girls, Sullivan, and a step-son somewhere. Where is he?”

Sullivan looked around the room, as if Grayson should have been there.

“I don’t know man. I haven’t seen him.”

“Have you been drinking?”

“I haven’t even been standing.”

“Ok. You gotta eat, at the table,” Andrew said. “I got you some dinner. The Mexican place the girls said you like.”

“Can’t eat.”

“Yes. You have to eat. Come on.”

Sullivan unfolded himself to leave the sagging couch, his knees creaking as he stood up. He held his lower back, as if pushing it in would straighten him up. He sat back down.

“I can’t.”

“I’ll bring it to you.”

Andrew watched as Sullivan ate, tentatively at first, then more voraciously, finishing even the browned shredded lettuce. His eyes brightened.

“Oh, man, that feels better,” he said. “What day did you say it is?”

“August 5. The girls say school starts next week.”

“Abby always did that stuff. I have no idea.”

“Here’s an idea. Y’all come and live with us. There’s nothing here for you. Dad’s near, Charlotte’s close, and we have enough room until you find a place of your own.”

Sullivan looked at the empty plate on the coffee table, then up at the walls that were covered in pictures of their family, celebrations of their sobriety and health, separated by a collection of crosses they had begun to amass. Abby had hung each picture to remind them of what was good in life. She had placed the furniture, mostly bought at Goodwill or found on the side of the road, which Abby always repainted, stained, or fixed to make it look like it hadn’t been abandoned, but loved. This was the only home the girls knew, or remembered, Sullivan thankful they were too young to remember the hovels they lived in before they got sober. Abby’s grandmother’s china was stacked neatly in the built-in china cabinet, along with other second-hand treasures that they picked out together. Abby’s imprint was indelible in the house, and to leave would be like losing a limb, but Sullivan knew he couldn’t remain if he wanted to continue breathing. He thought of the recovery center he was developing, the lease still with a few months left on it. He hadn’t been since Abby died, and had no idea if the men were still meeting there.

“OK,” he said.

Sullivan and the girls fit in snugly in the downstairs apartment and bedroom just in time to start school. They celebrated the trinitarian October birthdays together, for Andrew, Lizzie and Eleanor. William came, though Charlotte and Henry regretted, Henry unwilling to share a table with William after the insults a few years prior at the family

barbeque. As pre-teens got to know one another in the den, the adults, as per William's preference, gathered in the living room.

"Eliana, it certainly is nice of you to open your home to Sullivan and his rag-tag bunch of children," William said.

"Well, they're fine, and they're certainly welcome here. We're glad we have room for them."

"It's just like Andrew to have the most resources of all of us. He is the best of my children, you know."

Eliana bristled for Sullivan, who rolled his eyes and shook it off.

"Aren't all of your children the best?" Eliana suggested to William.

"You're simply the mother of one, so you cannot know what it is to have as many children as I did. They are not all equal. They simply cannot be."

Eliana excused herself to check on something in the kitchen and gave Andrew the side-eye. He shrugged his shoulder at her.

"Well, Sullivan, I see you are still on welfare. I would have hoped you would be off welfare by now."

"I'm not on welfare, Dad," he said, too worn down by grief to hold his temper or his hurt.

"Yes you are. You are here taking advantage of your brother's home, eating his food, drinking his drink."

"That's not welfare. Andrew asked me to come."

"Welfare is living off the benefit of someone else, and that is what you continue to do. It's embarrassing."



“My wife died, Dad, or don’t you remember?”

“Yes, but that doesn’t preclude you from work, does it? I had to preach sermons and tend to other people’s dead after Marilyn died. I couldn’t just stop working. Oh, but you haven’t worked at all, have you, is that what you told me?”

“Dad, I am trying as hard as I can. Abby died. Abby got up from bed and died, Dad, and I don’t know what to do with that. I’m not like you. I can’t just shelve it and act like it never happened. Did you not love Mom? Maybe you didn’t. You certainly didn’t act like it, all those years. You were as mean then as you are now. I was hoping you had changed, that you would understand. You buried your wife too, but you’re the same old son of a bitch and a bastard, too, just like Mom always said.”

William stood.

“That is all you will say about my wife. You will never speak of her again. And I shall never speak to you again. Goodbye.”

Sullivan left the room first, unable to control the tears that were a mix of grief for his wife, father and mother.

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Still in love with literature and the maudlin tales of the Victorians, William wistfully registered for his final year of classes at the Citadel, including a survey of the Bronte sisters’ tales of grotesque and inexplicable love. William had read and reread their thick books and was well acquainted with the character flaws, terroir indelibility, and familial loyalty that the young women wove into diffusive stories to support their father, a priest who could not make a suitable living. The mindlessness of the course eased the academic

burden of his senior year, but its professor, Garland Ammon, crippled his efforts to conform to the concept of acceptability demanded of him.

The blooming war in Vietnam began to dislocate resources and Garland – not in the military – was loaned from the more liberal College of Charleston for the year to fill a vacancy in the English department. His smallness was accentuated by his close-fitting khaki pants, tucked under a narrow lapel jacket punctuated by a thin tie. His wire-rimmed glasses came on and off his face as he discussed Heathcliff and Cathy, dreamily looking out the window as if they were out there on the moors. Most of the cadets looked at the doodles they were penning in their notes, but William would look out the window, too, hoping to see what Garland saw, realizing that his own breath had become shallow in sync with his instructor's. Garland's left hand jammed into his coat pocket, disordering the careful balance of his buttoned jacket, while his right tapped the pencil of an eraser on the lectern. After a particularly condemning discussion of Jane Eyre's overly convenient rescue by long-lost cousins in rural England, harshly criticizing Charlotte Bronte for not making the petulant Jane actually determine what is to be instead of relying on an insistent cousin to prospect for her, William approached the professor at the lectern after he dismissed the class.

“I do hate to take umbrage with your argument, Professor Ammon. But Jane Eyre will defy St. John, and will return to Rochester, even though he is a mangled, crippled, ugly man by then, left destitute and without his grand home, which I've never understood why she could love someone like that so completely.”

Garland smothered a laugh while he considered William's one-dimensional notion of love.

“Mr. Preston, you are correct, Jane does indeed choose her own path, and I now understand you are the only student who has read ahead of the assigned reading. But what you don’t understand is *love* itself, that it is based on more than looks and money and land and a grand home. Do you know what love is?”

William’s mind emptied, then filled with the marriages of his parents and grandparents, whose primary purposes were to make money and the appropriate gender of baby. He couldn’t recall an adult expressing love towards another or mentioning it to a child. His head tilted as if to reset memories, to shake out an *I love you*. None came to mind. He looked down and noticed Prof. Ammon didn’t wear a wedding ring.

Garland closed his eyes and answered his own question.

“Love is what you feel when you close your eyes and fall backward, knowing the person you love is there to catch you.”

He opened his eyes, leaned forward and put his un-ringed hand on William’s shoulder.

“Love is knowing that, when all of that falls away, the money, the looks, the home, because eventually Mr. Preston, they will fall away, that the person you love is still standing with you, or sitting next to you if you can no longer stand, and your arms still tingle when they touch you and your lips still reach out to kiss theirs. That is why Jane can live with Mr. Rochester in the house in the woods, because they love one another.”

William’s shoulder was hot under the touch of Garland’s hand and his breath was shallow. He did not blink in the shadow of Garland’s exposition because he felt tears welling. He ground his teeth to control the unexpected emotion and jutted out his chin.

“Well, I’ve never heard such a ridiculous thing.”

He turned and left the classroom.

William continued to argue with Garland regularly in class, to the notice of even the most inattentive cadets. He was invigorated by the diminutive professor, an intellectual who read deeply, then between the lines, sorting it out for the duller students in the room yet attending to William's barbs meant to poke holes in professorial suppositions long held by years of study and teaching. Garland had to admit that sometimes William was correct. William often stayed in his seat after class, afforded that luxury as a senior not required at all formations. Draping his right leg over left and leaning across the small desk, William would goad Garland to discuss the finer points of love in literature.

"William, what is it you're seeking, really?" Garland finally asked as the term neared its end. He had taken a seat next to William, addressing him for the first time in the familiar. He sat on the open side of the wooden desk-chair, so he could lean forward, elbows on his slightly opened knees, close enough so William could smell his breath, a mix of institutional coffee and cigarettes. William touched his own ear, suddenly self-conscious, to feel the heat of the blood now pulsating so hard he could feel it in his neck.

"I don't... I don't know what you mean. I'm just curious about your ideas, that's all."

William turned to face the front of the room and unfolded his leg, dropping his foot on the floor. He straightened his back for strength but looked down at the desk and fingered the carving of some other bored cadet.

"I think you're curious about more than that." Garland didn't touch William, but remained still, leaning close to him. William could feel the heat of his breath on his arm, which stirred his groin and shortened his own breath, but he did not move his arm. In that moment, William realized why he was arguing veraciously in class, why he got to class

early, why he stayed after class, why he thought about little else. What kept him still was the remembrance of Freddie, which he had kept crushed in that box that he carried with him everywhere, more like a comforter than an albatross, until now. He fought to control his breath as Freddie came back to him, as if he were sitting right next to him.

William graduated *summa cum laude* and with great satisfaction that he had not only survived but thrived in a culture he was sure his father had meant to defeat him. His grandparents came to the ceremony, along with his mother and sister, whom he was glad to see. Elliott shook his hand and uttered a passing comment about disbelief. Miriam stood arm's length away, modeling the standard of decorum she wanted William to exhibit. He took her cue and tamped down Mary's giddiness with a firm hand on her shoulder. He lightly kissed the turgid cheek of his mother.

William saw Garland Ammon in his academic regalia nearby on the parade grounds as proud mothers were crying over their boys-become-men. William had spent his final semester in his class debating the virtue of love and money and which of those drove Becky Sharpe to murder in *Vanity Fair*, another novel William read and considered a manual on sub-scandalous societal conventions. Garland had argued the unreliable narrator and Thackeray's own inconsistencies left gaping holes in the narrative but did agree with the novel's commentary on the commodification of women, which was brave for its time. William maintained society and one's standing in it has and always will trump any need for fulfilling relationships based in something as fickle as love, and it was unfortunate women suffered most in that scenario, but "it is what it is."

Garland lifted his hand to wave to William and started across the field toward him, but stopped when William looked at him, horror and grief compounded together in his

eyes, carefully concealed by the smile he was feigning for the family that surrounded him. Only Miriam read William's look and turned her head to see who had momentarily shadowed his face, but by the time she surveilled the parade grounds there was no one in particular who seemed to have his attention, and William was looking down at Mary, commenting on her hair. William swallowed hard, Miriam saw, and he made an overly grand gesture to encourage the entourage to return to their car.

Miriam took William's arm for the walk.

"Are there any classmates that you'll keep in touch with now?"

He knew what she was asking, and what she was telling him. Sadness overtook him and his thin belly ached at the thought of returning to the life in Greenville she was arranging for him. Sadness quickly gave way to anger, then bitterness, which flew out of his mouth unexpectedly.

"I did make many friends," he taunted. When Miriam tightened her grip on William's arm, his virulence ebbed and he consigned himself to her care. "But I likely will not keep in touch with them."

"I'm sorry to hear that," she said as she rubbed his forearm against the side of her breast. "It's a good thing, anyway, because Elliott has an office set up for you at the mill, and he is ready for you to come to work. We have to get you a wife, William. It's a pity none of these coeds would do down here, but it's probably just as well. We need to find you someone from Greenville, whose family we know."

"Yes, grandmother," he automatically replied as his shoulders withered at the submission to a life he knew couldn't be avoided.

Andrew's ministry to Sullivan's grief was a precursor to his sacerdotal calling that was recognized by the parish priest where he and Eliana attended church. The mortifying end to his misanthropic marriage and the unexpected redemption of his second marriage had dampened his desire for worldly success; he took more satisfaction in taking communion to the elderly confined to nursing home beds and participating in prison ministry at the nearby maximum-security penitentiary. Though the acquisition of dollars and things no longer held great allure for Andrew, he was surprised when his priest suggested he consider seminary. At first he laughed sadly at the memory of his mother's alcoholic tenure as a priest's wife, not wanting that for Eliana. Then his internal examination shifted to his father as priest, elements of which he could not pull from his memory. *Who had his father been as a priest?* Andrew wondered. He could only remember acrimony, resentment and neglect, which he quickly shook off as flawed memories. *Surely there had been more*, he thought.

Eliana had seen the change in Andrew as well, and agreed that living a life in subjection to supernal forces rather than corporal desires would be more satisfactory. Andrew sold the big house that William had taken so much pride in and went to Sewanee.

William's spiritual ego was boosted by Andrew's desire to follow in his footsteps to seminary, but his temporal plans to live out his years in the cover of Andrew's basement apartment were thwarted by the move. A succession of banged-up cars belied his ability to see, though none of his children dared broach the subject. William maintained his grandmother's embedded rule to always know everything and never be surprised by

anything, so he acted as if everything was fine when he forgot why he crossed the automatic threshold of the grocery store and bought yet another pound-bag of white rice, dozen eggs and jar of lemon curd, ignoring the three jars of molding curd and out-of-date eggs in his refrigerator and growing stacks of grains in his pantry. He feigned illness when his Tuesday bridge partner called asking why he didn't attend a game, and socialized congenially with the church secretary when he arrived an hour early for the Wednesday noon service, having forgotten what time the service he attended for 15 years began. Instead of expressing concern, he exaggerated his own behavior, refraining his decline whenever the subject neared.

“This is what happens in old age and decrepitude. I'm blind in both eyes and deaf in both ears. There's nothing that can be done,” was his playful admission that worked well enough to convince any doubter that he was aware and fine.

But his mind swirled with ideas that he could not corral, and sometimes became unsure of where he was. When those moments arrived, he would drive to his sister's house in an assisted living community 45 minutes away. Some weeks William would visit Mary three times. She never mentioned it, long familiar with the posture her brother assumed to deny any semblance of reality. She continued to love him for the man she knew was hiding underneath the priest's collar and his grandmother's intractable imprint.

“It's good to see you, William, *again*,” she welcomed him. “What are you up to?”

“Well, I have no one to talk to and nowhere to go,” he said. “I'm blind in both eyes and deaf in both ears and there's nothing to be done.”

“Yes, you've mentioned that.”



“But you are my younger sister so you would know nothing about old age and decrepitude, yet,” he said as he leaned in towards her and examined her swollen legs.

“I’m getting there,” she admitted.

“We have both outlived our spouses, so what are we to do?”

“What do you do all day, William? Do your kids come visit?”

“Heavens, no. I don’t need to see them. They have no need to see me. Andrew has gone off to seminary and the rest are God knows where. I can’t keep track.”

“How is Andrew doing?” While she didn’t mind his visits, she had called Andrew to let him know that William was visiting repeatedly unaware. Andrew said he spoke to his father weekly, and would keep an eye on him from afar.

“I haven’t heard from him all year. He is much too busy to talk with me, his old retired father.”

“He hasn’t called you lately?”

“Oh no. We haven’t spoken in months.”

“What about Sullivan, do you see him?”

“That scoundrel? I shall never speak to him again. He was a disaster, you know, worried his mother to death. Caused her I don’t know how many nervous breakdowns. He just would not do. I have not seen him in years. I have no desire to cross his path again.”

“Are you still playing bridge?”

“I cannot see a thing, Mary, so I have retired my bridge partners. It is all I can do to go to church. There is not a thing left for me. I sit around most days and think about

Marilyn, and what an angel she was to our family. She held us together, I'll tell you. She was our guiding light and star.”

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Nellie opened the door as William's grip on the doorknob tightened, surprising them both. He was still stick-thin, but his jaw had squared and his eyes hardened.

"William," she said. "It's so good to have you home."

He noticed her face was rounder and her voice lower. He was flustered by his desire to hug her, which would have allowed him to breathe in the coconut lotion on her skin and the chopped onions trapped in her apron where she wiped her hands. He could smell the intermingling aromas from his childhood, mixed with the cookies she had just made. He did not bend down to embrace her, but breathed deeply and slowly as he began the rest of his life.

His life was as Miriam prescribed it: days at the mill and evenings on dates. The work of the mill was tedious and dirty, fraught with equipment failure, lazy employees and slow-paying customers. Nothing ever went as planned, and William's constitution was not organized to accommodate aberrations. Elliott's patience was stretched thin as he was nearing 70 and eager to let an heir take the business.

Miriam focused on getting William married, hoping that a wife and a family would animate his zest for work. Elliott bought William a new car, a slate blue Chevrolet Corvair Sedan, the four-door model chosen by Miriam to reinforce the domestic objective the car was designed for. The most desirable girls in William's set were already engaged, a challenge that provided some frustration for Miriam. Their inadequacy gave William ample reason to reject them, just as when he was a teenager:

*She was vulgar and cheap, with bright red lipstick that looked like a whore.*

*I don't care who her parents are, but she was not raised appropriately.*

*She could barely read the menu.*

*She was fat.*

*She smelled ghastly.*

When her patience emptied at the end of the summer, Miriam put her foot down.

“William, I don’t know what you’ve been playing at this summer, but it’s time you got serious. I just don’t understand why you haven’t met *the one* yet. It’s time for you to settle down and stop acting like a playboy.”

“Yes, grandmother, I was just playing the field one last time before I settled down, you’re right. I will get serious.”

Marilyn Sullivan sat outside his office, one of three secretaries who served the mill managers. She was plainly dressed, with a rotation of three dresses and two cardigans, one of which was splitting at the shoulder seam. Her hair was short, teased up a little, in an effort to contain as much as she could the natural curl that was not in fashion. She was unremarkable, with a small nose flanked by narrow eyes. She wore a small gold ring on her right hand, capped by a cluster of cheap metal bracelets that jangled when she typed.

“What is that infernal noise?” William barked as he stood at the threshold to his office. The other two secretaries stopped typing and looked up. Marilyn, who knew why William was annoyed, kept typing and clinking.

“You!” he pointed at Marilyn. “What are you doing? Stop it. You’ve given me a headache.” He turned and went back into his office. Marilyn watched his back, unbothered by his reprimand. She knew the source of his headache; she was conversant with the red eyes and perpetual irritability of a hangover, having tended to many of her mother’s.

Marilyn was hard-boiled because life had not given anything kind to her. Dirt floors and a steady diet of cabbage and potatoes in the hills of Appalachia calloused her feet and her appetite, while her mother's desperation stole her childhood. Her father had died of destitution, the kind that seeped into his liver and bled into his stomach, engorging his indurate gut. Stories of jobs and housing in textile communities drew her mother to Greenville, where the mill village served as surrogate family to Marilyn and her younger brother Eddie while their mother attended spindles in the mill and drank cheap gin at night. Marilyn looked at her mother with contempt as they ate the dinner Marilyn prepared, her mother afflicted by the work and sinking into liquor to cease remembrance of the day. Marilyn had refused to go into the mill to work when she turned 14, as many mill village kids did; she hoped that graduating from high school would provide a different future than the one her parents showed her. She made sure Eddie went to school, too, for whom she would later come to believe she used up all her capacity for mothering.

William didn't know they had gone to the same high school. Marilyn was a sophomore his senior year. She recognized him as a popular socialite who always had a girl trailing behind him, though never at his side. She had wished someone like him would notice someone like her, a vanilla girl from an unremarkable family. She didn't go to college, but graduated high school and took the job as a secretary, just thankful she wasn't watching thread turn all day.

She had forgotten about William until he arrived in the finishing mill office. She watched him from her typewriter, lifting her eyes as she gathered the collar of her worn sweater around her shoulders despite the heat of the mill, self-conscious of her ample bosom that often unwantedly attracted men. Her mother had let the gin take her, slipping

away just after Marilyn graduated from high school and started work. It was a relief to them both, that her mother quit the life she hated so much and that Marilyn no longer had to witness. Marilyn's stern management of Eddie had won him a scholarship to Clemson, known for its ability to develop alumni networks for gentlemen farmers with political aspirations.

As William bumbled about the office from one mistake to the next, each corrected by his increasingly impatient grandfather, Marilyn both pitied and resented him. On the day of the clinking bracelets, Marilyn had had enough of his indisposition as well and began to take him into her own strong hands.

She stopped typing and followed him into his office with two aspirin and a glass of water.

"It's not my typing that bothers you. It's your hangover," she said, her inconspicuousness fueling her audacity to talk back to William Preston. "Take these and take a nap and try not to drink so much every night."

William began to watch Marilyn, and noticed her ample bosom that she attempted to hide under her ill-fitting sweaters. He focused on them as like protuberances whose nipples responded in arousal just as his masculinity did. He practiced with the worn-out magazines Miriam had given him, sacred texts preserved as manuals by which he needed to live. When he successfully responded to thoughts of Marilyn's bust, he asked her out on a date.

He had hoped his invitation to the Magnolia Club would disarm her and give him reason to call it off; her cool acceptance not only intrigued him but encouraged him. It was that kind of invisible strength that would allow him to endure.

He presented her with a corsage when he picked her up for the date, which he pinned onto the shoulder of her dress with slightly shaking hands.

“You look lovely this evening,” he said to the corsage, curious about his own nervousness.

He extended his elbow as they walked to the car. He walked slowly, purposefully placing each heel on the ground in concert with his breath.

“Do I make you nervous, William?” she said to him after he had installed her then himself in the car. William turned the key in the ignition and looked straight ahead. Marilyn turned her torso to look closely at him, her bare knees pointing toward him.

“Of course not,” William said as he pulled away from the curb. “Why would you say that?”

“Your hands were shaking when they put on my corsage,” she smiled. They came to a stop sign at the end of her street. William turned to look at her, briefly meeting her eyes and drifting down to her chest, to show her (and remind himself) that he was interested in her physically.

“Marilyn, I think you are very attractive and I look forward to getting to know you better,” he said.

William smugly felt her breath shorten when they entered the Gold Room at the Club: two story windows flanked by white silk curtains with gold tassels lined the room, the head of which was crowned by an oversized marble fireplace with a gold Rococo mirror floating on top, reflecting the dozens of crystal chandeliers that twinkled above the tables. Each round table was punctuated with a low arrangement of white roses, yawning lilies

and delicate baby's breath, circled by gold silverware and gold-rimmed china plates. William sensed her awe and his nervousness faded as he took comfort in her discomfort.

The black maître d' moved quickly as Marilyn attempted to seat herself, to pull out her chair and spread her napkin on her lap. William's smugness grew as he realized how little she knew about society and etiquette.

"This is lovely," she said, her defiant eyes settling on William.

"It is, isn't it? My grandmother and grandfather are founding members of this club, did you know that?"

"I did not."

Two drinks arrived without comment at their table. A bourbon for William and a Tom Collins for her.

"My family is very important in Greenville," William said, then took a long sip of his drink. "Besides owning the mills, I mean. There are two mills, as you know, that my grandfather owns, and that I will one day inherit. My grandparents are founders of this club, and my grandmother was a charter member of The Society, that's for proper young women to make their debut. I have escorted more girls than I can count. And the women's club. My grandmother started that, for all the important wives in Greenville. And the garden club, even though she had a gardener, she had to tell him what to do, or how would he know?"

William laughed at his own pretentious joke and finished his drink. She took a sip of hers.

"You must be close to your grandmother."



“Yes, well, she practically raised me. She is the one who taught me how to be. You see, my grandmother cares for me very deeply. She sees to it that I have everything I need, and that I know everything I need to know.”

“What about your mother?”

William raised his finger and another bourbon appeared. The server looked at Marilyn’s drink and she shook her head.

“My mother is the daughter of my grandmother, but she is very different. She has chosen to disregard any responsibility she has in being a proper mother to me. Or my sister.”

“You have a sister?”

“Yes, Mary is a horsewoman. Mother ignored her so much that she was raised by horses,” he said, starting his second drink. “I don’t mean that she is vulgar, but she is just obsessed by horses and I don’t know what will become of her.”

“Where does she live?”

“She goes to Converse College, in Spartanburg, which is a two-bit town, but a fine school for young ladies, though she spends most of her time in Landrum at a horse farm. I just don’t know what she is going to do.”

“Do you like working for your grandfather?”

“Oh, Heavens no,” William said, too quickly. He lifted his drink to his mouth. He put the drink on the table. “The mill is a difficult place to work, as you know. It is a challenging business, but Grandfather is a good leader and a brilliant man. I look forward to learning more from him.”

“He’s hard on you, sometimes,” she said. The warmth the bourbon generated extended to his sensibility, and he touched Marilyn’s hand as it lay on the table next to her gold knife. His fingertips grazed the top of the back of her hand, fingering the blue veins the popped through her translucent skin. She held still as he touched each finger, as if he were counting them. He took her hand in his and turned it over and lowered it beneath the table between them. He opened up her palm and stroked it with his other hand, which was wet and cold from holding his drink. He brought her hand to his mouth and kissed her palm, enclosing her fingers on it as if he had planted a gift. He replaced her hand on the table.

“Yes, Marilyn, he is hard on me, but it is important that I do what is necessary. And sometimes, necessary is hard.”

William began to take her to social events at the Club to see if her mettle would hold under the scrutiny of society. They melded their needs together: she let him do the talking, and William received compliments about what a delightful date she was. In return, Marilyn asked for more than just a kiss on the cheek goodnight. William did not mind touching Marilyn; her skin was surprisingly soft for a mill girl, and there was the matter of her bosom. William fixated on it as a refuge of comfort that he had never felt with his mother, who had not had the fortitude to breastfeed him. He did not get the images mixed up, rather supplanted contrived sexual desire for maternal comfort he never had. They developed a physical relationship that pleased Marilyn and satiated William, because he knew that others could see it.

“There’s no need for so much fondling in public,” Miriam chastised the two as they sat on her parlor sofa for their first appearance with her. William understood her rebuke

for approval, which made him squeeze Marilyn's hand even tighter before he let it go and scooted away from her. Marilyn blushed and remained quiet, as William had advised her to do.

“Grandmother, it's just that Marilyn and I are having such a wonderful time together. We have been to two socials at the Club this month, and we will attend the Fall Ball next month.”

Marilyn looked at William. They had not discussed the dance, which was one of the Club's most prestigious events of the year. Guests were closely scrutinized and seldom invited.

“I'm glad to hear that, William, and you must invite her to the debutante ball as well. I think that would be good for her. Do you have elbow kid gloves?”

“I'm certain she does,” William stepped in, sensing the scrutiny. “I'll make sure she is properly fitted.”

Mariam excused herself, a cue William took to interpret for Marilyn what had just transpired.

He turned to her, taking both her hands in his.

“Oh Marilyn, did you hear that? Grandmother says you may come to the Society Ball next month. This is extraordinary, Marilyn. This means you are acceptable.”

Surrounded by polished silver and antiques in a house bigger than any she had ever seen, Marilyn took William's face in hers.

“I love you, William,” she said.

William exhaled in surprise at her declaration, blinking at her as if trying to place her. Professor Ammon floated across his mind, blurring his vision for a moment. He tried to

recall his definition of love, but all he could see was his narrow tie and buttoned jacket. *Love is being there*, he finally remembered. *Marilyn is here*, he thought, withstanding the rigors of grandmother's judgement without injury. She had not judged him. She had done as he said, quietly hung on his arm and done nothing to embarrass him, despite her provincial upbringing. *She just might do*, he thought.

“And I love you, Marilyn.”

She released the breath she had been holding and brought their faces together. She kissed him lightly on the lips and pulled back. William smiled and said “Thank you.” He leaned toward her and opened his mouth as they came together again. He kissed her passionately, eyes closed as the bachelor professor Garland Ammon asked him about what he was really looking for.

## Part II

For now we see in a mirror, dimly, but then we will see face to face.

Now I know only in part; then I will know fully, even as I have been fully known.

And now faith, hope and love abide, these three;

And the greatest of these is love.



12

Andrew looked at his phone after class, just as he began his final year of seminary. There were five voicemails from his father.

“I’m just feeling a little antsy and hope that you will soon get in touch with me and tell me what’s going on with that mess that I’ve created. Thank you.”

“Andrew, I have maybe mixed up these numbers and names and it might be well for you to call me again and let me be sure I’m telling you the one I’m telling you if I’m still telling you. Thank you.”

“Well, I’ve tried again to reach you somewhere on the telephone and not been able to so I’ll just have to turn it over to you so you can try to get me on my telephone which I’m sure you know what that is. Andrew’s telephone is there that I call you on except you try to get me and I try to say yes and then we vanish into space. Thank you and goodbye.”

“I’ve been trying to call you more days than the other, and also I’ve been hearing attempts to call from me! I don’t know what’s become of us. I expect it has to do with my not properly paying for the telephone but a call from you would surely not be in the same condition of lostness that mine is, so if you keep on trying, I’ll keep on trying to answer. Thank you.”

“I’m your ancient mother wanting to talk with you Andrew. I don’t really quite know how to do the same things with the same people as Andrew Preston does. That one, out there, that’s a girl where she’s always been that I can’t even remember that so maybe you’ll help me. Thank you.”

Andrew called Sullivan immediately.

“Sullivan, you have to go check on Dad.”

“He’s been calling you, too?”

“Wait, he’s been calling *you*?”

“Yeah. He’s been calling me. I don’t think he knows who he’s calling,” Sullivan laughed. “I’m going up there this weekend. I’ll call you.”

“Are you sure?”

“Yeah man. He’s my dad. I’ll make sure he’s okay.”

Sullivan was restless and slept little the rest of the week. He hadn’t seen William in four years, which was the usual amount of time the two needed between brief, bitter interactions. He had been as surprised as Andrew when William called him repeatedly that week, unsure of where he was and how he was to be. Sullivan knew without a doubt he would go see him, but was afraid of how he would be received. He took pride in how his life had turned out since Abby’s death – he had earned his bachelor’s degree, owned a home and worked for the state rehab agency. His three girls were in school, living at home with him, though he didn’t know where his first daughter was, or where Abby’s son had gotten to. Still, he carried deeply his prepubescent confusion and injury that William inflicted on him as a child and an adult. He had medicated it with heroin and alcohol for most of his life, but hoped that his current treatment of work and fatherhood would maintain his sobriety as his father reentered his life.

Sullivan pulled into William’s driveway early Saturday with his three girls in tow, unashamedly using them as buffers should William’s temper expand. He parked next to an old hatchback, its hood and fender wrinkled like a wad of paper. William stepped out of the screened-in porch and looked at the group that entered his gated yard.

“Hello? Who are you?”

“Dad, it’s me, Sullivan.”

“Sullivan? How long have you been gone?”

“Not long, Dad. Just a little while.”

“Who are these girls?”

“This is Eleanor, Natalie and Lana, your granddaughters.”

“I have granddaughters? How many do I have?”

“Well, you have these three, and Amelia, and Juliana.”

“What? Who made all those children?”

“Your sons did.”

“My sons? Are you my son?”

“Yes, Dad, I’m your son.”

“Oh, I’m so glad you’re here to take care of me. What would I do without you?

You’re such a good son.”

The girls smirked and looked at their father. Sullivan shrugged his shoulders.

“What happened to your car, Dad?”

“Is that my car, the blue one?”

“No Dad, your car is the white one, with the dented hood. When did you get that?”

“Someone must have dropped it off here. I don’t know anything.”

“Have you been to visit Mary?”

“No. She lives far away with that Army husband of hers. Wait, he’s dead. Both our spouses are dead. But she lives in Powdersville. That’s much too far for me to drive.”

Sullivan didn’t challenge him. William offered them a seat on the blue wicker furniture on the screened-in porch.



“This wicker is very important,” William said. “It was on my mother’s back porch for years. I brought it here when she died. It is very old and important. Isn’t it elegant?”

“It’s great, Dad.”

“Who are these girls you’ve brought with you? What are they doing here?”

“They’re your granddaughters, Dad, Eleanor, Natalie and Lana.”

“Do I have granddaughters? How many?”

“You have five. These three are mine, and I have another. Andrew has one, too.”

“Do I have grandsons? They’re the most important, you know.”

“You do. Andrew has Ben and Daniel, Billy has Greg, and Charlotte has Hank.”

“Hank? What kind of name is that?”

“I think it’s after Henry, Charlotte’s husband.”

“Charlotte is my daughter?”

“Yes. You have three sons and a daughter.”

“I do? When will they get here?”

“I’m here.”

“Who are you?”

“I’m your son, Sullivan.”

“Oh, Sullivan, I’m so glad you’re here. I’m blind in both eyes and deaf in both ears and now I cannot remember a thing. There’s just nothing that can be done.”

Sullivan called Andrew later that afternoon.

“It’s bad,” Sullivan said.

“How bad?”

“He said he was glad to see me, and that I’m a good son.”

Sullivan and Andrew burst into boyhood laughter.

“That is bad. He doesn’t remember a thing,” Andrew said. Then he thought a minute.

“That is good, Sully. This is good. He doesn’t remember a thing.”

“I know. I thought about that on the way home. I’m not gonna lie, I was scared to death driving up there. I didn’t know what he’d say to me, but I thought it would be bad. But he’s just pitiful. The dad I remember was tall and strong and mean, and I was always afraid of him. But sitting there on his porch, man, he’s skinny. He was wearing these shorts that were pants he’d cut off and cinched at the waist with a belt. They’d a fallen off if he hadn’t had that belt on. We looked in his fridge and there’s not much there, and what is there is moldy or dried up. We offered to take him to the grocery store, but he said he was fine.”

“Wow.”

“Oh! And he’s grown a beard.”

“What? He never had facial hair.”

“Yeah, he’s got this scraggly beard he said is to hide his old face. He wasn’t...that wasn’t our dad, Andrew. Not the dad we grew up with. I don’t know what to do. He needs to be taken care of. And he can’t drive anymore. That car. The hood was crumpled and there were scratches all along the sides. I don’t know what he’s done, but it’s a miracle he hasn’t killed himself or somebody else. We gotta get that car from him.”

“Looks like you’re up,” Andrew said, laughing, but serious.

“I’ll do it, but I’m gonna need your help. I’m not taking on Dad alone.”

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“Marilyn, you are of no station to marry my grandson,” Miriam whispered. “But I have allowed it, and you will stand by William, and you not cause a scandal. Do you understand?”

Before Marilyn could answer, Miriam took the arm of an usher who escorted her down the aisle of the gothic church, where she smiled at William as he stood waiting at the altar. William looked past her, focused on the rose window that glowed pink and blue over the brass pipes of the church’s organ in the west facing loft. William had insisted they marry in an Episcopal church, remembering the strict liturgy that had brought him relief at The Citadel, but doubt crept into his mind and he felt it in his knees, which had gone numb and couldn’t catch him when he tilted backward. The priest’s white cassock expanded as he reached out to help William maintain his balance when his knees unlocked and his feet reorganized to prevent the collapse. William laughed nervously as he caught his grandmother’s glare.

“I know better than to lock my knees,” he said quietly to the priest. “I am a Citadel man.”

William and Marilyn settled into a home selected by Miriam that was appropriately distanced but close enough, in the right neighborhood, but not too pretentious for a young couple. It was more than Marilyn had ever had, so she was satisfied with the busy-ness of running the home of a textile executive: decorating, cleaning, making dinner, taking care of a man. They dined with Miriam and Elliot on Sundays, when Miriam made pointed statements about the expectation of babies and instructed them on who to socialize with. Marilyn allowed her interference, unsure about how to properly conduct herself and still malleable enough to take direction from Miriam, who ensured Marilyn’s acceptance into

the right clubs, taught her to play bridge and tutored her on the intricacies of society. William continued to feel ill at ease at work, never settling into the incongruous nature of the textile business, where forecasted growth never occurred and the unexpected always presented itself without reason. His struggle with the conundrum of work echoed Marilyn's entrance into society, giving them something to talk about over supper, finding humor in the unexpected place in which they found themselves, Marilyn wearing elbow-length kid gloves at formal cotillions and William diagnosing chemical failures in a finishing plant. They gave attention to each other's complaints, shaking their heads at the common sense most people did not seem to have and dreaming up counterplots that would not make it past the silver, but which gave them a conspiratorial edge on the frustrations of their days. Her mountain brawn stiffened his spine, and his effeminate self-indulgence softened her sharp edges.

Their partnership manifested vigorously as William discovered the layers and folds of a woman's body that were different from his own. He was mystified by the female form, and took pleasure in canvassing the connected features that were soft and moist with intended purpose as he neared. When Marilyn touched him, he distinguished that a touch charged with protection, preservation and guidance granted him strength and courage to love and serve Marilyn in reciprocation for all that he knew she was giving to him. As he slid into her, he closed his eyes and thought of his life in sequence, revising things done and left undone, leaving a story of embattled supernatural forces to explain how William Preston came to be. He went through the motions of husbandry and working, but the principle of his thoughts, distinctly separate from his body, remained in some other place that he couldn't reach. He would imagine the separation between this material life and his

deepest crevasses in which his distinctive mark was made. He would hold the moment long enough to relieve himself to something seen otherwise than by ordinary sight, a vivid emotion of pleasure arising from that ephemeral truth. Tears always followed as he returned to a world deficient in the matter with which he was concerned. Marilyn wondered where he went when he whimpered back, but she did not ask, afraid of the answer.

Their efforts, which could have been compared with the effort it took to orbit John Glenn around the earth in 1962, were successful in producing a child. They named him William David Preston IV and agreed to call him Billy. William basked in his accomplishment, thinking that his work was complete.

“Didn’t I do well when I lay with Marilyn?” he asked his grandmother.

“William, don’t be vulgar,” Miriam chastised him. “But you *must* have more children. Just look at my children. You never know how they’re going to turn out. They could be terribly disappointing.”

The infant was loud and complaintive, an evening cacophony that William had difficulty bearing after enduring the same caterwauling in the mill by machines and men. The child also demanded great effort from Marilyn, whose repository had no artifacts of motherhood; she may have given all she had to her brother, who was engaged to a girl from Charleston rice planter wealth. At least he no longer needed her succor, for which Marilyn was thankful. She was overwhelmed with the energy the baby took from her, clinging to her breasts, rapacious for her milk, which engorged her and weighed down both her frame and her resolve. Marilyn was frightened by the infant’s dependence on her and lived in constant dread that she would fail the child, as her mother had failed her.

The child also unmoored William from the safe harbor he and Marilyn had constructed; William had developed a dependence on Marilyn's firm presence of which he was unaware until she became distracted by motherhood. William hired a nurse to help Marilyn, which enabled her to find relief in an occasional drink that quieted the cries and tranquilized the nerves that she could feel convulsing in her limbs. Marilyn eventually discovered that several drinks helped her sleep through the baby's insatiable cries, and dried up the milk that taxed her, temporarily easing her weariness and distancing her from the yoke of the child. William imitated her application of remedy for the day, and the two began to drink more dinner than they ate.

William lay on top of the white chenille bedspread, stained yellowish-brown by years of use and neglect. He stared at the ceiling, dimly lit by the sole working bulb in the flush fixture that held two blown bulbs and a cemetery of bug carcasses, all of it a blurry mess to eyes that had never worked very well. He couldn't make out the cobwebs that fluttered in the breeze of heated air that circulated in the small room despite the June temperatures outside. His thin, 85-year-old body no longer kept him warm, so the electric radiator ran year-round. The constant heat amplified the smell of the dust under the bed, a thick layer twenty years in the making, and the musk of an old man who could no longer control his bowels or bladder. His fingers fondled his belt buckle, an accessory needed to cinch the size 40 pants around his 32-inch waist.

He wanted to sleep, eternally. He was patiently waiting for the Lord to call him home, disappointed each morning when he woke up. He was ready – had been ready for some time now – to take his place at the right hand of God. Being human had been painful, unfair and ghastly.

*Please, God, take me now. I have lived too long. Have I not suffered enough?*

His eyes closed, opened again. He turned his head to the left, where he thought the door was. But there was a wall with a painting on it, a painted wooden frame around a white ... something. He couldn't remember the oil painting of a magnolia blossom, his grandmother's favorite. On the bedside table, he saw the device, the one with the numbers big enough for his poor eyesight, that he thought was a radio. Sometimes it would allow him to talk to people. He wasn't sure how it worked and became tired trying to remember.

He wanted to talk to his grandmother, in whose remembrance he struck his chest three times with his fist, bringing tears to his eyes for the depth of his love for the woman who rescued him from a mother and father lost to alcohol and selfishness. Sixty years in the grave, yet he thought of her every day – one of the few people the dementia hadn't stolen from him. He saw her portrait on the wall, opposite from the head of his bed; he could recognize the shape of the ornate gold oval frame and though he couldn't make out her picture, he remembered what was there.

*Grandmother. I know you loved me. You saved me.*

His fist relaxed and his hand slid to his concave belly, which was grumbling from hunger. He did not know when he would be fed again, or who would feed him. A tear slid sideways into his thin, grey hair.

*If I don't eat, Lord, will you take me? I want to leave this world. It has been cruel and mean and unfair. Why did you put me here? What was I supposed to do?*

He rose with the agitation and found himself facing a door. He opened it and stepped out into a short hallway. He saw the bathroom and urinated in the toilet, forgetting to zip his fly. He avoided looking in the mirror. He didn't want to see the wrinkled face covered for the first time in his life by an unkempt beard. He dragged his hand down the unfamiliar grey and white hairs, and extended his jaw to allow the swipe to clear the spittle that had dried in the corners of his mouth.

*This hair is unseemly, but it covers my drooping skin that is folding in on itself, pulling my eyes down, eyes that have shown me nothing for most of my life. I cannot see and I do not want to be seen.*



Around the corner he found the kitchen. The refrigerator had eggs, a loaf of white bread, a container of chicken salad, eight cans of Dr. Pepper, and three prepared meals. The sugary soft drink eased his anger and mellowed his sorrow. He saw a chair and sat to wait. For what, he didn't know.

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“Yes? What do you want?” Marilyn hid behind the door as if she expected he was a salesman. Freddie was startled by her abrasive demeanor and her hard countenance. The two years between the charming engagement portrait in the newspaper and motherhood had contracted her youth, and Freddie sensed a fragment of sadness hiding behind her bravado.

“Mom-eeeeeee!” A small voice screeched behind her.

She tipped her head and furrowed her brow. Her hand caught the dark hair of a toddler attempting to squeeze through the opening. Freddie looked down at the deep brown eyes of a face that favored his mother, but that looked at him as if he were familiar. Marilyn began to close the door.

Freddie raised his hand in surrender to stop her from shutting it.

“I'm so sorry, Marilyn, I seem to have forgotten myself,” he blushed as he drew his raised arm towards his chest, catching his breath. “I'm Freddie Kimball, I was a classmate of William's at Wofford.”

“William didn't go to Wofford,” she said absentmindedly as she struggled to prevent Billy from running outside.

“It was just a year, then he went to the Citadel, you're right. We had literature class together, and I've recently returned to the area. Just looking up acquaintances.”

Marilyn nodded her head as she picked up Billy to corral his energy.

“William should be home soon. Do you want to come in and wait? I’m sure he’d love to see you then.”

She opened the door and Freddie stepped in William’s home, a modestly styled living room with a beginner’s collection of antiques and silver-framed photos.

“Come to the kitchen, if you don’t mind. I’ve started dinner and Billy will destroy everything if I don’t keep him where I can see him.”

She quickly set Billy down and shooed him toward the kitchen. Freddie followed her swishing skirt to the den, where she was already at the bar handling a glass for him.

“What’s your preference?”

He noticed she poured straight gin in her glass.

“I’ll have the same, with some tonic, if you have it.”

She nodded her head and took both glasses in the kitchen where she topped only his with tonic from the refrigerator. She handed him the glass with a flat smile and nodded toward the table, silently offering him a seat, then stepped to the stove and stirred the contents of a steaming frying pan. She adjusted the burner, took a sip of her drink and looked away as she took a deep breath. When she turned to Freddie, she had focus and a smile that included her eyes.

“Tell me about Wofford,” she said as she sat down and lifted Billy onto her lap.

William stopped to listen when he heard a laugh of long acquaintance coming from his kitchen, thinking he had walked into the wrong house. He checked the wallpaper of the hallway in which he paused, recognizing the orange floral and geometric pattern that spilled down the wall, his eyes following the wavy lines to the nutria-flecked broadloom

carpet covered by a plastic protector, reassuring himself that he was in the right place. His felt a loss of equilibrium even though he remained upright, studying the wallpaper that he had never liked. He reached out to trace the lines as if he expected them to lead him back to where he needed to be. He became aware of perspiration under his arms and above his upper lip. He held his breath to listen and not be discovered so that he could confirm what he thought he heard: the voice of Freddie in his home.

William could not repress the smile that came to his lips while his limbs held sorrow acknowledging the impossibility of the situation. But his house felt like home with Freddie's voice in it, distinct vibrations in the air that ministered delight he had forgotten as his pulse pounded so vigorously he could hear it. He spread his hand on the wallpaper, covering a monochrome flower and leaned against it, closing his eyes to let the inflection of Freddie's familiar tone wash over him.

He turned the corner to find Marilyn at the kitchen table, chatting with Freddie as if they were old friends.

"As I live and breathe," William said breathlessly, trying to check Marilyn's expression but unable to look away from Freddie. "I cannot believe it. Freddie Kimball. In my kitchen."

Freddie stood awkwardly, knocking the painted wicker chair into the wall. His shoulders buzzed unexpectedly at the sight of William as his feet shuffled to maintain balance. His breath caught, inducing a slight cough and precipitating water in his eyes, and he was suddenly frightened that perhaps their narratives weren't as solidly stitched as he expected them to be. Marilyn rose as well, flattening her skirt and wincing slightly at an unexpected cramp in her lower belly, exhaling slowly to help it release.

“William, it’s so good to see you,” Freddie said as he extended his hand, holding it as still as he could to cloak the quiver of nervousness. William looked at his hand without raising his to meet it, as if touching Freddie would hurt. Instead, William sought refuge next to Marilyn, whose waist he encircled with his arm, cinching her tightly against his hip. Her cramp subsiding, she cradled in his embrace, but looked away from him through the chintz curtains that flanked the bay window.

“You’ve met Marilyn, my wife.”

Freddie lowered his hand.

“Yes. I’ve read your announcements in the *Greenville Piedmont*, and I’ve come to congratulate you. Your grandmother must be very proud.”

He looked down to apologize, and to reset before speaking again.

“Marilyn and I were just talking about the mill. She says you’re doing a fine job.”

“Yes, well, it’s what pays for all this,” he said as he swept his arm around the kitchen, furnished with a wicker dining set and new avocado green appliances. Marilyn looked at William, bewildered by his inability to appreciate the gift of underserved work well rewarded.

“It’s a lovely home,” Freddie said, following Marilyn’s gaze, and bowing slightly to William.

“Can I refresh your drink?” Marilyn offered, holding her hand out to receive Freddie’s empty glass. She turned to William. “We were talking about your year together at Wofford.”

She went into the den to refill the drinks. Freddie leaned over the table to whisper.

“William, I’m so sorry to intrude. I didn’t think Marilyn wouldn’t have known about Wofford.”

“Freddie, I’m so glad you have stopped by,” William said loud enough for Marilyn to hear and to stop Freddie’s apology. He stepped closer to Freddie, reached to Freddie’s hip and lifted his hand, holding it tightly between both of his. “I’m so glad to see you.”

When William led Freddie into the den, Marilyn almost didn’t recognize him; he seemed taller, with broader shoulders, brighter blue eyes, and an expansive smile that nearly distorted his face. He and Freddie sat down opposite one another, William in his wingback, flinging his left leg over right, and Freddie on the couch, ankles crossed and tucked, back straight and near but not touching the decorative pillows, preserving their tableau. Marilyn handed out drinks. Billy reached up to William, who left him on the floor.

“Where’s Anna?” He wanted the maid to take Billy. Marilyn sighed deeply and retrieved him, settling him on her lap, bouncing him up and down for distraction. Freddie watched Billy gurgle and laugh at his own noise.

“She gone home William, it’s suppertime,” she said over the top of Billy’s head. “You never mentioned Wofford.”

“I’m certain I did.” He looked at the coffee table between he and Freddie. “I completed my first year there, closer to home, to suit grandmother. She wanted me close for just a year, then we always knew I’d be off to the Citadel.”

Freddie’s smile creased at the retelling of the story, but William lifted his stare to Freddie and finished the matter.

They recalled papers they had written and snickered about the professors they trumped in front of their dim-witted classmates. Billy watched their banter for a moment then squealed to get down and play.

“Please take that child away,” William said, rubbing his temples. “He sounds like the machines at the mill and I just cannot stand it. I can’t hear myself think.”

“He’s very busy, isn’t he?” Freddie smiled at Marilyn. “What kind of books does he like to look at? William, what are you reading to him?”

“Read to him? He can’t sit still. He’s only two years old. What am I supposed to do with him?”

“You’re supposed to read to him, William. That’s the new research. Which is good for me, I’m thinking of staying in the stacks and getting a PhD to work at a university.”

“That sounds heavenly. Working with smart people who don’t make much noise. That would be ideal.”

“The mill’s not your ideal?”

William closed his eyes and his face dimmed. Freddie recognized the detachment, remembering that look when his smile fell, his eyes clouded and his skin dulled; he saw it often that year at Wofford. He didn’t know where William went when that happened, but he suspected it was back to the suffocating menage of his childhood. Freddie waited quietly for him to return.

William replaced his smile, took a noisy breath and rubbed his hands together unconsciously, as if their friction would create enough resistance to power his need for agency. Marilyn had put Billy on the floor and moved to the edge of her chair, both feet on the floor and hands on her knees, her face hardened as if she were prepared to pass

judgment and determinedly renounce him, the rejection of which he could not suffer. He held a benevolent attachment to her, grateful that she became a mother, that she allowed Miriam's authoritative interference in their lives, and that she loved him.

Marilyn grabbed her stomach, doubled over and vomited on the green shag carpet of their den. She put her hand out to prevent Billy's interest in it. William rushed to the bar for a cocktail napkin to tend to her mouth and instructed Freddie to get a wet cloth from the kitchen. William knelt by Marilyn, opposite her slimy yellow discharge, indicative of her diet of the day. He took the cloth Freddie had retrieved and gently patted her cheeks that had been made rosy by the effort. Freddie tried to distract Billy as he witnessed the commiserative moment between husband and wife.

"I must be pregnant," she sighed, looking up at Freddie. "I get afternoon sickness, wouldn't you know."

William grabbed her head and kissed her on the mouth, ignoring the taste of regurgitated gin and stomach acid.

"Oh Marilyn! You've done so well. Grandmother will be so pleased."

Freddie became a weekly fixture at their home. He developed an affection for Billy, bringing books and toys to occupy him while Marilyn grew heavy with the weight of the second baby. He was also kind and attentive to Marilyn in way that William wasn't, making sure she had a pillow for her back, refreshing her drink, lighting her cigarette. He always brought a cake from Strossner's Bakery to suit Marilyn's craving, and read aloud to Billy to encourage his Saturday afternoon nap. He called long distance during the week to check on her afternoon sickness.

William hovered near as Freddie committed these acts of kindness, waiting his turn. He and Freddie would sit in the front room while she prepared dinner, discussing the finer points of Victorian literature. Marilyn marveled at the peals of laughter and heated discourse that old books brought between them. She had read *Wuthering Heights* in high school and didn't think it was nearly as exciting and William and Freddie did.

William's countenance changed, more confident in himself but less accommodating to her, which she accepted because she knew he needed the confidence to meet the standard of his grandparents, the bane and benefactors of their life. She also knew William loved her and was devoted to her, though she divined there were fragments of William that he concealed, thinking he was safe behind the veneer he constantly layered in thin slips over those parts he didn't want anyone to see. Freddie was also trying to wedge in between those same layers, though he was discovering the family was a complex structure formed by elements that didn't quite fit together but which were bonded by forces that would not be put asunder. Freddie came to love Marilyn because she loved William, the strength of whose façade he doubted just as he feared that Marilyn could become brittle as William's withholding wore on her. He did not flatter himself to think he could amend the cleft, but he coveted their dependency and relished the domestic charade they all engaged in.

Marilyn mentioned the helpfulness of their friend, Freddie, to Miriam at Sunday dinner that winter. William's head shot up from his soup and Marilyn saw the blood drain from his face as he glared at her. Miriam looked at William.

“William, where do you know this Freddie from?”



“You remember Freddie, Grandmother,” he said, pushing air forcefully from his diaphragm to control his voice as he rewrote the past. “We were classmates at Wofford. He’s a librarian and tutor at Converse College now. He has been visiting with us on Saturdays and Marilyn and Billy thoroughly enjoy him. Isn’t that right Marilyn?”

“Yes. Freddie’s been a godsend to us. He’s practically teaching Billy to read, and brings me cake. He’s gotten William to read the classics again. We have so much fun when he visits.”

“No need for too much reading,” Elliot grumbled. “But, your work has been good lately, William, I think you’re finally getting the hang of it. Just don’t get distracted.”

Miriam wiped her mouth with her cloth napkin and didn’t mention it again, but did not come to the door to say goodbye to Marilyn and Billy after dinner. William looked back into the foyer, hoping she would appear. He lingered until Marilyn tugged his arm and Elliot began to close the door.

“I want to say goodbye to Grandmother,” William said to Elliot.

“Just go home, William,” he said. “I’ll see you at work tomorrow.”

William blew his nose on his handkerchief before he started the engine. Marilyn did not ask why.

“Dad?”

William looked up, his eyelids heavy. He had fallen asleep in the chair.

“Have you come to take me away?” he said to the blurry figure in front of him.

“Where do you need to go?”

He pictured the big white house, columns across the front and the blue coverlet in his room. He thought he smelled his grandmother, the chemical scent of hairspray with an undertone of gin.

“To Grandmother’s. I need to leave this place. It just will not do.”

“Your grandma died sixty years ago.”

“I know that. I am 85 years old. Do you know how old 85 is?”

He couldn’t calculate how many years ago 60 was, and he wasn’t sure he knew that she had died. He blinked back the sting of a tear as he quickened his breath and ground his few remaining teeth together to recalibrate his emotions.

“Have you eaten today?”

“I don’t want to eat. I want to die.”

William closed his eyes again.

“Hey, Grandfather,” a small feminine voice said.

“Who is that?” He turned his head toward the voice but didn’t lift his eyes to investigate. He couldn’t see her anyway and wouldn’t have known who she was.

“I’m Lana, your granddaughter.”

“I have a granddaughter?”

“Yes, Dad, you have five.”

“Oh my. What good are girls? What can they do?”

“They can do a lot these days, Dad.”

The girl’s voice reminded William of his wife, whose name he remembered, though he could not recall what she looked like. His mind filled with her presence, a memory of strength that carried the heaviness of sadness too. He couldn’t remember why.

“When are you taking me away from here? I am totally dependent on you. If your mother were alive, she would not let this happen. She would not let you neglect me. Marilyn and I were partners until the end, in deep, desperate love and in agreement about everything.”

“That’s not how I remember it, Dad.”

“What did you say?” William slammed his foot on the floor as he sat forward, clinched his jaw and jutted out his chin. He glared at the strange man in front of him.

“I said, do you want me to turn on *Judge Judy*?”

“Please do.” William sat back in his chair. “She is the only person who makes any sense these days. She’s right about everything.”

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Charlotte Poe Preston was born easily enough into a country that had just officially abolished racial segregation, her low birthweight of just under five pounds matching the anemia of the country. William ached to tell his grandmother, who had cancelled family dinners after the revelation of Freddie’s presence, though each stubbornly held to the dissenting faction that separated them, unwilling to bend the stanchion that held them upright. William had stayed at work until the breach was imminent, leaving only briefly to see the bloody newborn put into the arms of his exhausted wife. He returned to work to

tell Elliott, who acknowledged the announcement with a glance up from his balance sheet. William felt the same, disappointed by a girl, knowing that Miriam would demand another, to ensure an heir and a spare.

Charlotte was different from Billy, longer and thinner, with wrinkled toes and fingers that she perpetually stretched. She didn't make much noise, which William was thankful for, though her eyes moved about quickly to look at everything, even turning her newborn head to see a chair or a painting or a doorway, as if she were committing to memory her new surroundings so she could return there if lost. Marilyn tried to comb down her thick shock of black hair that had given her so much heartburn in utero, but it remained upright on the top of her head, adding to her length and stature.

Marilyn was eager to have a girl, a familiar form that both delighted and frightened her. She wanted to do better by her than her mother had. In her childhood, Marilyn had resented her mother for not being enough or having enough to furnish a house, set a table or protect her children. Now Marilyn understood what it took to simply have and raise children: the corporeal pain caused as they exploded out of her already hungry and squawking for food Marilyn's body immediately began to produce. While Charlotte was sucking her ducts dry and her nipples bloody, three-year-old Billy was tugging constantly at the hem of her housecoat, needing a juice, cracker, or *up-up*. She shooed him away and called for the nurse to relieve her of Billy and the baby, as soon as Charlotte quit feeding. She sought relief in gin just as her mother had, though she tried not to yield too indulgently, and if she did, anyway, Anna was there.

The provision of an Anna and a home with enough room, furnishings and food was why she married William. She had ignored William's oddities – the way he crossed his

legs and pointed his toe, his fingers always moving about in the air as he commanded conversation, his pitch heightening into womanish giggles when he got excited, his lidded eyes drooping when he silently judged her, and his preoccupation with perfection in appearance and conduct. She knew these mannerisms were imprinted by his grandmother, whose obsession with convention and decorum he mirrored, but Freddie's regular presence was uncoiling another side of William that she found endearing and offensive. His choosing Freddie's friendship in obvious disregard of Miriam's wishes had surprised Marilyn, to which she couldn't allot much attention in between feedings and baths and diaper changes for two children, managing the house and Anna.

Soon after Charlotte's birth and spurred by the abandonment of Miriam and the availability of Anna to watch the children, William announced they would go to church regularly. Marilyn went along indifferently, as she had not been brought up in any kind of church, except for the Methodist youth group activities she went to in the mill village when she was a teenager, where boys tried to kiss the girls when the pastor left them alone to read their Bibles, so her experience with God was more tangential than spiritual. Billy and Charlotte were baptized at Christ Church Episcopal, the church in which William and Marilyn were married. Marilyn didn't find the baptism disagreeable, performed during a Sunday service in the church adorned with stained glass windows that marched down the aisles of the dark wood pews that kindly held velvet cushions for comfort. As they began to attend each week, Marilyn was thankful for the respite from the children and the house, even if it was just an hour. She fumbled through the liturgy at first, the complications of following the service in one book and singing hymns out of another seemed overdone to her, but she quickly learned the ritual and settled into the

comfort of knowing what comes next. The sameness of each Sunday service – saying prayers that were written 1,600 years ago in an order of worship that was compiled 400 years ago – consoled her and reassured her that if those words can persist, perhaps she can, too.

William soon became devout not just in his physical presence each Sunday, but his metaphysical attendance to the words he was reading as he flipped pages in the Book of Common Prayer. Marilyn noticed that he withdrew into its pages, not only reading the prayers but partaking of them as if they were food feeding some hunger she couldn't see. He began to close his eyes tightly when he muttered the Nicene Creed, and he thumped his chest during the confession of sin when they said together: *We acknowledge and bewail our manifold sins and wickedness, which we from time to time most grievously have committed*, then again later when they asked to *have mercy on us* three times. There was something all-encompassing and road-clearing about a general admission of things done and left undone, but she did roll her eyes a bit when they had to admit that *the remembrance of them is grievous unto us, the burden is intolerable*. A little over the top, as much of the service tended to be in the Episcopal church, Marilyn thought, though she was getting used to the dilating vestments, the endless procession of candles and crosses, and the booming intrusion of the organ, elements that seemed to make William's skin glow and his breath deepen.

William felt changed every Sunday after he emerged from church, having been fed spiritual food in a holy mystery of which he was not yet in full comprehension. He continued to remember the deep amazement he first experienced at Summerall Chapel, when he snuck in and sat behind Jim Stevens, whom he always thought about when he

first sat in a pew. Church – and the Episcopal church in particular, with its repetition, its precision, its pageantry – gave William the permission, the forgiveness, and the solace he needed: he could lay his sins at the base of the cross and be made good again. Every Sunday was a miracle to him, who did not understand the life he was forced to live, but which he understood that it was now, through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ, God’s only son, in some way redeemable and worthy.

He was not deeply rooted enough in the comprehension of everlasting life, though, when his grandmother died in her sleep that summer of 1964 to be able to bear her death with deep understanding and great joy. Their standoff had not ended, and the only emotion William could muster when Elliott called him before work that Tuesday morning was anger, not that Elliott expected to see him at work by 8 a.m., but that Miriam died without speaking to him. He had not expected a full reconciliation, but he had hoped that over time, Miriam would see that he was fine, Marilyn was fine, the children were to be fine, and that Freddie could co-exist with all of them, seeing that his presence helped make them fine. But she would not see that, *that old bitch*, he thought for the first time in his life, as his anger evaded control and he slammed the handset onto its silver cradle.

Marilyn turned around, abandoning the coffee she was measuring into the percolator, concerned about the early morning phone call.

“What is it?” she asked, having only heard him say “I see, yes, oh. Yes.”

William continued to stare at the phone as it hung on the kitchen wall, trying to decide if he had just had that conversation. Marilyn could see the anger pulsing in the artery of his neck as his jaw clenched and his breathing shortened. His eyes narrowed as

she waited for him to respond. William slowed his breath and lifted his head. Marilyn saw the anger pass and the vapidness set in.

“Grandmother has died.”

“Oh William, I’m so sorry.” She reached out to touch his arm, which William swatted away.

“There is nothing to be done now,” he said. “I must get ready for work. Is the coffee ready?”

“No, not yet,” she said as she reached for the cord to plug it in.

“Never mind then. Don’t make it. I’ll have tea.”

William left the house without drinking the tea Marilyn steeped and sugared for him, left to grow cold and bitter in a porcelain cup on the kitchen table. She sat at the table while Anna tended the children, feeding Charlotte, whom she had just weaned, thankfully, her breasts engorging less and less now at the sound of her cry. Her coffee drained, Marilyn stared at the tea cup and wondered why William requested tea. She’d had to dig around in the cabinet for a teabag, as she had been making iced tea with the more convenient iced tea powder, a new product that summer. Marilyn liked the lemony bitterness in the back of her mouth against the sweetness of the tea without the trouble of boiling teabags, cutting lemons and measuring sugar.

Elliott was already at work when William arrived just before 8. William stepped to the edge of Elliott’s desk but did not sit down.

“We’ll have the funeral Thursday at 11 a.m., at Fourth Presbyterian,” he said, as if it were a meeting William needed to attend. “We have a family plot at Hillcrest, so we’ll bury her there.”



The funeral plan, as sparse as it was coming from Elliott, made Miriam's death real, and for a moment he thought he could no longer breathe. His knees locked, he swayed backwards, then forwards, where his right hand caught the edge of the desk, restoring balance and reminding him to bend his knees to allow for blood flow, just like they taught him at The Citadel to prevent falling out while standing at attention in the Lowcountry August heat in a wool uniform. His eyes and nose released wetness that he reached up to counter with his left hand, catching a sob in his palm as if it were a cough.

"Not here," Elliott said firmly, but softly. William saw the tears in his grandfather's eyes that he was clenching his teeth to restrain from spilling out. Elliott breathed deeply to clear his grief. Miriam's death had not been a total surprise to Elliott; a visit to the doctor for shortness of breath earlier that year had revealed a heart murmur that the doctors wanted to investigate more aggressively, but Miriam had not allowed it. Elliott had agreed with her decision, not wanting to spend money on an unsolvable problem. He didn't do that in the mill and he wouldn't do it at home. He loved Miriam for what she was, his wife of 50 years who rigorously built and zealously defended their family and its legacy in Greenville. Miriam and Elliott had agreed that they weren't afraid of death; they attended a church, but didn't necessarily worship that God who would give them eternal life in the great unknown. Rather, they worked hard to ensure they would be remembered in the narrative of their invention after death took them. They were both recognized as revered members of polite society whose mills had provided livelihoods for many families, and the Poe name was scattered on buildings and in societies throughout Greenville. But Elliott could never quite hide his disappointment at Miriam's provision of only female children; her death signaled the beginning of the end of his line, and as

Elliott stared at William Preston, thin and pale, teetering at the edge of his desk and still unsure of how his mills worked, Elliott swallowed a knot of anger at Miriam for not forging a stronger lineage.

William knew he had been dismissed but could not immediately let go of the corner of Elliott's desk. He felt as if he had become untethered, and if he took a deep breath and let go the oxygen would lift him off his feet and he would float away. He closed his eyes and curled his fingers tighter around the desk. He had not always liked his grandmother's dictums, but he knew they were the most prudent for him and his family, meaning his grandmother. He couldn't remember life without her, nothing but hours spent in her parlor reading and playing bridge, and more importantly, learning who to do it with. She had been his tutor, his disciplinarian, his conscience and his encyclopedia. He sighed with pity as he realized his mother was no factor in his formation and that the death of Miriam was, in fact, the death of his mother. He was now an orphan.

Elliott's voice boomed louder, calling him back to awareness.

"William, get to work," Elliott growled.

William coughed into his hand to disassemble the wail that was straining to release itself and let go of the desk, sweeping his arm to counterbalance the turn of his feet, a spin that blurred the room in his vision. He stumbled but caught himself as his hand fell to the arm of the chair to regain his balance, the adrenaline clearing his sight. A deep breath straightened his carriage and he left Elliott's office as he heard the old man sigh in disgust.

Sullivan called the Council on Aging, a quasi-governmental agency designed to advise and help families whose parents planned poorly for the ravages of old age. They sent a caseworker to William's house to assess the situation.

"Who are you?" William's voice rose as the short black woman entered his gated yard.

"I'm June Seavers, from the Council on Aging, Mr. Preston. I've come to check on you."

William took three long, quick steps toward her, almost stepping on her toes before he stopped.

"I am *Father* William Preston, a priest in the most high church, and you will not step foot on my property. You will turn around this instant and not return."

June stepped back and opened her hands in an act of surrender.

"*Father* Preston, I'm so sorry. May we sit down and talk for a few minutes?"

"I don't know what you have to talk about with me, but there is nothing to discuss. You will not come in my house and you will not ask me any questions."

"Can I leave you my card, Father Preston? In case you need something."

"Absolutely not. I don't need anything from the likes of you. I know what you're trying to do. Get out of here!"

He rushed toward her. June was an experienced social worker and knew when it was time to cut her losses. She quickly walked through the gate and got in her car. William shoved the gate closed.

“I am a priest and if you ever come here again, I shall send the devil after you and he will take you straight to hell!”

William went inside, slamming the screened porch door followed by the French door. Anger pulsed in his fingertips and he touched his head to feel the sweat his exasperation had caused. He looked around the house in a panic, moving furniture and shoving clothes aside in closets, looking for who else might be watching him. His heart raced and exhausted him quickly. He sat on his bed and wondered why he was so agitated. He looked around and his eyes landed on a book, *The Boys' Second Book of Great Detective Stories*.

He retrieved it from the top shelf of a small bookcase. He turned it over in his hands and remembered the lightness of it. He closed his eyes and smelled it, and the vaguest scent of bacon and toast from the morning his grandmother gave it to him lingered. He smiled and held the book to his chest, wrapping his arms as tightly around himself as he could, imagining that it was his grandmother's arms instead of his, her breasts pressing against him instead of a book, and her cheek against his instead of his own hand. He smelled her perfume, then reached out to touch her red-stained lips. He lost the grip on the book and it tumbled out of his hands onto the floor, spilling its contents at his feet. He slipped off the bed and dropped to his knees, leaning over to gather his treasures – the most important treasure – the lock of his grandmother's hair. The green rubber band had disintegrated, broken in several places but maintained its hold on the brown curl. William felt it and lifted it delicately from the dirty floor and held it to his face. He cried as he leaned against the wall, silent tears falling out of his cloudy eyes. He touched his groin through the folds of his oversized pants as he remembered her, wanting to show her that

he had done what she wanted, all his life. His potency now gone, his chest caved and he looked at another object that had fallen out of the book: a nametag, and as he squinted at it, made out the name *Sam*. He turned it over in his hands, closed his eyes and begged his memory to release the owner. He opened his eyes when he smelled minty gum, wondering if someone had entered the room. The memory took him to a dark corner where he felt lips and tongues and young, hard cocks. *Sam*, he thought, and smiled when his groin tingled at a fragment he couldn't see but could feel. *That's enough*, he thought. He put the nametag in the box on top of some playing cards and a notated page torn out of *Jane Eyre*. He pulled out a piece of paper, a label from a can of potted meat. He fingered the brittle label and put it to his nose to see if the smell would return the memory. Nothing came to him, and he crumpled the label and put it in the trash can next to him.

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Sunday after Sunday William sat in church, breathing incense, reciting prayers, singing hymns (louder each week) and watching the priests and deacons move in choreographed patterns through the nave and around the altar, hidden under vestments whose colors changed from green to purple to red to white with the seasons of the church. He stood to sing, kneeled to pray, sat to listen. He squinted as the sun rose through the east facing window during the 8 o'clock service, blotting the sanctuary red, violet and blue as it seeped through the two-story stained-glass window of a before-and-after Jesus, first at the last supper with 12 variously distracted disciples, and a more interested group above, focused with hands clasped seeking a benediction from the risen Lord, whose long arms extended to bless all.

He imagined himself soldered into the window where he could be in perpetual reception of the blessing of the Son of God. Jesus had been blessed by his father, though he also sent him into a villainous world where he was mocked, beaten and eventually killed for crimes uncommitted, relinquished by a ruler who didn't want to get his hands dirty. At first he wrestled with the idea that a father would abandon his son knowing what would come to pass, but then his chest curdled as Christ's story awakened memories of Dub's paternal withholding, and William found himself angry with God for surrendering his Son to an angry mob that was essentially afraid of someone who was simply unlike anyone they had ever known. But the Easter Sunday resurrection and subsequent elevation to eternal life restored his supposition of fatherhood and sonship: that a father could watch a son suffer and love him at the same time. He began to understand the holy concept of love, that God loved a world that was so wicked he had to sacrifice his only son to save it, but he couldn't square that with the malevolence he had suffered as a son of Dub Preston, a father who couldn't love or sacrifice for his only son. When he sat in the cushioned pew and nearly became entranced by the prayers, creeds and scripture read each Sunday, he began to feel a sense of belonging and comfort that was distressing and troublesome. Under the inverted hull of the church, he felt rescued and safeguarded in a vessel whose distorted windows prevented scrutiny from pernicious external forces. He became increasingly uneasy about leaving church after each service, knowing he had to return to a place where there were daily uncertainties and unreachable expectations, the mercy of which he fell victim to now without the security and shelter of his grandmother. Elliott's temper progressively shortened as William's interest in working waned, the children's incessant clatter disquieted the house, and Marilyn's accelerating descent into

her afternoon gin were depleting the stamina he needed to sustain his own claim to merit, dignity and worth.

He could not pinpoint the moment at which it happened, and perhaps it was the moment it came out of his mouth which made it real, when Marilyn was already knee-deep in gin and Anna was struggling to quiet the children and Elliott had exploded into a tirade of foul and true expletives after yet another gaffe at work, that William knew he had to become a priest. He knew that in order to survive in a world that was so unfair to him, he would have to retreat to a place where he knew a Father loved his Son, and where he could hide under vestments, behind a book and in a bunker that would prevent the outside world from projecting their version of who he should be. It was the only way he could persevere.

Marilyn had gone to church with him and noticed his transformation, but had not guessed his thinking.

“Have you lost your mind, William?” she slurred just a bit, her blurry mind trying to fabricate just what a life as the wife of a priest would be like. “What about our home, our cars, our things? What will happen to them?”

He waved his arm expansively around the room, his eyes following the tips of his fingers as if to convince himself.

“All of this is insignificant. I only know that I must become a priest.”

Marilyn pulled in her belly to quash the liquor it wanted to expel. The children had been fussy all afternoon, as if they were already cognizant of their father’s pressing tightly on the bounds of their family, and Marilyn’s nerves were frayed by the alcohol, whose purpose to tame them was never realized. She swallowed the rest of her drink for

false fortitude and pushed up from her Queen Ann chair, leaning sluggishly on the arms; her right hand slipped and loosened the grip on her crystal tumbler, sending the glass to the floor where it bounced off the shag carpet.

“Insignificant? What is insignificant? Me? Your children? We mean nothing to you?” Her voice tightened with each inquiry. “We *are* you, William. We make you who you are, who your grandmother wanted you to be. You cannot discount us because you are a lost little boy without her. For God’s sake, grow up! That’s how you can use this new God you’ve found, as a way to grow up. Be a man. Go to work and provide for your family. Stop this nonsense. Have a drink and wait for this to pass.”

She fell hard into her chair, exhausted by the truth and the fear of his proposal.

“I know this is strange, and believe me, there is no one who is more perplexed by this than me. Me? A priest?” He pressed against his own chest and tried to laugh. “Who would ever have imagined?”

“I have never have imagined you a priest. I imagined that you would work at that mill until you died, so I could live in a house and eat off china plates and go to parties, that’s what I imagined, and that’s what I was promised, William. Where will we live? How will we live? Priests don’t get paid anything. They live like poor people. I’ve already done that, and I don’t want to do it again.”

She covered her mouth with her hand to stifle a sob.

“We don’t need any of these things, Marilyn. They don’t bring us happiness, or fulfillment. We need to look to Christ for those things.”



Marilyn raised her head, the anger bubbling over the fear. She stood up and pushed past him into the dining room. She opened the breakfront, full of Miriam's Dresden china, and picked up a handful of plates.

"These, William? We don't need these?" she yelled, then threw them to the hardwood floor. William flinched as his grandmother's plates shattered into sharp pieces at Marilyn's feet, but he did not move to stop her. She held his gaze as her left hand reached in the cabinet for two more plates and threw them at her feet. Only her breath spoke between them as they stood silently across the chasm of shards from one another. Marilyn reached for more plates to meet the fate of the others.

"That's enough." He reached out his hand but could not step forward over the puddle of broken plates between them. In his hesitation she threw the china toward his feet; they ricocheted off his legs and burst on the floor around him. He stepped carefully back and called her name in anger. Marilyn stepped forward, ignoring the porcelain fragments punching holes in her feet, to open the next glass door so she could access more weapons.

"We don't need these anymore. Look to Christ for your precious plates, because you're a son-of-a-bitch and a bastard too!"

William began to move around the dining room table, to counter her assault and approach her from a safer side. But there was not a safer side; she pivoted on her bleeding feet and began to hurl dessert plates at him, across the table, aiming for his head. The thin edge of a plate collided with his temple and knocked his new glasses off his ear. He yelled her name as he shielded his head with his arm, now under a constant hail of his grandmother's small plates, chanting *we don't need them, we don't need them, we don't need them*. She didn't notice that he had turned the corner into the kitchen, surrendering

those things he just said they no longer needed. The crashing of plates made his stomach hurt as he leaned against the kitchen wall for support, sliding down it as his legs gave way; he took off his glasses to check their lenses, but realized he couldn't see through his cloudy tears. As each plate burst into irreparable pieces, he felt the fracture of Miriam's death. His knuckles banged the linoleum floor as he cursed his father for ignoring him, his grandmother for forming him, and his mother for having him. He had hoped that Marilyn loved him enough to make up for their deficiency, so he was devastated at her naked revelation, laced with alcohol as it was.

Out of plates, Marilyn bellowed out a bestial moan, discharging the last of her outrage.

Elliott refused all support of William's new vocation, even denying the proceeds from the sale of their home, the deed for which William had not realized was in Elliott's name. Elliott had begun to hoard cash as the end of the domestic textile industry came into sight. Manufacturing was heading to Mexico and China where labor was cheap and government oversight lax. John Arrington, Elliot's mentor and benefactor, had closed two mills, and was in talks with a northeast cotton manufacturer to purchase his surviving plant. Newer, cleaner occupations like lawyering and supercomputers, like the one Milliken was developing over in Spartanburg, were more attractive to progeny who didn't want to get their fingernails dirty or be exposed to chemicals that doctors had discovered caused cancer. Elliott had to hold on to what he could, and his own bitterness wouldn't let William have a scrap of it. He sold William's house and spat on the sidewalk in front of the attorney's office as he folded the check from the proceeds of the sale and put it in his coat pocket.

Marilyn hurried to pack up their house, paring down to what would fit from their 3,000-square-foot house into a house half that size on the top of a mountain in Tennessee, where William would go to seminary for three years. William pointed out the furniture they would keep – the antique secretary, the bow front glass cabinet, the Queen Anne armchair and sofa, the mahogany dining table and his protective wingback chair. Marilyn had no say in bringing utilitarian things that would prove useful and substantial, like their upholstered den sofa and swivel club chairs, or dutiful wicker kitchen dining set.

They drove for hours through the Great Smoky Mountains on two-lane roads, Marilyn looking out her window at trees clinging onto the rockface that had been blasted away to make room for cars, while William's south-facing view was often into the white waters of the Ocoee River, whose winding bank road builders had stolen from long ago. The twists and turns of the river and the road caused equal reactions in Marilyn's stomach, though she couldn't discern which part of the journey made her nauseous, the road or its destination. The landscape they passed reminded her too much of the rural crags from which her mother had emerged to find food to put on the table. She knew where dirt lanes that veered off the paved road led: to drafty, scratch-made houses guarded by mean dogs as hungry as their owners, who were as mean as their dogs. She looked away from those portals to her past, praying to William's God that this road ended somewhere else. She held momentary hope when they reached the grimy foundry town of Chattanooga, its emissionary fumes at least a sign of civilization, but sighed in exasperation as they crossed the Tennessee River and continued through the Sequatchie Valley and then onto the Cumberland Plateau.

The Plateau stretched through towns and homesteads as if they were on level ground, instead of hovering 1,900 feet above sea level. The University perched particularly precariously, not to Marilyn's comfort, on a southern edge of the mountain range, just before more curvaceous roads dropped cars off to the western edge of middle Tennessee, a more sensible but still desolate flatland where cotton and corn took turns in the fields. They turned into the domain of the university before agriculture set in, though, where minds more so than seed were cultivated.

Trees dominated the domain they called Sewanee, hiding the sharp escarpments with leaves and trunks, giving Marilyn a false sense of security. The gothic architecture of the dorms, chapel and academic buildings that were built from stone taken from the mountain beneath them stood in contrast to the wood frames of the Victorian carpenter gothic homes professors had built nearby. The men attended class in their academic gowns, taught by professors costumed the same, to give it the feeling of the centuries-old colleges in England after which it was modeled. Built by Episcopal churches of the south following the Civil War as an incentive to keep its bright minds away from Yale and Harvard, its ecclesiastical inception naturally gave way to a seminary shortly thereafter. While it seemed quaint, Marilyn couldn't help but notice the dearth of a nearby supermarket or store for basic supplies, which immediately reduced its charm and increased her anxiety.

A group of equally anxious seminarians greeted them at their small rental home, located in a neighborhood of a dozen similar pumpkin-patch stone cottages. Every face looked like hers, unsure of what they had agreed to and comforted to see others who looked just as apprehensive. They eagerly introduced themselves as they helped unload

their moving truck, answering rapid fire her questions about groceries (7 miles away), playground (just behind their houses), winter weather (mostly foggy), and things to do (play bridge). Maybe it wouldn't be so bad, she thought, as she set up the playpen to contain Billy and Charlotte while she unpacked boxes, looking for sheets for their beds so she could get them down for a nap.

She heard something rustling in a box behind her, and turned ready to fuss at the children whom she assumed had escaped their protective prison. Her mouth set and teeth bared, she poked a finger in the direction of the noise, turning to see a woman rather than children looking through boxes.

“Excuse me, who are you?”

“I'm Nancy Miller, your neighbor. I assume you're looking for some bedsheets so we can put these two down for a nap? Y'all've probably had a long day and I bet you'd like a drink about now, wouldn't you? So let's get them in a bed.”

Marilyn breathed a sigh of relief as she and Nancy worked in tandem looking for sheets and a blanket to quiet the children. Nancy loaded up their dresser as she came to socks, t-shirts and shorts in a box marked *childrens room*, and found hangers in the next box that she used to hang Charlotte's dresses neatly in the closet. Marilyn stopped looking when Nancy tapped her on the shoulder.

“Look,” she said, pointing down into the playpen, where both Charlotte and Billy had put themselves to sleep. Marilyn was so grateful she almost cried. Nancy found a small jacket and a cotton dress to drape over them.

“We'll find the blankets later. Come on.”

They closed the door to the children's room to shut out noise the men were making as they arranged their strange concoction of brown furniture. William pointed as if he were directing a symphony of movers, and his gracious classmates followed his cue, already learning their pecking order in the flock that follows William Preston. Nancy and Marilyn slipped out the back door and walked across a gravel pathway to a duplex, where Nancy and her husband, Gilbert, lived.

"I've only got a few more minutes before mine get up," she whispered as she grabbed two short glasses and an open bottle of white wine. "Do you?"

Marilyn could almost taste the whiff of wine as Nancy passed it by her face on her way out to their screened-in back porch.

"Oh yes," Marilyn said, surprised at the saliva she was already producing. They sat on the porch in rusted lawn chairs perched among balls, bats and trikes.

"Welcome to the Holy Mountain," Nancy said. "That's what we call it here. You'll see."

"I don't feel very holy, and this place doesn't feel holy. It feels like nowhere stuck out in the middle of nowhere."

"Yes, it does feel like that because it is. But you'll get used to it."

Nancy laughed gently, but Marilyn could not share her sentiment. The thought of getting used to it angered Marilyn, whose lips flattened as she tried to smile. She looked at Nancy, grateful for her immediate kindness and the silence she allowed Marilyn to absorb her new surroundings. Nancy refilled her glass as it emptied, quenching Marilyn's thirst for the comfort of the cloudiness of alcohol.

“Classes start in a week, so your husband will be out of your hair then, and we can return to our regular nap-time bridge game,” she said with a tip of her glass. “The kids all play together and we help each other out. So you just let me know what you need.”

A toddler’s wail pierced their peace.

“That’s me,” she said, getting up. Marilyn followed, but Nancy shooed her back to her seat. “No no. You sit as long as you need.”

Marilyn remained in the uncomfortable webbing of the lawn chair that was beginning to chafe the back of her legs. She watched William talk to two men at the back of their empty moving truck, surprised they were done unloading, dreading the next chore of unpacking more boxes. She let the wine and hospitality of Nancy soften her hardness. Her eyelids fell as she watched William laugh, his smile broad and light as he shook the hand of his new friends, putting his hand on the shoulder of the man to his left, his fingers lingering one breath longer than they should have.

The males-only academic environment – his third – allowed William him a sense of liberty he could not attain in communion with women. He resonated with women, but always found himself controlled by their will; without women present, he was not subject to their fate nor bound by their needs, and he could draw on the power of self-determination, only his will to be done. The presence of men reconciled within him the estrangement he felt with himself, restoring him to the full stature he felt Christ made him to be.

He found that studying scripture wasn’t that different from Victorian romance literature: imperial chauvinism, strange alliances, flawed figures, mysterious deaths and a selfless martyr appeared in both Old and New Testament narratives, literary tropes

William had examined at Wofford and the Citadel. He also mastered the theologically complex concepts of three persons in one, resurrection after death and the virgin birth, exegeting them easily in papers and sermons, and eclipsing classmates in late night doctrinal debates. But it was in the liturgy that William was transported to a higher plane, the component that first attracted him to the church. He was titillated by the black cassock and white surplice he got to wear as sacristan, one of a dozen seminarians charged with the custody of the sacred vessels and vestments of the chapel. He spent hours at the small church designated for the seminary, with its east facing altar pushed up against the wall, an ancient setting that enabled the priest to carry the prayers of the congregation, rather than allowing the hoi polloi to pray directly to God. Garish portraits of the afflicted Apostles surrounded the altar at eye-level, reminding the priest of the anguish incurred when one decides to follow Christ, and the organ's pipes blustered from coops on either side of the altar, bringing no comfort to the suffering apostles.

William luxuriated in setting the holy table with starched and pressed linens and placing the burnished chalice, ciborium and paten – particularly named serving pieces that held wine and bread for the Holy feast – on the credence table, ready for the priest to distribute. The perfection required in the preparation and celebration was almost instinctive to William, as if his delicate fingers had been made for this task. In the sanctified space when he prepared for church alone, he questioned nothing and was concerned with nothing. He felt neither gender under his generous white surplice that covered the body that both betrayed and honored him. During services, he read the words printed on the worn pages of the Book of Common Prayer that told him all he needed to know or say or do, to believe, praise and worship, after which mercy would be granted



and the sins of the world would be taken away. He remained in the pew after services ended, allowing his more congenial classmates to file out, to enjoy for just one more moment the lightness of that forgiveness, grace and mercy that huddled under his cassock with him, so abundantly dripping out over his black loafers and onto the floor.

Reluctant to rise, he would eventually clear the table and put away the silver, so as not to tempt thieves in the night. As he lifted the weighty white surplice over his head and unbuttoned to step out of the black cassock, his feet took on the heavier weight of being a man, husband and father, roles in which he felt an imposter, and he wondered how he was going to walk home, as heavy as he was. More often than not, he retreated to the university's new library to read, where the smell of stone and paper comforted him, or he walked to the nearby bar and leaned into the smell of stale beer and undergraduate vomit.

While William passed his days in church (three times a day) and writing papers in the library, Marilyn fell into a routine based around the needs of the children. Breakfast, playground, lunch, nap, bridge, playground, cocktails, dinner, bed. As Nancy had predicted, their proximity allowed for bridge games and cocktail hour during naps, and a babysitter for trips to the grocery store. The comradery of the women not only helped her pass the time, but rescued her when her body rejected an unnoticed pregnancy. On a cold February morning, she thought the blood-filled toilet was a result of her miscalculating her last period, and so strapped on a sanitary napkin and started the day. She pushed Billy and Charlotte toward the jungle gym and joined the other mothers gathered at the picnic table. When she got up to retrieve a wayward ball, a mom shrieked Marilyn's name as Marilyn felt the effects of the loss of blood that had soaked through her orange wool coat. Marilyn woke up in the small campus hospital, groggy from drugs and the doctor's

diagnosis - miscarriage. Her blurry mind prevented her from remembering when she last had sex with William, which at first caused a laugh then sadness. Their sex life had dwindled down to the necessary, and she wondered if William followed the dispensation of bloody feminine products in the trash, then counted the days to have sex in a post-mortem agreement with his grandmother to have another boy. She angrily wondered if Miriam's voice was still commanding him, despite his best efforts to allow Christ to take over.

Marilyn didn't prevent the next pregnancy, though, as routine evening cocktails led to unprotected and uncalendared intercourse. Couples gathered for supper in the evening, separating quickly into academic and theological conversations among the husbands, giving the wives reason to withdraw to a porch or lean against the kitchen counter to complain to each other in increasingly slurry diatribes about their husbands' desolation in their lives. Asperity increased as the evening grew long, and many nights ended in acrimony followed by some kind of penitent intercourse, because by the end of the first year, nine wives of William's sixteen classmates were pregnant, in addition to others in the middle and senior classes.

Marilyn suffered the same fate, she discovered the fall of his second year, when she vomited during the first afternoon bridge game of September 1966.

"Oh shit," she said as she stared at the vomit on Nancy's cheap rug. Nancy started to rebuke her foul apology.

"No, I'm not cursing at you, Nancy, and it's not the alcohol," she said, feeling anger come up with more bile, which she swallowed with a long pull on her cigarette while

Nancy blotted the carpet at her feet. She blew out a long plume of blue smoke. "I'm pregnant."

Marilyn wiped the vomit from her scuffed sneakers with her napkin then threw it on the table, scattering her cards. She thought she had been more careful, denying William when she thought it was most advantageous, but she hadn't wanted to refuse him. She needed him to be aroused enough by her to affirm her femininity and her wifehood; to be only a mother was not enough, and two children were enough. Her resentment poured out in tears she couldn't control and she buried her face in her hands. She hoped this one would reject life, too.

But the baby endured and made Marilyn sick for most of her waking hours for the first five months; then, it began to kick and push as if it were ready to come straight out, punching at the top of her belly when she lay down, making sleep impossible. She sat in William's uncomfortable wingback chair all night, covered in a blanket to protect against the chill that settled in their stone house on winter nights, her head bobbing against the chair's distinguishing form. The lack of sleep shortened her temper that Billy was beginning to test as he turned four and began to ask questions about everything. Marilyn's nerves frayed at his constant babbling and his inability to piss in a toilet. She was ready for him to be out of diapers but couldn't seem to get him to do it.

When Nancy caught her breaking the group's strict rule about liquor before 5 p.m., she offered to potty train Billy. "One less thing for you to worry about," Nancy said as she volunteered to take him for a couple of days, training him as she trained her own toddler. Marilyn thanked her for taking Billy then poured the drink down the sink after

Nancy left. She lit a cigarette, hopeful for the nicotine to do its work, inhaling deeply at the sound of Charlotte quietly playing with dolls on the den floor.

Marilyn's due date came and went that spring, surprising her because the baby still kicked and scratched to get out. She yelled at it in an effort to get it out and cried in the night, pressing against it to show it the way. The doctor didn't express concern, so Marilyn demanded to William at the end of May that he take her to the hospital to have it taken out. He agreed to take her on Saturday so he wouldn't miss class or church.

As if the baby knew, Marilyn went into labor Saturday morning, just as they got in the car to drive to the university hospital. The first cramp of labor was excruciating, unlike the mild pains needed to extricate Billy and Charlotte, but a pain she wasn't averse to as long as it meant the baby was on its way out. The doctor soon discovered that because the baby had gestated for more than 42 weeks, it was more than 10 pounds and was having trouble getting through her vaginal canal.

"I don't care," she hissed at the doctor, propping herself up on her elbows so she could see the doctor over her expansive belly. "Just get it out."

He urged her not to push; each push was compacting the canal further, pressuring it to do something it couldn't.

"What do you mean, it can't come out? What am I supposed to do, hold it in until it can drive a car? This baby has been beating me up for nine months! And you're telling me it's not ready?"

The doctor shook his head and gave the nurse some quiet instructions. He left the room and went to talk with William in the waiting room.

"If I were you, I'd head home. It's going to be a while."

William went home and asked Nancy to keep the children while he went to the library to study. The hospital would call him there when it was time.

The nurse had started a morphine drip to stop her contractions and allow Marilyn to sleep. She and the stuck baby laid in situ for three days, Marilyn drifting in and out of the best sleep she'd had in months. On Monday afternoon, they both finally gave up, and James Sullivan Preston was born in a bloody gush of fluid, blue in the face from his effort.