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Mercury

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MERCURY

by

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ABSTRACT

Mercury is a collection of short stories based in the fictional town of Mercury, Georgia. Set over the course of several decades, the stories trace the events that changed individuals, families, and a whole community for decades. Loosely based on the author's real-life family history, the stories, both humorous and heartbreaking, show characters caught between the past and the present and searching for a way forward. A girl who makes friends with a ghost, a woman who can't help but run from crying babies, a man forced to face the town's darkest side—these and other characters respond in surprising ways to circumstances that are both ordinary and extraordinary. Most of the stories in the collection are linked, showing the interconnectedness of the lives in this small town. The pieces work together to present a larger narrative of how the characters and the town struggle to change, survive, hope, and face the future.

To Douglas and Raye Jordan, Mary Alice Gaines, Thomas and Pamela Gaines, Kenny Jones, and everyone else who encouraged me to finish. Thanks for believing I could do this even when I didn't.

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WRITING LIFE

Recently I heard social psychologist Amy Cuddy give a talk about how body language shapes not only the way other people see us but also the way we see ourselves. She told a personal story about how, after experiencing a traumatic brain injury, she struggled as a student to believe she should really be studying at Princeton. The feeling of inadequacy became so intense that she was about to quit her graduate program, but her adviser told her to just fake it—to give the talk, to ask the question, even if she was paralyzed with fear. She followed that advice, and one day she realized she wasn't faking it anymore; she had become it (Cuddy, TEDGlobal).

I can think of no better way to describe my life as a writer. I have struggled, intensely at times, to see myself as a writer. In fact, that has been one of my greatest challenges as I have pursued this MFA. The more I learned about writing, the more great writing I read, the more inadequate I felt. I saw myself as an imposter in the creative world, but I hoped that if I kept at it long enough, one day that might change.

In the first part of this writing life essay I will talk about my writing journey. Then I will discuss some of the books and techniques that have influenced this collection and my writing in general. These are some of the particular skills that I hope to develop further as I grow in my craft.

My Writing Life So Far

I have been writing my whole life—a poem in elementary school, musings in my journal during middle school, a couple of decent essays as a high-schooler. I knew I loved books and reading, but I didn't see writing as a viable career possibility until college when a friend of mine

suggested it in a roundabout way. At the time I had no clear vision for my future. I knew I wanted to study communications, but I was attending a historically black college with a journalism school and no mass communication program. My options were quite limited: broadcast journalism, print journalism, or public relations. There was no way I was ever going to be seen on TV, and I never seriously considered radio. I tried public relations for a semester and hated it. So there was only one thing left: print journalism, namely newspaper journalism, which happened to be the most rigorous writing program at the school.

For some reason, writing was the one thing I was terrified of doing. It was the only thing that I ever said I absolutely did not want to do, but it seemed circumstances were pointing me in that direction. Then that friend told me I should write, and she gave me a good reason. I could help people. I could give them information that would improve their lives, share stories that might inspire or instruct. This resonated with me, so I decided to face my fears, stop running from the inevitable, and become the best writer I could be.

This was the nineties, when journalists could still get jobs in newsrooms and make a decent living. It seemed like a practical way to begin a career as a writer. Even though the pace of newspapers and the pressure of deadlines were incredibly intimidating to me, I began to enjoy writing about things people wanted to know or needed to know for one reason or another. And I loved being able to document the experiences of real people. I believed everyone had a story to share, and if I dug deep enough I could find it.

I still struggled with confidence, but in time I began to find my stride. After graduation I secured a real job at a magazine, which relieved my fears about keeping up with the pace of

newspapers. Even when I began editing news for the magazine, the deadline pressure wasn't nearly as intense as at a newspaper, and I found a way to keep my head above water. Most days I really liked my job, but then I began to feel restless.

I had long believed that I shouldn't limit myself to only journalism, but the burden to do more was becoming intense. That's when I began the master's program in creative writing, and that's when the fear I'd faced in college returned. It seemed to me that I *could not* write. My plots never came together. I'd draw a blank on story ideas. Often I felt I could only stumble onto a successful story or a good turn of a phrase. Thanks to journalism's inverted pyramid and brevity, some stories practically wrote themselves. That wasn't the case with creative writing. I felt I was in way over my head, poorly read, and uncritical in my thinking.

I struggled through every course, eking out stories that were poorly constructed and unclear. I didn't know what I wanted to say or what I was supposed to say. I kept going because I like to finish what I started, but I began to doubt that I would ever be able to write decent fiction. Then one day I got an idea for a story, and I knew what to do with it. I knew how to develop the characters, the plot, the setting details. I realized that after all the reading and anxious nights in front of my computer, something had changed, and I no longer felt like I was pretending.

I began to see that my problem wasn't as intrinsic as I once thought. I didn't struggle to write because I wasn't cut out to express myself on paper. I struggled because I had a lot of hard work to do to develop my craft. No longer limited to the structure of newswriting, I was forced to see how few writing techniques I had in my wheelhouse. And there was only one way to change that: I had to become better read. The more good writing I read, the better my writing would

become. I'd heard that throughout J-school, but it took on new meaning for me in the creative writing program.

Reading Influences

Although I have been reading since I was a kid, I didn't read much challenging literature. I read the Anne of Green Gables series, *Little House on the Prairie*, and *Little Women*, yes, but I spent just as much if not more time reading Sweet Valley High, saccharine Christian romances, and popular genre fiction by Bebe Moore Campbell and LaVyrle Spencer. I read some better Christian fiction by Bodie Thoene and Frank Peretti, but I didn't read C.S. Lewis or J.R.R. Tolkien. I liked romance—a lot—but it didn't occur to me to read Jane Austen or Charlotte Bronte, and I regret every minute I lived without Elizabeth Bennett and Mr. Darcy.

I am grateful that I cultivated my love for reading at a young age, but I regret not making better choices. The books that have had the most profound impact on me as a writer are ones I read in college and graduate school. I am going to talk about some of the ones whose influence is most apparent in my writing and especially in this thesis. I have organized them into three primary areas of influence: technique, form, and theme.

Technique

One of the most influential novels I read when I began my graduate work in creative writing was *One Hundred Years of Solitude* by Gabriel Garcia Marquez. The book is about the evolution of a family and a town over the course of a hundred years, and when I read the book, family and community were becoming significant themes in my writing. But what I loved most about Marquez

was the folksy voice of the narrator and his beautiful use of magical realism. I found in Marquez the kind of storyteller I wanted to be. The characters I always played around with were the kinds of people who might suddenly discover ice or foresee their deaths or have their lives turned upside down by an impossible, supernatural occurrence.

Marquez gave me a way to explore some of the more unconventional things I saw my characters doing, to embrace the unusual and otherworldly in my storytelling. I grew up listening to my grandmothers and aunts tell stories about real people whose lives were affected by their beliefs in the supernatural. Dreaming about fish or the dead meant something, and people would make decisions based on these kinds of experiences. After reading Marquez, I felt I'd found a legitimate way to tell their stories honestly without asking the reader to believe as they did.

Marquez also liberated me as a storyteller. I felt empowered to write the stories as they occurred to me. Sometimes I wanted to make grief or worry a thing that might walk in a room and sit next to someone on the sofa, because that's how I saw them, as palpable. In one of the stories in this collection, "Happily Ever After," the character Joann battles depression, and it is described as tangible presence that packs its bags and moves in. In "Ghosts," one of the characters seeks to befriend a ghost, and she wants to believe it is a legitimate experience. I didn't use a lot of magical realism in my thesis, just hints of it here and there, but that's because I use it when I think a story calls for it and because when magical realism is handled poorly it can ruin a story. As I grow as a writer and storyteller, I hope to learn to use magical realism more effectively because it is one of the devices that I believe allows me to write in my most authentic voice.

Toni Morrison, of course, also uses magical realism, and that is one of the reasons she has also become a significant influence on my writing. But what I have gleaned even more from her writing is the lyrical quality of her narrative voice. Her novels are the only ones that I truly enjoy hearing read. Most of the time listening to a book on tape irritates me to no end, but Toni Morrison's words flow together in a way that sounds like music. I used to want to be a singer, and I was very serious about it. I took lessons and everything. I wanted to be a great vocalist like the opera stars Leontyne Price, Marian Anderson, and Kathleen Battle. The problem was that I couldn't sing all that well.

I used to wonder why I cared so much about sound when my ability to make beautiful music was so limited. Morrison helped me find a way to channel that interest. As I write, I'm always listening for how the words sound, and sometimes my word choice is based largely on the rhythm I hear as I put the sentences together. I know this isn't unique to me, but thanks to Morrison I feel it is a legitimate way to use my time writing. This is not a skill I have mastered by any means, but I hope to become more adept at it over time.

Form

Before I began the creative writing MFA, I had read short stories, but I was not well acquainted with short story collections. Four collections have been especially influential, particularly in light of my thesis project. *Winesburg, Ohio* by Sherwood Anderson was an influence as I was deciding how to organize the project. The town of Mercury, Georgia, factors into all the fictional stories; the characters live there, are from there, or have visited at some time,

and their experiences in Mercury shape them in some significant way, even if only by motivating them to leave.

Cane by Jean Toomer is a much more varied collection than my thesis. His stories are not connected in any obvious way, and the form ranges widely from poetry to short story. But what influenced me most was the way his work presented the diversity within the African American experience. Characters in the North didn't behave exactly the way characters from the South did, and Toomer's stories weren't all written in the same style, just as the African American community does not express itself in only one way. My storytelling style doesn't change a lot throughout my thesis, but I wanted to shape my stories around the characters and the place where they lived in a way that would highlight each character's unique point of view. I sought to do that in part by letting the character guide whether the story was written in first person or third, with an omniscient narrator or a single point of view. I appreciate Toomer's courage in illuminating the diversity of his characters' perspectives and experiences, and I hoped in much the same way to create characters who would not fit so easily into a box.

Another significant influence is *Leaving Atlanta* by Tayari Jones. This collection stands out to me because it successfully fictionalizes a historical event without allowing that event to overshadow the characters and their development through the course of the book. I hoped to do the same thing, but I am not yet the writer I aspire to be. Because research is important to me, this will always be an area in which I am challenged as a writer. I never want the facts to weigh down the story or make it seem preachy. Tayari succeeds in making us care about the characters, and in

the process she exposes the reader to a dark moment in history that was not given the attention many people believe it deserved.

Last is *Unaccustomed Earth* by Jhumpa Lahiri. The book is just beautifully written, but in addition to her gorgeous writing, this collection influenced me because of the linked stories in the second part of the book. The stories follow the same characters over a period of time, giving glimpses of how they evolve. Each story can stand alone, but together they tell a more complete story, and I hope the connected stories in my thesis will do something similar.

Theme

When it comes to the kind of writer I want to become, I think of three books that I selected for their theme more than for their technique. *Cane River* by Lalita Tademy tells the story of an African American family through several generations. It was one of the books that inspired me to write about my family, and though I don't approach my stories in quite the same way Tademy does, as a sweeping novel, I feel my motivation for writing these stories may be similar to hers: to get to know people who lived during an extraordinary time in history and to give them a voice, because their experiences should not be forgotten. Tademy did extensive research into her family history in order to gain the fullest picture of who her relatives were and how they interacted with their white slaveholders. I was able to do some research for the stories in my thesis, particularly "The Trouble With the Leg," but nothing at the level of Tademy's. If I am able to learn more, I may revisit some of these stories to create a picture of my family that is more factual. Even if that project were nothing the masses would want to read, it would be a wonderful gift to offer my family.

Second is *The Known World* by Edward P. Jones. In this book Jones does what I wish I could do as a writer: cause readers to look at history with fresh eyes. Jones' novel is about a black man who owned slaves, a part of American history that is heavily documented yet not a theme that has been widely explored. The idea of it feels off, wrong, worse, perhaps, than ordinary slavery. Jones deftly takes the reader deep into the inner world of those characters so we understand their motivations and, perhaps, see glimpses of how those motivations are still with us today. What Jones does makes me think of the concept of "re-memory" presented in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*. Through "re-memory," the character Sethe reconstructs and re-presents the past in order to process those experiences.

While I don't suggest we change or water down history, I believe there is a place for stories that reconstruct the past, that re-present it, so it never gets lost or forgotten as our collective memory evolves. In one way or another, this is something I will always be thinking about as I write because I am fascinated with history and because the past always affects the present and will shape the future. If we don't allow the past to change us in the right ways, we'll take toxic emotions and beliefs into the future and allow them to infect another generation.

Having said that, I have no desire to get on a soapbox and write stories that are preachy, and I have no desire to write only fiction that addresses historical themes. What I hope to write are stories that make people think, which is why I consider *Everything Matters!* by Ron Currie, Jr. another influence. In the book a man named Junior knows from birth when and how the world will end. Because of this, he questions whether his actions really matter in the grand scheme of things.

Because I ultimately want to tell stories that get people to reflect on significant, even weighty, ideas, I have been thinking about Currie and how he accomplished this in his novel.

Currie uses a second-person narrator along with various other "narrators," including a mental health transcript and an *Oprah Winfrey* episode, which creates the effect of multiple voices who see the situation with Junior from a variety of angles. I think this use of multi-voiced narration is one tool that allowed Currie to explore a heavy theme without turning the story into propaganda. I know Currie is not the only author who does this, but his book came to mind recently, and it made me want to spend some time considering how I might be able to experiment with multi-voiced narration in my writing.

In hindsight, I see having limited options for my choice of a college major as a blessing. I don't think I would have chosen writing if I'd had the opportunity to do something else. Writing is incredibly tough work, but there are times when I can't imagine doing anything more rewarding. I believe I have a lot of room for growth as a writer, but I also see how my thinking about storytelling and my craft have evolved in positive ways. When I look back at some of the stories I wrote early on, I see clear improvement, and I expect to continue growing as I keep writing.

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FLIGHT

The preacher was in the middle of his sermon, still warming up for all practical purposes. Anyone who'd been to church more than once or twice knew he promised to close at least three times before he finally brought his point home. Jesus had just told Peter to cast his net on the other side of the boat, where he'd reel in more fish than he could carry, but the reverend hadn't gotten to the miracle part, only the command, so everyone knew he was nowhere near the end. But it was exactly then, while the preacher was still approaching the climax of the story, that Mabel Watkins suddenly stood up and rushed past the usher, almost stepping on Mrs. Baker's bunion in her hurry to get out of the church. For all the gasps that could be heard throughout the small, cramped sanctuary, it wasn't Peter or Jesus or Reverend Murray who made Mabel leave. It was Ruth Richardson's baby sitting on her mother's lap on the back pew, who for whatever reason could not be consoled this day, not with bottles or rocking or the tender kisses of a mother who wanted to hear whether this fishing boat story might be God's way of telling her he'd also give her the miracle she needed.

Mabel was already outside the church when she realized the magnitude of what she'd done. Not only had she left the church—fled, really—while Reverend Murray was still talking, she'd made a spectacle of herself while she was doing it. And she'd left her husband sitting right there on the pew, bewildered yet again by his wife's actions. If there was one thing everyone knew about Sam and Mabel Watkins it was that they were childless. They married when they were both just a few months shy of twenty, and now, some twenty years later, there still were no children to fill

that big, pretty brick house of theirs. Why now all of a sudden Mabel would run off whenever she heard a baby cry was a mystery to everyone, Sam included, and especially Mabel.

"What has gotten into you?" Sam had rushed out of the church behind his wife and was now catching up to her at the bottom of the church steps. Mabel didn't want to turn around to face his question or the shame she was sure she'd find in his eyes. Sam grabbed her by the arm and in one swift movement turned her around in his direction.

"May, what is going on?" The look on his face made Mabel die a little inside. He didn't look angry, just scared by what might be happening to his wife. Mabel couldn't bear to speak, could barely bring herself to even look at Sam.

"Come on, May. You can't keep doing this."

Mabel wrested her arm out of his grasp and started toward home. Nothing in Mercury was too far to walk to; it was the smallest of Georgia's small towns, and The Bottom, where the Negroes lived, was smaller still. Mabel couldn't explain herself, no matter how much she wanted to, but right now she didn't feeling like trying. Sam's questions would just have to wait until she could figure out what exactly to say.

Sam and Mabel walked on in silence, each caught up in his own thoughts. Sam wondered what a man does when his wife goes crazy; there was little else to explain her behavior in the last few months. It was bad enough when she left Miss Josephine's store without paying for even one of her groceries just because Mrs. Wilson's baby started to cry. It was worse when she acted up on the white folks' side of town. But now she was letting God and everyone else know her mind wasn't right. How much was a man supposed to take?

Mabel, just a few steps ahead, was wondering the same thing. Sam was the gentlest man she knew; she'd loved him since they were children. But she knew this was wearing on him. He'd always said he was happy even though they hadn't had any babies. His name might not continue on, but they wouldn't have anyone to worry them into an early grave. At first she didn't believe him, but after a while, he started talking about teaching his nephew how to manage the farm, and she could tell he'd settled the matter in his mind. For all of Sam's good qualities, this was one of the bad. He could not be swayed once he'd decided a thing. It was like he became a rock—completely immovable. Mabel was just passing Miss Jo's house when she felt Sam take her hand and link his fingers through hers. They didn't say a word the rest of the way home, but she could tell something about him had changed. He had decided something.

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The house had belonged to Sam's uncle, and the land had been owned by who knows how many Watkinses before them. Leaving Sam's great-grandmother this land was the only decent thing Grover Watkins had done for the slave he'd made his mistress and the children she'd borne him. Sam's grandfather, though the master's son, had worked the land just like the other slaves, and when the old man died after the War Between the States, his Negro heirs continued to work it, only now they sold the cotton and kept the profit, unlike the sharecroppers who worked all the farmland these days. The house, built by Sam's uncle so his wife could be closer to town, would have remained empty, the uncle's wife never having had any children, had Sam not been the favored nephew and the beneficiary to most of his uncle's things. Mabel used to wonder if it was

the house's fault that she and Sam never had any children. Was there something inside its walls or under the ground that would not allow the women within to have babies?

The smell of collard greens greeted them the minute they walked through the door. The kitchen was at the back of the house, but the aroma was strong enough to make Mabel wonder if she'd forgotten to turn off the stove. She made her way to the kitchen, telling Sam she'd have dinner on the table as soon as the hoecakes were ready.

"It's still early, May. Seems we should wait a bit before we eat."

Mabel hadn't thought about the time or the fact that it was still too quiet outside for a Sunday afternoon. There were no children out playing just yet, but what Mabel really missed were the women from church who normally stopped by to fill her in on all the latest news. She hadn't sat down to talk for a spell with anyone since her troubles began. She imagined she was becoming the topic of conversation herself. After this latest stint at church, she'd surely be the one being talked about in such a small town.

"I didn't think about the time," Mabel said, with a wistful tone in her voice. "I guess it is a bit early for dinner. Let me know when you're ready for something."

Sam sat down at the kitchen table and folded his hands in front of him as if thinking carefully about his next word. But before he could speak, Mabel seemed to erupt.

"Sam, I don't know what's gotten into me. I know I haven't been myself lately, but I'm sure it will pass. Renee said her cousin's half-sister used to just burst into tears whenever anybody said her daddy's name. He died when she was a little girl, so she hardly even knew him. It didn't make no kind of sense. But one day, she just stopped having the fits, and they never came back."

Sam looked up at his wife, wishing this button that had been switched inside her brain might just suddenly shut off. But what were they to do until then? The plan that had begun to form in his mind took on clearer shape, and he knew he'd have to do it. There was no other way.

"Listen, May. Let's not talk about this anymore. Let's just enjoy the day, OK?"

Mabel didn't mind moving on, but she knew her husband well enough to know this wasn't over. It was nowhere close.

###

What Sam liked most about his life was the quiet, the peace in his home and in his head. His daddy and his brother had always been plagued with anxious thoughts. His daddy would wake up in cold sweats at night, and his brother took to eating dirt from time to time. Said it settled his nerves. Sam had always slept like a baby, had always been able to focus on the task at hand and not the one coming in the future. Normally he drove home thinking about the cotton crop, which was unusually good this year, or just humming along to Cab Calloway or Dizzie Gillespie playing on the radio. But lately he'd found himself worrying all the time about what was happening to his wife. Mabel had never given him anything to worry about; the washing, the cooking, the mending, the cleaning—it was always just done. He never saw the work in progress, just the end result. And Mabel had a level head, not one filled with fancy like the women who came to the house to gossip.

But now he could think of nothing but her. The anxious thoughts simply refused to let go. They were like the gangsters in the James Cagney movies, uninvited yet determined to stay. Sam saw visions of Mabel rushing from church and getting hit by Anderson's boy driving his daddy's truck like a wild man. He saw Mabel curling up on their bed crying tears that would not stop, no

matter how he tried to soothe her. He saw Mabel sitting on the porch with a blank look on her face, staring out at nothing. The idea of losing Mabel, no matter how it happened, was more than he could bear.

Sam stopped the truck outside the church and turned off the engine. He knew Mabel wanted a baby, had always wanted a baby. He wanted a son himself, but the good Lord had never seen fit. And that was OK. He'd never been one to argue with the Lord. But with all this running from crying babies, Sam knew his wife was not all right with the way their lives had become. He didn't understand it—who did?—but somewhere in the midst of his anxious thoughts came an idea that made some sense. He just needed to talk with the preacher, but the longer he thought about it, the more it seemed like less of an idea and more like a plan.

###

What the Lord was thinking when he didn't see fit to make Mabel a mother, she did not know. There were fast young gals with babies on their hips when they didn't know what to do with them, and here was Mabel, a good wife with a good home and no children to fill it. And now she was running from screaming babies. The first time it happened, she didn't exactly know how. She was with Sister Moody, taking a pie to a woman who was sick and shut in, and she heard a sound pierce through the air. It seemed to crack something open and hurt her ear so bad she couldn't stand it. She stood there in the middle of the street unable to move in either direction. It was a good thing nothing in Mercury moved very fast—neither cars nor time—or she might have gotten herself hurt. The next thing she knew, she'd handed the pie to Sister Moody and was rushing away.

Where she was going she had no idea. All she knew was that she couldn't stand still and let her ear get split right in two.

She didn't realize it was a baby who made that sound until two days later, when it happened again in Tyson's store. Ellie Wilson was minding her business, picking up some liniment when the baby on her hip wrinkled up his face and started to wail. Mabel's reaction was uninvited. Unplanned. Unexpected. She wished she'd thought to hand Miss Jo a quarter for the things she'd picked up, but she didn't think of that until much later, after she was halfway home, groceries in hand.

She cried on the phone to her sister, not quite knowing what to do about this strange turn of events. She had been married for twenty years. God had made it clear that she wouldn't be having any babies. She'd accepted that, and thank God Sam never complained. So what was all this running in the street?

"You think it would help if you kept Dave and Ruthie for a while, just so you could get used to being around children?" Her sister only wanted to help, but her niece and nephew were far from babies. They wouldn't be crying unless they were good and hurt. She didn't see how it would help, but she was willing to try anything.

Getting the kids to come to Mercury from Augusta for a whole summer was a feat in itself. There was Dave's camp for future farmers and Ruthie's camp for future homemakers, but by the middle of June the children were in Mercury, ready to help their auntie get over her fear of children.

She wondered how Sam would do with children around, but despite all his claims about the joys of peace and quiet, he took right to the kids. He took them to deliver cotton to the mill,

and he showed them how to hunt squirrels in the woods. The children playing and making messes and eating up all the ice cream never sent Mabel into a fit. Not once did the niece and nephew give her a conniption. But when Jackie Towns' baby started crying right there in the middle of Woolworth's—on the white folks' side of town, no less—Mabel grabbed each of the children by the hand and dashed out of the building and down the street. Only when the baby was no longer in earshot was Mabel even able to slow down.

When the children were gone at the end of the summer, their power to cure their aunt clearly not a match for whatever ailed her, Mabel gave God an ultimatum. She'd been assured that this was a wicked thing to do. Both her mama and the preacher at church had said as much. They quoted the Bible—"thou shalt not put God to a foolish test"—and told her they couldn't be sure how God might answer if one did test him, but they didn't want to be around to see. Yet when her back was placed firmly against the wall, she did the thing that ought not to be done and made the Lord a promise she couldn't keep. "Lord, if you make this go away, if you'll just give me some peace, I'll tell Sam about the baby."

###

Sam's daddy always taught him not to put off what could be done today, so he got out of the truck and headed toward the church. But before he reached the door, he heard Mrs. Murray call to him from the parsonage.

"Hey, Brother Samuel. If you looking for the reverend, he's in his garden out back. Tell him to bring some tomatoes when he comes in for dinner."

Sam nodded in Beulah Murray's direction and headed toward the back of a small but well-kept house. When Sam found him, Reverend Murray was kneeling over a row of collard greens that had been attacked by cabbage worms. The leaves were pocked, and the reverend was loudly pronouncing curses on all the pestilence that crawled along the ground.

Sam knew the man heard his footsteps, but he cleared his throat all the same, just to make sure he didn't catch him by surprise. Reverend Murray looked up briefly then turned his attention back to the holes in his collards.

"I always plant onions between them, but this year I thought I'd do without. It was the sin of slothfulness, son, and look where it got me."

"The worms have been bad this year. We got a new spray from Americus that kills 'em real good. I don't know what would've happened to the cotton if Mr. Tilson hadn't put in a good word so we could get some for the crop."

The preacher looked up at this, squinting from the sun. "Might have to get me some of that."

"I can bring you some for your plants here. Thanks to Mr. Tilson, we got plenty."

"I thank you kindly," Reverend Murray said with a smile. He was now giving Sam his full attention.

"Reverend Murray, you know my wife and I haven't been blessed with any children."

"We have to believe the good Lord knows best."

"Yes, Reverend Murray, but you must have noticed that she's been acting a little funny lately. I think she may have had some kind of break. I heard sometimes that happens. I know there's some kind of hospital in Americus for people with problems in their mind. I—"

"You want to send your wife to a sanitarium?"

"Something got to be done, Reverend. Mabel ain't been herself, and I fear it will only get worse."

The reverend stood up and brushed the dirt from his hands. "Son, have you ever thought about taking a child in? Maybe the good Lord has another plan for making your wife a mama. There are young gals who get themselves in the family way and would want to give the child up."

"It ain't every woman who wants to give up her child, even when she ain't got no husband."

"You won't know if you don't ask." The preacher crossed his arms on his chest and gave Sam a look he couldn't read.

Sam was ready to take his leave, but the preacher spoke up again. "Ain't no need to send somebody to the sanitarium just cause they grieving."

The reverend said it as if it were a matter of fact, as if there were no other explanation for Mabel's behavior.

"What makes you think Mabel's grieving?"

"Son, I been a preacher for a long time. I seen people go through every kind of trouble you can imagine. I knew an old man who couldn't stand the sight of a hammer because his mama's skull had been crushed by one when her massa got mad one day. A hammer, son. It's hard to keep away from a hammer, especially out here in these woods. But this man could barely stand to be

around them. A hammer, son. Everybody knew what had happened to his mama. Back then, I was just a young preacher, and I didn't know what to do for this man but stay out of his way. My daddy was a sharecropper. I grew up in them fields. But I ain't never been no slave. I didn't know what to tell him. Then one day I was out in my garden, and I heard the good Lord tell me this man needed to grieve the death of his mama. I was scareder than scared, but I went over to his house and told him what the good Lord had said. I thought he was going to throw me off the porch, but he didn't. I could hear something in his voice when he said, thank you kindly. After that, he stopped running from hammers."

Sam's normally quiet mind had been racing since Reverend Murray said the word grieving. Was Mabel grieving the children they never had, the life that never was, the one filled with diapers and schoolwork and worry?

"Did the man ever pick up a hammer?" Sam wanted to know just how much grieving the death of his mother might have helped the old man.

"Can't say that he did. I moved on to another church about fifty miles away and never heard what happened to him."

Sam was ready to go now. The old man's story had little to do with his dilemma, but he had to ask one more question. "How come she ain't never used to run from babies? We been married twenty years. We ain't never had no babies, and she ain't never run around town like she been doing."

"Maybe something upset her especially."

Sam wasn't sure how much help the preacher would be, but he was glad he had followed his mind. Now he wanted to get away from this man and his garden. All the way home Sam wondered at what the preacher said. Mabel grieving, so bad it had her running in the street? It sounded strange to him, so he knew Mabel would think it was crazy. And there was room for only so much crazy in the Watkins family.

###

Mabel pretended to look for shoe polish in Tyson's store, knowing all the while that she couldn't really wait until Mattie was done. Sam would be home in less than an hour, and when he got there he'd be expecting to see her standing over the pot of stew she'd left on the stove. What he wouldn't expect was to find her at Tyson's, waiting for a chance to take Mattie to the side.

The girl, just fifteen, was helping Mrs. Mason find a fabric for a pair of dresses she was making for her twins, Birdie and Gerdie. She'd made a mess of their names, but she was one of the finest seamstresses in Mercury, and the girls were two of the best dressed children in town. Mabel caught Mattie's eye, and the girl, perhaps sensing the urgency in her manner, asked Mrs. Mason to excuse her for a minute. She walked to where Mabel was pretending to study the petroleum jelly and asked her in less than gentle tones exactly what she wanted.

"I know we don't know each other well, but after our talk that day on the road, I just wanted to come check on you." Mabel's eyes were wide. The urgency to leave her pot and come down to the store took her by surprise, and now that she was actually talking to the girl, she wasn't sure what she should say.

“I ain’t told nobody but you. You gonna run round town telling folks? If you hadn’t found me that day, probably wouldn’t nobody know. My pappy would kill me dead if he knew I was with child, and he hates Harold. You know he do.”

Everybody in town knew how much Mattie’s father hated Harold. What they didn’t know was why. But that wasn’t Mabel’s concern, at least not today.

“I want to help you, Mattie. I ain’t told nobody, and I ain’t gonna tell nobody. I was just worried about you.” Mabel couldn’t read the look on Mattie’s face. She looked no more relieved than she had a second before.

“Does Harold know? Is he going to take you with him off to that college?”

“We ain’t figured that out yet.” Mattie looked over her shoulder at Mrs. Mason. She was holding a spool of fabric and seemed to have made her selection. “Look, Miss Mabel, I thank you kindly for stopping by, but I got to go.”

Mattie walked back to Mrs. Mason and Mabel rushed out the door. The last thing she wanted to do was explain to Sam why there was a pot simmering on the stove with nobody home.

###

She and Sam couldn’t have babies. That’s what Mabel told herself when the bleeding started, and it’s what she kept telling herself after it stopped. The big ugly mess had been a nightmare to clean and left her feeling worn out. When Sam came home that day to find her lying in bed, she told him she just wasn’t feeling like herself. He kissed her on the forehead, then the cheek, then the lips before offering to bring her some soup. She didn’t feel like eating then or for days afterward. She knew somewhere in her heart of hearts that the mass of blood was more than

an unusually heavy cycle. She knew something terrible had happened. She just didn't want to say what. Forming the words would make it more real than it already was.

The hope that had lived for a second then died all of a sudden seemed harder to grieve than the baby itself, and she didn't want Sam to carry that burden. But she figured the baby wanted Sam to know; otherwise it wouldn't have been haunting her. Could she have done something different? Was the child accusing her of neglect? Was the miscarriage somehow her fault?

Mabel needed the torture to stop. She would have to tell Sam, and she'd do it tonight while he ate his favorite stew.

At dinner Sam seemed agitated. She knew him well enough to know something was on his mind. He gnawed at his lip as he tinkered with a watch his father had given him. It seemed to be stopping around nine every morning, leaving Sam at a loss for the time of day. It would need to be taken into town to the jewelry shop, but Mabel knew he'd do anything in his power to make it work, or get used to life without one.

"Reckon it wasn't too hot for picking today, was it?" Mabel liked to let Sam know she was grateful that he worked so hard to keep her from the field. Not every man could keep his wife from picking, but Sam had never asked her to work the farm, even though she'd grown up picking cotton with her daddy.

"We got a good crop this year. More than we expected. Them worms been eating up everybody's crops, but we done good with that treatment Tilson told me about."

Sam said every word without looking up once, but Mabel could tell there was something more on his mind. She figured he'd tell her when he was ready; he always did. It wasn't as though

she planned what happened next. She was just pulling the cornbread out of the oven when all of a sudden the words just poured out. “I done lost our child.”

Sam looked up from where he sat at the kitchen table with his mouth open but no words coming out. Mabel stood by the stove watching him, wondering what horrible thing she had done. The stew popped and sputtered from the stove, reminding her of its presence, and she wished it were that simple—just put plates on the table and watch everything go back to normal. But the man sitting in shock in front of her would never be quite the same. Mabel sat down at the table, foregoing the stew, and watched her husband as if he were a picture show. Sam sat there with a hand over his mouth, staring out at the porch.

Mabel glanced toward the invisible thing that now seemed to be holding Sam’s attention. Couldn’t she always tell what Sam was thinking? Why was the page suddenly blank? When Sam’s voice broke through the quiet, Mabel jumped, surprised to hear a sound.

“This is why you’ve been running away from babies?”

Mabel shook her head and said the most honest thing she could tell him. “I don’t know what got into me. One day I woke up feeling a little funny, but I didn’t think much of it. Then I went over to Sister Moody’s and helped her in her garden. That arthritis in her hip makes it plum near impossible for her to get down in the dirt, so I go help out sometimes. It was hot as fire, Sam, you remember that day. We shouldn’t have been out there in that heat, but the peppers were getting too ripe and if somebody didn’t pick ’em, she’d lose them. By the time I got home, I was wiped out, and we barely did anything but pick a few peppers. I was down in the kitchen trying to get some dinner ready before you got home when I felt something between my legs. There was so

much blood, and I couldn't stop it. Honest, Sam. I wanted to believe it was just my monthly flow, but the longer I thought about it, the more I began to wonder. I couldn't rest, Sam. It was like I knew. But a woman my age with a baby?"

"Stranger things have happened…"

"After all these years? I don't know what happened exactly, but one day when I was walking with Sister Moody, I heard a baby cry, and something in me just shook. I felt like my head would split in two if I didn't get away from the sound. Then it happened again and again."

"Reverend Murray said you was grieving over something. I thought maybe you were suffering over not having any children of your own."

"I figured I had to tell you. Seemed the baby was wanting you to know. I reckon that's why I didn't have no peace."

"You didn't do nothing wrong, May." Sam's voice was gentle, and Mabel knew he meant every word, but she couldn't shake the heaviness that was settling into her chest. The knot that formed somewhere near her heart worked its way up until Mabel burst into tears—deep, painful sobs that hurt Sam to hear. He wrapped his arms around his wife and let her cry. Why after all these years had the good Lord seen fit to give them a baby only to let it slip away? Sam couldn't begin to understand.

The idea that had formed in his mind seemed distant now, unnecessary. This was a different kind of problem, one he wasn't prepared for. May had been pregnant. The womb that hadn't been able to conceive had suddenly opened up. What had allowed his seed to finally begin to grow?

Mabel had no more strength left to cry when Sam finally let her go, the stew practically forgotten. He looked at her pretty brown face and wished for the first time that they'd had a daughter who'd grow up to look like May. The preacher had been right after all, though Sam hated to admit it.

Weeks went by, and Sam and Mabel went on, not forgetting what had happened but not spending too much time remembering either. Sam found that it hurt to think about what almost was, so he refused to let his mind settle on it. He'd taken such care to keep babies out of his thoughts that he was confused when the preacher pulled him aside one Sunday after church and told him he knew someone who wanted to talk with him and Mabel. The look on Reverend Murray's face was that of a man holding a secret, and Sam had to search his brain for what the man could possibly know. Then the memory of his talk with the preacher came back in a rush. "Ah, yes, well, let me talk to May."

When Sam found his wife, she was outside the church laughing at something one of her gossiping friends had said. Sam didn't know his anxious thoughts had altered the look on his face, but when Mabel saw him she said her good-byes and let Sam lead the way back to the house.

"Reverend Murray say somebody want to talk to us about a child." Sam was walking faster than usual, and Mabel wasn't sure if this was due to fear or excitement. She liked the idea of having a baby in the house, but she didn't like the thought of trying to replace their baby with someone else's.

"We can't ever replace our child, Sam."

Sam seemed to be lost in his own thoughts, and Mabel didn't think he'd heard her until he broke the silence. "We don't need to replace her, May. But maybe this is the good Lord's way of bringing a child to us."

Mabel could tell from his voice that Sam had wrestled with his thoughts and settled this in his mind. "I think we ought to just see what the Reverend has to say."

Mabel nodded her head, though she still wasn't sure that's what their baby would want. The next day Reverend Murray came by with a very pregnant Mattie Simmons. Mabel's heart sank in her chest when she saw the girl with the preacher. How far along had she been when they met alongside the road that day for her belly to be so big now?

"Mattie?"

Mattie began to cry the minute Mabel said her name. "My daddy say he'll kick me out if I keep it. I was going to take in some washing to help out, but he won't hear none of it. I ain't got no choice, Miss Mabel. There ain't nothing here in Mercury, and there's less than nothing for a baby that ain't got no daddy."

"What about the daddy? What does he have to say about all this?" Sam hadn't spoken since Mattie and Reverend Murray walked in and settled in the living room.

"He got money for school and say he can't have a wife and baby with him. I ain't got no choice, Mr. Sam. I know you and Miss Mabel good folks, and I want to know my baby with good folks."

Sam put a hand to his mouth; Mabel held her arms across her chest, both of them unaware how hard and long they stood there staring at the girl before Mabel finally spoke.

"Mattie, we can't take a baby from a mama who wants her child."

Mattie hadn't stopped crying since she started. The preacher held an arm around the girl's shoulder and wondered aloud at Mabel's decision. "You sure this is what you want to do?"

"We lost a baby of our own, Reverend, and we can't put nobody through that. Mattie, if you can't go to your daddy's house, we'll take you in here. We got room for you and the baby if you want to come stay with us."

Mattie's tears seemed to fall anew as she buried her head in Reverend Murray's arm. As he patted Mattie's back, the reverend gave Sam and Mabel a curious smile.

Mabel started clearing out space for Mattie and her baby in her mind before the girl even left the house, and she went into high gear the next day. After a week, everything was in place, but there was no Mattie. Mabel and Sam figured the girl must be settling things with her folks, but when two more weeks went by, they became concerned. Maybe Mattie's daddy hadn't taken too kindly to her leaving his house. Or maybe he'd decided to let her stay after all. Mercury was too small for Mattie's whereabouts to remain a mystery, so Mabel started asking around, first at Tyson's, where no one had seen her since she'd left her job weeks before, then at church, where Beulah Murray seemed as surprised as her husband by the girl's sudden disappearance. Finally Sam and Reverend Murray drove out to the Simmons' place to settle the matter once and for all.

The place was small, wood-frame and rickety with peeling paint and shutters that were in desperate need of repairing. Mattie was the only child, but the place was crawling with Mrs. Simmons' sister's children, who'd moved in along with their mama temporarily about five years

ago. Sam doubted Joe Simmons would really send away his only daughter, especially when he'd taken in so many other children. But the man had a mean streak and knew how to hold a grudge. Joe was outside when the men arrived. He was laughing with one of his nephews and was still smiling when Sam and Reverend Murray approached.

"What can I do you for?" Joe seemed to be in a good mood, not like a man worried over a missing daughter. Reverend Murray spoke first. "Hello, there, Joe. We came to talk to you about young Mattie."

"Mattie? What's worrying you about Mattie?

"We just ain't seen her around in a while," Sam said. "She and my wife became kind of friendly, and Mabel was worried about her since she hadn't seen her around."

"Mattie gone off to her mama's people in Americus. When she lost the baby—"

"She lost the baby?" Sam felt his stomach turn.

"It was stillborn. Didn't cry a lick. After that, Mattie went off to Americus. Her mama said it would be good for her to get away."

Reverend Murray shook Joe Simmons' hand and offered his condolences.

"I done told her, Reverend, God don't like ugly."

Reverend Murray cocked an eyebrow as he released the man's hand. "No, he don't like ugly, but it don't bring him no pleasure to see his children in pain. I'll be praying for Miss Mattie, sir."

"You do that, Reverend. She surely needs it."

Sam didn't know how he'd break the news to Mabel. She'd been preparing the house for weeks. Now those rooms would remain empty. Sam knew, though Mabel didn't, that the women from church were going to give Mattie a shower, and he'd asked George Cooley over at Tyson's to order a crib. There was no reason Mattie's baby couldn't have at least one thing that was new. He prayed silently for the good Lord to show him how to tell his wife. He knew he couldn't take the sting away, but he still couldn't stand the thought of hurting her.

Sam dropped Reverend Murray off at his parsonage then headed home. Sam pulled the truck up to the house and sat inside for a minute, trying to think of the right words. He whispered another prayer before getting out of the truck and walking toward the door.

When he walked inside, the scene in the room took Sam's breath away. There was his wife, in the living room rocking a baby wrapped in a blanket and humming a tune Sam didn't recognize. She looked at her husband when he entered the room and nodded toward the basket sitting on the table. There was a note inside the basket: "My daddy thinks he was stillborn. He can't know where he is. This is the best way."

"I heard something on the porch after you left, and when I went out to look, he was just lying there in a basket at the door."

He was a tiny thing, no more than a week old, but everything about him seemed perfect to Sam. There were ten fingers and toes, a tuft of curly black hair, eyelashes that lay softly on his cheeks, and the softest skin he'd ever felt. Tiny fists moved beneath the blanket and the perfect face began to contort until it finally let out a weak cry, then a stronger one. Mabel cradled the baby to her chest and nestled her face in his neck. The sound was like music.

"What are we going to tell people about where he came from?"

The baby was crying louder now, and Mabel was rocking him to the rhythm of the tune she had been humming. "We can just tell 'em the reverend knew somebody who couldn't keep her baby. That's the truth."

It was the truth, but it didn't settle well with Sam. He wanted something more, something formal, a ceremony or some paperwork. He felt protective all of a sudden, and he was surprised by the fierceness of this passion. Now that the baby was in Mabel's arms, he wanted nothing more than to keep him there. He would do whatever it took to preserve his little family. And he knew he meant that. He'd do anything.

GHOSTS

I guess, looking back, I should have seen it coming. But when you're twelve, you don't trust your intuition. At least I didn't. So when I went to bed with a sneaking suspicion that our parents might leave while we were sleeping, I didn't take it seriously. I didn't force myself to stay awake or pretend to be sick. I just fell asleep, in the room with the ghost, and when I woke up I knew, without even checking, that our parents were on their way back to Jacksonville and that my sisters and I would be staying with our Aunt Jo in Mercury, Georgia, for the whole summer.

Aunt Jo had visited us at every military base Dad had been stationed, but we had never stayed with her. Mama thought the country would be too much for us. I didn't like to think we were spoiled, but Mercury was part of a different time. Aunt Jo had only recently gotten indoor plumbing, and the yellow room where I slept was haunted. I hadn't seen the ghost, but I knew it was there, just like I knew Mama and Daddy would be leaving.

"You up yet?" Aunt Jo called out from the door. I was sprawled out on the big bed, playing possum as my mother called it, but Aunt Jo just walked in and sat on the edge, as if she knew I was pretending to be asleep. "I know y'all girls wasn't planning on staying here with me, but it won't be no chore. You'll see. Your daddy used to love coming up here to see me." Aunt Jo started wiggling my toes, like all the little piggies had somewhere urgent to go, and I laughed out loud even though I wanted to spend the day in mourning. "That's what I'm talking about," Aunt Jo said. "Now get on up and come get you some breakfast."

I crawled out of bed as Aunt Jo left the room and took another glance out the window above the big bed. There was no station wagon, no Mom, no Dad. No buffer between the country and the city. No one to tell Aunt Jo that we didn't mean any harm but we just weren't used to outhouses and fried chicken that had been walking the lawn just hours before dinner. We were citified, like Aunt Jo had said yesterday.

I heard my middle sister, Julia, wail from the other room, and I knew she was up. "No," she screamed. "I want my mama. Where's Mama?"

I heard Aunt Jo's voice, but I couldn't make out what she was saying. By the time I got to the room, Julia was throwing a full-blown tantrum. Her body fell limp before she passed out on the floor. Ava, the youngest of us three at age eight, watched from the bed. She looked worried, even though Julia had done this dozens of times when Daddy was away. Usually Julia only threw fits in front of Mama, but here she was acting the fool in front of Aunt Jo.

"Get up from there," Aunt Jo said, watching her closely. I tiptoed around my sister, who was just lying on the floor like a dummy, and sat down beside Ava to get a better view. "Well,"

Aunt Jo said. “When you get ready, there’ll be some breakfast in the kitchen. But if you take all day, it might get tossed to the chickens.”

Aunt Jo looked at me and Ava. “Come on now. You two get dressed. We got things to do. People to see today. We don’t have all year.”

###

Aunt Jo was our father’s aunt, so technically she was our great Aunt Jo. But things like that didn’t matter in Mercury. Everybody was everybody’s cousin. At least, that’s how it was in The Bottom, where all the black folks lived. Women of a certain age were referred to as aunts, because you might be related so you ought to show respect just in case. Aunt Beulah Ann (not our real aunt) explained this to us the day our parents left town. She came by to borrow some eggs and instead sat down and had some breakfast. She said we had kin all round these parts and that it was good that our daddy was making sure we got to know his people. Aunt Jo promised her that we’d see Everybody because apparently Aunt Jo knew Everybody. “I’ma take them round,” Aunt Jo said, “just as soon as Jules get up from off that floor and get herself some breakfast.”

Julia seemed to regain consciousness all of a sudden, as if a spell had suddenly been broken. She walked into the kitchen still wearing her pajamas. She held a hand to her forehead presumably to ease the dizziness and, carefully, took a seat at the table. If there’s one thing we knew, it was that Aunt Jo was a great cook. My daddy had said she could make hotdogs and beans taste like a gourmet meal. But we’d never know because Aunt Jo didn’t cook that kind of food. She only knew how to cook country food—fried chicken and biscuits, cornbread and collard greens. And the vegetables always came out of her garden, which was crowded with rows of cabbage, onions and

green peppers, snap beans, tomatoes, and so many other things we were used to getting from the grocery store.

We loved our Aunt Jo. Whenever she came to visit us on whichever military base we were stationed, it was like a holiday, with Mama making her special apple rum cake and keeping spiced pecans sitting in fancy dishes around the house. Dad would take us all out to dinner, saying his two favorite ladies deserved a break from the kitchen. Of all my relatives, they said Aunt Jo was the one I was most like. I don't know why they said that back when I was twelve. Aunt Jo was tall and the color of caramel. Her hair was wavy and fine. It was easy to see that she used to be beautiful, though her hips had grown wide over time. I looked nothing like that. Mama said I was the color of milk chocolate, and my hair was no stranger to a hot comb. I wore glasses—still do—and I was too tall for twelve with feet already as long as Mama's. The foot situation would not get better with age.

Even with the ghost, I was glad to have the yellow room. Its walls were bright and cheerful, and the big bed in the middle swallowed me but was incredibly soft. I figured Aunt Jo gave me this gift on purpose, that she realized I needed my space, considering I was twelve going on thirteen. But a few days after Mama and Daddy left, cousin Bennie came in from Atlanta, and Aunt Jo told her to put her bag down next to my bed.

Bennie was tall and elegant in a way. She didn't wear braids like me and my sisters. And even though she was only fourteen, she seemed a lot older. She wore dresses that Mama would have called grown, but I guess her mama, whose daddy was Aunt Jo's brother, didn't mind so much.

"What do you have to drink around here?" Bennie asked, as if I were the maid.

"I don't know," I told her. "We had orange juice this morning."

She said she needed a Coca-Cola—and she said it just like that, "Coca-Cola." She said she couldn't take another step without one. "When you get used to a thing, you know how it is, Georgia. Old habits are hard to break."

Julia was an amateur compared with this one.

###

I knew there were books about this sort of thing, communicating with the dead. But I hadn't read any of them, didn't know how to locate one without being seen, and wasn't sure the ghost in the yellow room would respond to their techniques anyway. So I came up with my own strategy, one I might have reconsidered had I thought it through in the first place: I began to write to him.

Ghost,

My name is Georgia, and I come in peace. My cousin Bernice and I will be staying in here for the summer. I hope you are a friendly ghost.

Sincerely,

Georgia

P.S. I'm not afraid of you.

The last line was a bluff. I hadn't even considered what it would mean to sleep in a room with a smart ghost, one that could read my thoughts, or reach from the supernatural into the natural and stroke my cheek or touch my hair. Or worse. I thought of the ghost as a benevolent spirit, a fixture in a house filled with memories that refused to stay in pictures. I wasn't prepared for him to be anything more than that.

I left the letter on the bureau at bedtime and got up before Bennie so I could remove it in the morning. If the ghost couldn't read in the dark, we were both in trouble. But I didn't want Aunt Jo to walk in and find it, or for Bennie to wake up in the middle of the night and stumble upon it. This was private, something between the ghost and me. Drawing too much attention could spoil everything.

The secret wasn't easy to keep while I was sharing a bed with Bennie. She slept curled into a tight ball and would flinch hard anytime I moved. Once she jumped so hard she woke herself up. I had never seen a more nervous sleeper.

I wrote every day, storing the previous day's letter in a notebook that I kept with my luggage. Bennie was nosy if nothing else, and she'd surely tell Aunt Jo if she ever caught me. As far as I could tell, the ghost wasn't talking back. Once I heard a voice crying out, and I thought the ghost might have been trying to get my attention, but it was just Bennie having some kind of a bad dream. Still, I was undeterred. My letters simply got longer.

Ghost,

Things have been pretty quiet on your end, but I guess it's probably hard for you to talk to people who aren't dead. Sometimes, it's hard for me too. I told Mama and Daddy I didn't want to move, but they didn't seem to hear me, and if they did, they didn't seem to care. They brought us here so they could get settled. They never even asked us what we wanted. My friends are all so far away now. Are you listening, Ghost? I need to know I'm not invisible.

Sincerely,

Georgia

During the daytime, I helped Aunt Jo pull weeds from her garden or listened to Bennie complain about all things Mercury. “I’ve never been to a slower town,” Bennie said while we girls snapped beans at Aunt Jo’s kitchen table.

“I know what you mean,” Julia said. “I don’t think I can stand to hear another story about Dad or your granddaddy. It’s like they don’t have anything else to talk about.”

“I think they’re the same stories, only changed a little bit,” Bennie said. “Like the one about the time your dad got chased by a fish. I heard someone else say he was being chased by something else.”

“A rabbit,” Julia chimed in.

“Yes, that’s it,” Bennie said, laughing. “He was being chased by a rabbit. And that was the most exciting thing that had happened in who knows how long. I could never live here. I don’t know how I’m going to make it through the summer.”

I wanted to tell her she’d make it until her mother came to pick her up, just like us. Even Julia was settling in; Bennie could do the same. And though I hadn’t intended to, I said as much: “Not everything is about you, you know.”

Bennie looked at me like I’d committed a crime or something, but I was on a roll. “Aunt Jo has taken good care of us, and everyone’s been nothing but nice, and you walk around with your nose in the air like you’re better. That’s just not right.”

“Oh, really?” Bennie said. “Since when did you become the mayor of Mercury? This town is not my home, just so you know, and these people are not my family.”

"Half the people in Mercury are related to us," I told her. "Aunt Jo says it's good for us to get to know our relatives. Maybe that's why your mama sent you here."

Bennie shot me a look meaner than any I'd seen so far. "That's not why she sent me here. What do you know?"

Ghost,

I'm not sure what happened to me today. I told Bennie exactly what I was thinking. I never do that. She didn't like it, and she told me as much, which is exactly like her. I don't know why Bernice thinks she has to be the boss of everything.

I talked to Mama and Daddy. They're coming to pick us up in July. Mom seemed real upset about leaving us here without saying good-bye. I told her it was all right, and I meant it. It's not so bad here. I thought I heard you making noises again last night. If you can talk, please say something.

Sincerely,

Georgia

I'd been writing to the ghost for three weeks straight when, finally, there was a breakthrough, and it was all due to my little sister, Ava. "Georgia, come look what I found."

I followed her down the hall and into the bedroom she'd been sharing with Julia. She knelt by the dresser—a tall antique that looked tired after such a long life—and pulled on the bottom drawer. It was stuffed to the brim with a little of everything: letters, photos, documents that looked no more or less valuable than the other items Ava had been rummaging through.

"I couldn't find my socks, and Julia told me they'd be down here. There aren't any socks, but there are pictures of Daddy with a little boy."

I knelt beside my sister and picked up the photos one by one. They were too old to be of Daddy, but the man did look an awful lot like him. “I don’t think this is Daddy, Ava. I don’t know who it is.”

“It looks like him.”

“But the picture’s too old. Daddy would have to be a hundred years old for this to be him.”

“Are you going to ask Aunt Jo?”

I wasn’t sure about revisiting the past with Aunt Jo. She didn’t like to talk about her father, or anyone else dead for that matter. But I hadn’t learned the value of letting dead things lie.

“I don’t know. But don’t tell anyone about this, OK? Let it be between just us.”

“But I already showed Julia.”

“Then tell her to just keep quiet about it, OK? I want to find the right time to ask Aunt Jo.”

“Ask Aunt Jo what?”

Our aunt stood in the doorway, her frame almost completely filling the space. Her soft brown eyes moved from Ava then to me then back to Ava. As if on cue, Julia and Bennie appeared behind her.

“Ask Aunt Jo what?” she asked again. “Ain’t no sense in keeping secrets.”

“We found a picture in the dresser drawer that looks just like Daddy, but Georgia says he’d have to be a hundred for it to be him.”

I looked at Ava, realizing for the first time that she couldn’t keep a secret. What’s worse, she wasn’t even apologetic. This was something I’d have to remember.

“What picture?”

Aunt Jo directed the question toward me. I was supposed to be sensible, able to explain things, to mediate between the child-world and the grown-up one Aunt Jo lived in.

"Ava and Julia found it earlier today. We wanted to know who it is. He looks an awful lot like Daddy, but it can't be him."

I passed the snapshot to Aunt Jo, tenderly, wanting to protect the brittle photo as much as my aunt. Her face softened into a smile, and I felt myself breathing for the first time in a long minute. "Well, if that don't beat all. This is my father with your Uncle Henry when he was a little boy. I never realized how much he and your daddy looked alike. That's just too much."

She was laughing now, her face transformed by her broad smile. "If that don't beat all," she said, chuckling again.

Bennie stood on her tiptoes to look over Aunt Jo's shoulder at the picture of her grandfather when he was a little boy. Julia looked at the photo as if it were the first one she'd ever seen.

I wanted to resist—I really did—but the words slipped out, and there was no way to push them back in. "Is he the one who died, the one they lynched?"

Aunt Jo's smile fell and I could tell I'd brought up something she didn't want to remember. I should have stopped right then. A girl with better sense would have. But instead of leaving well enough alone, I said the thing I'd been thinking for the last three weeks. "Is he the ghost in the yellow room?"

"There's a ghost in here?" Julia said in a pitch higher than any I'd heard her reach. "Aunt Jo, we can't stay here with a ghost. He might try to eat us."

“There’s no ghost in our room,” Bennie said in a huff. “I couldn’t sleep in a room with a ghost. Spirits know this. They wouldn’t dare try me.”

“Maybe he’s a good ghost,” Ava said.

“Or maybe he’s a bad ghost who’s been giving Bennie those nightmares,” Julia said. “That’s probably why her face has been so puffy.”

Bennie shot Julia a look, and they were all talking on top of each other—at me, to themselves. With one long shout Aunt Jo got everyone to calm down and, unfortunately, turn their attention back toward me.

“Your daddy shouldn’t have told you that tale,” Aunt Jo said. “There ain’t no ghost in this house.”

“I know I hear noises sometimes, Aunt Jo,” I said. “Like a wind blowing. Maybe it’s your daddy trying to tell us something.”

“This is an old house, baby, with lots of things that need fixing, but there ain’t no ghost in here.”

“But Aunt Jo, I know I hear something.”

Aunt Jo looked tired all of a sudden, and she sat down heavily on the bed. “That room catches a draft, and the air comes screaming through like a banshee sometimes, but the house ain’t haunted. Baby, you got to learn to let them dogs lie. There’s enough trouble among the living. Don’t you be going waking the dead, you hear me?”

“But Aunt Jo, how do you know?” I crumpled to the floor, crying, though I wasn’t sure why. Julia followed behind like a shadow. Ava sat down next to me, on the side without Julia, and

laid her head on my shoulder. Aunt Jo sat the photo on the bed and stood up from the bed. “Not all secrets are meant to be told, baby.” Then Aunt Jo disappeared down the hall.

###

The tears ceased almost as quickly as they came, and I got tired of the floor. I left my sisters in their room and walked back to mine, only to find Bennie sprawled across the bed with an assortment of notebook paper strewn all around her. She looked up at me with laughter in her eyes. “You’ve been writing letters to a ghost? And you hid them under the bed? You have got to be kidding me.”

I wasn’t having a good day. Bennie knew that, and still she had to take a jab. “You should be grateful I made peace with him,” I said. It was the first thing that came to mind, and then, “He could have tried to eat you or something.”

“Oh, really. So ghosts eat people now. You can be such a baby sometimes.”

“Well then, I guess it’s contagious.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You know exactly what it means. It means you’re a whiny, spoiled crybaby.”

I didn’t know where the words came from. I didn’t know if I had grown a backbone or a tail, or whether either would last. But I felt powerful all of a sudden, and I liked it. “You’re not better than us. You’re just a brat.”

Had I been writing this down for my friend the ghost, I never would have come up with what happened next. Bennie broke down in heavy sobs, her tears gushing like a fountain. Here was

my regal cousin Bennie crumpled up on the bed in a heaping mess. Watching her cry like that—not like Julia, who I knew was faking it—took the wind right out of me.

"I'm sorry, Bennie. I didn't mean it. I don't know what's been the matter with me. I've just been saying all the wrong things."

I crawled onto the bed and curled up beside her. "I didn't mean it. Honest."

Bennie turned and looked up at me, still crying like someone had died. "Do you know why my mama sent me here?"

I hadn't thought much about why Bennie came for the summer, but now that I was putting my mind to it, I figured her mama probably needed a break. This time, though, I didn't say what I was thinking. "I don't know. I hadn't really thought about it."

Bennie wiped her eyes roughly with the back of her hand. "My mother wanted to have Lester all to herself. Even after I told her what he did, she still wanted to be with him."

Bennie was starting to make me nervous. She didn't look like herself. She looked like me or Ava, just normal.

"What did he do?" I asked nervously, this new Bennie a stranger to me.

Bennie turned her back to me and curled up on her side across the bed, crushing my letters beneath her. I could tell she was still crying. "It doesn't matter," she said.

Mama and Daddy hadn't told me much about the birds and the bees, but I'd gotten the gist of it from Mary Lou Stevens at school. She was in eighth grade and had a sister who'd had a baby before she was sixteen. Bennie didn't have to tell me her secret. Somehow I just knew. I lay down beside her and hugged her sobbing frame.

"You need to tell Aunt Jo. She'll know what to do."

Bennie turned to look at me, and there was something new in her eyes: approval. "I will, Georgia, but not yet, OK?" Her eyes seemed to be pleading.

"OK," I said. I would wait for Bennie and for the ghost, until their secrets were ready to be told.

THE ODDS

The world as he knew it ended the summer John turned seven and he met his brother for the first time. His father's secret had been found out, and John's mother had been ranting and raving ever since about That Woman and how she would never come to her house, never speak to her children, never even think about looking her way if they crossed paths on the street. Then one day That Woman showed up at Mary Ann Cooley's door with a boy she said ought to know his father.

"I stayed outta your hair long enough. But he's going on twelve now, and he ought to know his daddy. Need a man to show him what's what."

Mary Ann hadn't cursed since the day she found Jesus at a Holy Roller meeting. The crowded room and stifling heat made her feel faint, and when she came to the preacher said she'd been touched. She stopped drinking whiskey and smoking tobacco and told George Cooley there would be no more rendezvous out behind her father's woodshed. They were married two months later and within a dozen years they'd had four girls and a boy. She'd kept all the promises she'd made to Jesus until That Woman pushed a button she didn't know she had. Every profanity she'd ever said or thought of came rolling off her tongue as if she'd never taken a hiatus.

John saw in his brother the big boy he wanted to be. William was tall with broad shoulders and a cool sort of swagger when he walked. John moved past his mother and the woman arguing on the steps and walked out on the porch to get a better look at this brother who hadn't been born but just showed up at his door.

“I got marbles, but I ain’t learned how to play,” John said. “Mama says marbles is in the devil’s toy box. But Papa says you can’t go to hell for playing children’s games.”

William smiled at his little brother, revealing a mouth full of the straightest, whitest teeth John had ever seen. “God don’t have no problem with fishing, do he? I got a pole and my grandpa says there’s trout in the lake out by Patterson’s farm.”

“Mama won’t never let me go out near Patterson’s. She says there ain’t nothing but trouble out there.”

“Old Mr. Patterson has the best peaches you ever did eat.”

“Won’t he sic his dogs on us?”

“He don’t got no dogs. I bet you could—”

William’s arm lifted without his permission, and he was suddenly being dragged off the porch behind his mother.

“I don’t ever want to see you talking to That Boy,” Mary Ann told her boy. For the first time in her thirty-three years Mary Ann’s age was showing on her face. “He’s no good. He won’t bring nothing but trouble.”

###

John woke up the next morning to a rat-a-tat on his window. Outside he saw his brother, his arms full of ripe Georgia peaches. John’s head was already out the pane when he remembered what his mother told him. As if he knew what his brother was thinking, William left the peaches in a pile near the bushes.

They were the sweetest peaches John had ever eaten.

The rat-a-tat came every day, with William bringing a new temptation. “You wanna go down to Patterson’s lake? The water don’t come up any higher than your thigh.”

“My mama said I can’t go.”

“Your mama ain’t got to know. I’ll bring you back before sundown. She won’t even have time to miss you.”

After about a week, William wore down John’s resolve. The younger boy crawled out of his bedroom window and onto his brother’s shoulders, Mary Ann thinking her son was with his father at the store. The brothers walked for nearly a mile before William put him down and led the way to Patterson’s lake. The sun seemed to stand still that afternoon and every afternoon William would show up at John’s window to take him out into the world. William taught his brother how to fish and hunt and steal Patterson’s peaches. “Sweetest ones at the top,” William would say. “You gotta get way up there.”

William taught him the important things too. Like how you would know when a dog was ready to have her pups. And who should win the World Series. And that Joe Louis had always been and would always be the world’s greatest boxer. “He don’t never do what you’d expect. He stays right on his toes, prancing round that ring like a natural-born dancer. Don’t matter how big his opponent. He just tires him out, keeps him guessing.”

William had never seen Joe Louis fight; he’d only listened to the boxing matches on the radio. He’d never even been in a fight, but he believed what he was telling his little brother. “Don’t you never go looking for no fight, but if one comes, just keep him guessing.”

That summer John became a little boy Mary Ann didn't know. He had learned to swim and to stare down raccoons. He could outrun all the other boys his age and had developed a mean batter's swing. Then, every day as sundown approached, William would deliver John back to his bedroom window, where he'd become his mother's son again and never let it slip that his sinful older brother had become his best friend.

###

It had been years since George and Mary Ann had seen eye to eye, but communication had completely broken down between them since That Woman, whose given name was Ruth French, had shown up at their door with that son of hers who was the spitting image of his father. George spent long hours working at Tyson's store then on the porch smoking cigars in the evenings after dinner. He barely listened to the girls when they chattered about the latest fashion or the newest musical recordings. And no matter how many times Mary Ann brought it up, George refused to discuss William or his mother or what happened twelve years ago. "I made a mistake, Mary. There ain't much more I can tell you."

George had met Ruth at nineteen when he and his brother, Joe, moved to Mercury and started sharecropping for Patterson. Ruth's family had worked for Patterson since before the war chopped up the South, leaving land to everyone except the Negroes. The days at Patterson's were long and hard and left little time for anything but a few hours rest. Except on Sundays, when George and Ruth would steal away to the woods to find a little comfort in each other. Ruth would stroke his chest and his ego while he told her about his plans to learn a trade, maybe go to college. "I was thinking about Tuskegee. Never been to Alabama."

"You could stay here. Maybe we could work our own farm."

"I don't want to farm for the rest of my life. My daddy was a sharecropper. His daddy was a sharecropper, and his daddy was a slave. I'm tired of people owning me. I want something that's mine."

Even when he wasn't tangled up with Ruth, George spent most nights sleeping outdoors so he could save his money. The next year George was enrolled in a college in Atlanta, studying business, but he landed back in Mercury two semesters later when his money ran out. He took a job working with Sam Tyson in his general store and slowly became the man in charge.

By that time he had married Mary Ann, a teacher's daughter whose family hadn't farmed or sharecropped since before Emancipation. She'd spent two years at Spellman and helped him at the store until the children started coming in waves—two girls, then three years' break; two more girls, then five years later, a boy.

Around the time his youngest daughter turned three, George started sneaking over to see Ruth. The first time they'd gotten together had been an accident. Then Ruth became a habit he couldn't break, a reminder of the man he was before his dreams came true. They met regularly for two years; then one day Ruth told him she was leaving and was gone.

George wasn't prepared for her return years later after her father had a stroke and slowly started dying. George knew Ruth slapped his wife in the face every time she walked into town with that son of hers who looked more like a Cooley than the little boy who lived in his house. But he was always glad to see her.

###

John crawled out of his bedroom window and onto his brother's shoulders earlier than normal. When Mary Ann walked into her boy's empty room, his father still downstairs hunkered over his breakfast, she went into a panic. George knew John had been sneaking around with his brother, but he didn't know where his sons might have gone. "Don't worry none unless he ain't back by the evening," George told his wife, but that would not do. She paced her living room all day, her mind thinking of all the ways her only son might be killed. Then, finally, she heard William and John sauntering back toward the Cooley home just before sundown.

Neither boy saw Mary Ann coming when she burst out of the house carrying George's gun, fully loaded. "You put him down," Mary Ann screamed.

John had never seen his mother so hysterical, had never seen her hold a gun, had no idea if she could even shoot. William lowered his brother to the ground and held up his hands in a kind of surrender.

"You leave my house," Mary Ann said. "And don't ever come back. You stay away from my son, you hear?"

George walked up just then, having left work early to see if John had come home, and he heard his wife yelling at his boy. "Mary, put down the gun. William ain't hurt nobody."

She looked at the father, then at the son, and pulled the trigger, sending a bullet soaring into the tree.

###

George didn't have any say in whether he'd ever see his son. Ruth settled her late father's affairs and boarded a train headed north, promising to never set foot in Mercury again.

John cried for days, openly as little boys do. George mourned silently, shedding his tears into shots of whiskey at the bar. Mary Ann thought her world had finally turned right side up, but she'd lost more than she gained. Her husband and son grew distant, and the chasm became wider with each passing year.

As soon as John finished high school he joined the Army and moved as far from Mercury as the government would take him. He spent two years in Germany before being stationed in Arkansas, where he married a gal named Cecily. They'd had two children when his mother called to say his father was getting worse and the doctor said he probably wouldn't survive the summer.

In his childhood home, filled with memories good and bad, John asked his father if he'd ever heard from William or his mother. "I got a letter once, addressed to Sir. Said he'd graduated high school and was studying mechanics. There was no postmark, but I think they settled somewhere in Massachusetts. Ruth's people wouldn't tell me much."

When George Cooley died that summer, his insides eaten away by his disease, he left a little something to each of his six children.

John had been made an officer, and he and Cecily were expecting their fourth child the year he was stationed in Massachusetts. So close, he rummaged through phone books until he found seven William Frenches who might be his brother. He called each one until he thought his father had been wrong about where William and his mother had relocated. Then he called a William French on East Sycamore.

"Hello. My name is John. I'm from a little town in Georgia, and I'm looking for a man named William French. His mother was Ruth."

“John? John Cooley?”

Time seemed to have stood still, and John felt like the little boy on his daddy’s front steps who’d met the person he wanted to be. William had a wife of his own, children, a job with benefits. He still listened to fights on the radio.

The brothers talked for hours and made plans to talk again. John sat in his favorite chair just holding the phone even after his brother was off the line. After all the years the brothers had been kept apart… He thought of his father and his mother, of Ruth French on the porch, and wondered at the odds. “If that don’t beat all,” John whispered to himself. “If that don’t beat all.”

MAKING ROOM

Josephine waited as the train unloaded its passengers. Charlie hadn't been to visit since the summer before last when he was just seven years old and still scared to travel alone. Now he was nine, a big boy, and probably looking even more like his father.

Since the day her brother died and Charlie went to live with his sister, Jo had felt cheated, like the last shred of light in her small world was being stolen from her. But what would she do with a little boy? She knew it was best.

A woman stepped onto the platform, tall and thin and wearing a yellow gabardine dress that looked like sunshine against her light-brown skin. She was followed by a man in a tweed coat with elegant stitching, like it had been sewn on a machine. Then came a woman struggling with two small children and a cumbersome bag that made her walk like a seesaw. Jo watched the passengers unload one by one until finally a boy, tall for his age but still so small compared to all the adults who debarked before him, stood on the steps in a wool suit, much too hot for the Georgia sunshine, and a bag so big he held on with two hands.

He was the spitting image of his father.

"Charlie." Jo crushed him against her massive chest. He dropped his bag and held on tight, taking in the familiar smell of perfume mixed with hints of bacon grease. Jo could have carried him all the way home, but he was much too old for that kind of thing, and she didn't need to give the neighbors another thing to talk about. Long seconds went by before she pulled back and kissed him hard on the cheek. Charlie squirmed without thinking, as boys do, and Jo laughed out loud. "Come on now," she said, taking his bag in one hand and his palm in the other and wondering to

herself if she looked anything like the woman with the children who'd gotten off the train. The walk to the bus stop was a short one, and there was no danger nearby, but still she held on tight, savoring the touch of his small palm.

"Martha has a car now," Charlie said as he waited in the heat beside his aunt. The bus driver took the bag, and Jo climbed in beside the boy. "It belongs to Uncle Henry, but she drives it. Sometimes she takes it real fast. How come you don't have a car, Aunt Jo?"

Everyone in town knew Jo was afraid to drive, had been for years, ever since George Lewis ran into a tree when he was driving her home from the post office. She lived just down the road, but he wanted to show off his Model-T, a dilapidated old thing Old Man Mason had given him just to see what would happen. She knew back then that George was a fool, but she married him anyway, the first of her husbands. He wasn't the worst, but he didn't hold a candle to Frank. None of them did, especially not the one that run off a few weeks after she put Charlie on the train for Jacksonville.

"I don't need no car," Jo said. "Ain't nowhere worth going in this town that I can't walk to, except maybe the train station."

Mercury had a simple pattern, like the plain dresses girls sew when they're first learning. A red-clay road snaked from the train station into downtown, where there was one of most everything people thought they needed. One department store owned by Mr. Harding. One small restaurant that served Negroes out the back door. One five-and-dime run by Sam Tyson. Most of the essentials were repeated across the invisible line that separated the town, minus the department store. Jo ran a small store her father had built.

At the house, white and showing its age in the Georgia sunshine, Jo settled her nephew into the yellow room. It had had the biggest bed and a clear view of the big oak tree in the front of the house. The room used to be Jo's when she was a little girl, back when she used to have nightmares about her father, back before she began hearing whispers in the wind that, strangely, made her feel at ease. She still loved that room even though she hadn't slept in it for years.

Jo put Charlie's clothes in the tall dresser and made him change into something that would welcome the sun. Jo promised Martha she wouldn't let Charlie run around in his bare feet the way other children did, that she'd make him act like he was raised in civilization. But she knew Charlie would do as he always did, and she knew she wouldn't stop him.

"Before supper, we'll walk down to the store and get some soda pop," Jo said. "We got some new flavors."

Charlie's face spread into a big smile as he pulled on his shorts and shirt. "Can I get some candy too?" he said.

"You can get some candy too—but just one piece. You gotta leave room for your dinner."

Jo hadn't promised Martha not to spoil him a little. Isn't that what aunties do? A little candy, a little soda pop—what would it hurt? Children grow up so fast, and the summer is only so long.

Jo's store was an assortment of odds and ends—knobs for doors and lace for curtains—and enough necessities to keep people coming back. On top of rope and shoe polish and chewing tobacco, which she never seemed to carry enough of, Jo had the widest selection of candy in town. And hers was the only place in The Bottom, as the Negro part of Mercury was known, to carry

soda pop. Sometimes, when she was feeling especially generous, Jo would bring some of her own cooking into the store—fried chicken, pound cake, stringed beans with potatoes—to sell to the men who'd gather on the porch to listen to the radio. When there was a fight, she'd make a killing. But she warned the men months ago that Deacon's baby boy was coming, and the store would be closing on Sundays for the rest of the summer.

Jo was sure everybody heard her. Mercury was only so big. But when she and Charlie walked up on that bright Sunday afternoon, there was Otis Fields, a wiry nuisance of a man, sitting outside the door, waiting for someone to open it. He squinted against the sunlight and held a curious expression as Jo walked up with the boy, as if his mind couldn't quite comprehend the scene. "So this is Deacon's boy," Otis said as Jo and Charlie approached. "We ain't heard nothing but Charlie this, Charlie that for weeks. Son, you got something against listening to the fights on Sundays?"

Otis gave Charlie a pleasant smile, like he may have been glad to meet him, but Jo shot him a look that a more sensible man would have taken for a warning. "Go way, Otis. Can't you see I got my nephew here?"

"Come on, Jo," Otis said. "How am I gonna hear the fight if you don't open up?"

Jo directed Charlie toward the barrel where she kept her sodas, not missing the easy way Otis sauntered into the store. "You gotta know somebody else with a radio," she said.

"I don't know nobody as pretty as you or who can cook as good as you." Otis followed Charlie over to the barrel and began to examine the sodas. He reached for an orange soda and held

it up for the boy. “I think this here got your name written on it,” Otis said. “You ain’t tasted sody pop until you tried orange sody pop.”

Charlie looked at the bottle then at Otis, and answered the way he knew his sister would have wanted him to. “Thank you, sir,” he said.

“Lord a mercy,” Otis said, slapping his knee and cackling hard. “You sho do have some citified manners. You gonna grow up to be a lawyer or a preacher or something? I bet your aunt hope you sho don’t become no preacher.”

Charlie caught Otis’ laughter and chuckled himself. Everybody knew Jo was a churchgoing woman, but the store could get rowdy at night when the jukebox roared with the popular songs. Churchfolk called it the devil’s music, and it was being played by a woman on the usher board.

Jo kept her eyes on Otis and refused to look away even when the man lifted his head and caught her glance. He held her stare as he pulled a dime out of his pocket and pressed it in her hand. “For the boy’s soda,” he said. “I got more where this came from, just aching to be spent on dinner with a pretty lady.”

This sounded like a song she’d heard before, but played out of tune and sung off key. “You go on and git now, Otis. You hear?” Jo said.

“Aw, Jo. Won’t you even think about it?” Otis said, pressing her hand with the quarter.

Jo jerked back. “No,” she said. “Now, go on. Git.”

She didn’t know why Otis got under her skin so. He wasn’t as dumb as George or as annoying as Jimmy, and he kept a steady job. He liked to listen to the fights as much as she did, but she wasn’t in the market for another husband. Jimmy had been gone for a year now, and though

she missed having company, she didn't miss him. It was his fault she had to send Charlie back to Martha early two summers ago. Jimmy didn't like children and had beaten Charlie raw when Jo was away one day. Her brother Henry said Charlie would be better off in Jacksonville anyway; it was a big city with big schools for Negro children and even a college. Still, sometimes she wished she could change his mind. Mercury wasn't so bad.

###

"Charlie," Jo called from the kitchen. "Dinner's ready."

The soft rustle of feet was a welcome sound. For all the trouble her husbands had left her with, they hadn't given her any babies. And her nieces—Deacon's girl, Martha, and Henry's daughter, Anna—were all grown up now and living far away from Mercury.

The house smelled of pork, collard greens, and macaroni and cheese. Jo made the cornbread sweet, the way Charlie liked it. There was pound cake for dessert if the boy wasn't too full of the candy he'd eaten. The radio wailed Dizzy Gillespie playing with Teddy Hill's band. As Charlie settled at the small wooden table, Jo made a mental note to turn the radio to *The Green Hornet* after dinner.

Charlie let his feet swing under the table and filled his fork with greens and macaroni and cheese. Jo stole glances at her nephew between bites of dinner, marveling at how much he looked like her baby brother and how small he seemed. After long minutes, Jo broke the silence.

"You doin' good in school? You getting your lesson?" Jo said.

Charlie glanced up from his plate but wouldn't meet Jo's eyes. "Martha says I can do better. She say I can't turn into no dummy," he said, then looked his aunt full in the face. "But I can read, Aunt Jo, and write. And I can do my numbers."

Jo hid her smile. "I want you to do your best for your Aunt Jo, OK?"

Charlie dropped his head again, shuffling his food until crumbled cornbread dusted his plate like little drops of yellow rain. "No, ma'am. I ain't gonna grow to be no dummy."

"I know you won't," Jo said. "I'm gonna stay on you to make sure you don't."

Charlie lifted his head, bowed it, then raised it again. "Am I gonna come stay with you?" he asked.

Jo struggled to swallow the food left in her mouth. The face across from her looked so much like Deacon's. He had rushed out of Mercury as soon as he turned eighteen, joined the army, and survived the First World War only to get killed by a stray bullet during a rowdy poker game. Now his son wanted to come back.

Jo opened her mouth to say one thing, but something altogether different came out. "Your sister is taking good care of you. She and her husband keep a roof over your head and got you in school. You'll do better in Jacksonville, where you got somebody can teach you how to play catch."

Jo didn't know what she was saying. The words came from nowhere. She was as good at throwing a ball as most men she knew, and Mercury wasn't lacking in schools. Maybe they weren't fancy like the ones in Jacksonville, with different rooms for each class, but she wouldn't let her nephew grow up to be no dummy. Yet she knew there was something true in what she had spoken.

“You’ll come see me in the summer,” she said. “We can spend every day together and you can run and play and not worry about cars or traffic or anything. It’ll be you and me.”

Charlie let his feet swing and gripped his fork as he looked at his aunt. “Martha’s gonna have a baby, and there ain’t gonna be no more room for me,” he said. “I heard her talking. She said she didn’t know how she was gonna make room.”

Jo did her best not to let the surprise show on her face. After all their talks on the phone, Martha never even mentioned a baby. But what she’d done to Charlie was worse. Martha had crossed a line in Jo’s book, worrying a child with grown folks’ problems. She’d never known a house that didn’t make room for a baby.

Charlie looked like he wanted to cry, and Jo felt like something was pulling her heart right in two. Mercury was nothing but red clay and wide open space, pecan and peach trees, and more relatives than any reasonable person could name. But time refused to move in a hurry, and too much had remained unchanged. That was something Jo knew better than most. She had to stay. She knew that’s what her father wanted, even if she never could explain herself to Deacon or Henry. Some things you just know, she’d told her brothers and her husbands when they tried to convince her to sell the house and leave town. She’d quit trying to explain by the time her third husband brought the subject up. “If you want to leave, then get out,” she’d told him.

But Charlie shouldn’t be here. That was something else she knew. Mercury hadn’t been kind to the men in her family, not since back when the Hardings owned them as slaves. “This ain’t the place for you, baby,” Jo said. “You probably too young to understand this just now, but having wide open space don’t always mean you free.”

Jo looked at the little boy, still struggling to keep the tears at bay, then back at her own plate. Dizzy's trumpet wailed again from the radio. If she didn't know better, Jo would have sworn she heard a faint wind blow from the yellow room.

THE NIGHT OWL

The earth beneath her seemed to be moving and Jo hadn't felt this way in years, not since Frank wasted away and died. She held on to the kitchen sink and cursed herself for feeling she might be sick. This man wasn't worth it, wasn't worth her losing her lunch or her sleep or her money. He wasn't Frank. But she had no choice. Before she knew it her stomach was rising up, and she barely made it to the back door before she splattered its contents all across the back porch.

The courtship had been quick, which in hindsight was her first mistake. Or had it come earlier, when she let his smile break through her resolve and light that little lamp that hadn't burned since Frank? She couldn't go back far enough in her mind to pinpoint the moment when she let herself down, and the harder she tried to place it the more her stomach would curl.

She washed her mouth out at the kitchen sink and sat down heavily at the table, the weight of her large frame seeming to pull her harder and faster than ever these days. In truth, she was glad to be rid of Jimmy, glad to have the house to herself, to be able to run the store the way she wanted to without constantly having to fight about what food to serve or where to get her liquor. There would be no more strange men looking for Jimmy, wanting to settle up on bets.

She might have found the strength to actually be happy—and after so long—if Jimmy hadn't taken what she could never get back, no matter how much time went by or how much money came into her possession. Jo had never been one to give in to hysterics; there would be no puddles of tears, no emotional fits. She clenched one fist on the table and tightened her jaw. This wasn't sadness. It was anger, and she would have to work it like a piece of chewing tobacco. She couldn't swallow it, or it would make her sick; she'd have to let it sit until it was ripe, and then spit it out.

“Miss Jo! Miss Jo! I got here as soon as I could.” Mabel Watkins was knocking on the front door and letting herself in at the same time. “I heard what he done did, Miss Jo. I’m so sorry. So, so sorry.”

Mabel was like the wailing women in the Bible. She would be crying for days, every time she thought about it, long after Jo’s tears had completely dried up.

“I told Sam. He said he’ll go after him if you want. It ain’t right what he done did. It just ain’t right.”

Mabel had come to sit down at the table, her pretty, light brown face turning red from weeping. Jo hadn’t said a word, but wailing women need no inducement. Jo stood long enough to reach for a towel, which she passed to the younger woman, and sat back down in her chair.

“He was a Cheshire cat,” Mabel said, sniffling into the towel. “You couldn’t trust that smile. But who knew? Who knew he’d go off and do what he done did? Just up and leave? Just go on and take the car you done bought for him, pad his pockets with money he made from your store, and just up and run off. It ain’t nothing but a shame. God don’t like ugly, Miss Jo. He won’t forget this. Don’t you worry about that. He won’t forget this.”

Jo smiled to herself, grateful that Mabel didn’t know any more than that. She could live with all of Mercury knowing Jimmy up and left her. Half of them had been expecting it anyway. She was fifteen years his senior, and most folks couldn’t see anything but trouble in that.

“Don’t you worry, Miss Jo,” Mabel said, dabbing at her eyes. “Joe Cooley said he’d open and close the store till you come back. And Beulah Ann said she’d make some stew to serve. It

won't be as good as yours, but it'll do until you're ready to go back. I got some cornbread and biscuits I'm going to take over. Don't you worry. Don't you even worry."

Mabel usually got on Jo's nerves, but she was grateful for the woman today. She didn't feel like cooking, and she didn't feel like being around people.

"I thank you kindly, Mabel. It's been a hard time. Real hard. I got my stomach rolling around, turning flips on me, and I could use some time to get this all settled around in my head."

"You don't have to say it twice," Mabel said. "You get some rest. I'll be by to check on you. We'll take care of everything."

###

The sign above the Night Owl had been crooked for years, ever since Frank hung it like a lazy man, standing on a rickety assortment of stools and chairs. Jo had fussed about the sign for most of their marriage, but after a while, the fighting was just for show. She liked it that way. Now it made her think of her first husband, who'd always been just a little different from everybody else.

The little wood-frame building had peeling paint and rocking chairs sitting beside a table for playing checkers. A barrel Frank made Jo promise to stock only with Coca-Cola sat near the door. It had been little more than a store for years, until Frank said folks needed a place to just relax and have a good time. So he put in a few round tables circled by chairs. Thanks to Jimmy, the tables now filled every inch of space except for a patch near the center that served as a dance floor. A jukebox was perched against one wall.

Jo watched from her house across the street as people started filing in. She had a clear view of the Night Owl from the window of the spare bedroom. And for now, while the crowd was still milling in, she could hear the music. Lena Horne's "Stormy Weather" filled the air. "That dern Mabel," Jo said to herself and remembered again why she never asked Mabel to watch the place. The Night Owl wasn't made for mourning, but as sure as the day was long Lena was followed by Billie Holiday singing about strange fruit. Jo wondered how long she could let this go on. Surely Joe Cooley would put a stop to it.

A big boy everybody called Boo stood on the porch, smoking a thin cigarette that from behind Jo's bedroom curtain looked like a Mary Jane. Boo had arrived in town from Americus to visit a cousin three years ago and never managed to make the short journey home. The difference between doing nothing in Mercury and doing nothing in Americus is vast. There was real trouble to get into in Americus, chain gangs to wind up on for making one wrong move. In Mercury, if Boo had sense enough to stay where the black folks lived, he'd be left well enough alone.

A girl barely tall enough to reach his shoulder slithered up next to Boo and reached for the joint. He gave it up without a struggle, smiling down at her and letting his hand rest low on her back. Jo never let drugs into the store, but she knew Jimmy let customers break all of her rules when she wasn't around. Before things went from bad to terrible, she started asking Joe Cooley to stick around after he dropped off his whiskey, just to help her keep an extra eye out. He'd taken to staying every night until the last man was gone.

Boo reached down and kissed the girl, letting his hands slide down her hips, then lower still. Jo watched the two, kissing like they were somewhere private, and she almost missed Jimmy.

Frank had been dead for two years when Jimmy walked into the store to deliver an order of chewing tobacco. She'd been alone for so long, she wasn't prepared for a man not yet thirty to flash her a wide, perfect smile and call her Sweet Pea.

"Sweet Pea? You got eyes to see I ain't some gal just out of school," Jo said.

"I see just fine and I like what I'm looking at." Jimmy leaned across the countertop while Jo took his coin and passed him a Coca Cola.

"You hush up now. Handle your business and keep moving. You wasting your breath trying to sweet talk me."

Jimmy gave her another smile, and Jo found herself smiling back, as if it were a reflex. Joe Cooley had been trying to catch her eye for months, and she just pretended not to notice. But Jimmy wouldn't be ignored. He said he was just passing through on his way to Atlanta, but he came back the next week and the next and the week after that. Everything happened so fast—the candy and flowers, the kiss that felt like cool water—and the next thing she knew he'd asked her to marry him, said there was no one else who'd ever measure up to her. And she'd said yes.

###

The Night Owl hadn't been open thirty minutes before people started trickling in. The crowd had been mostly young folks since Jimmy started working the place with Jo, but there were older folks tonight, people as old as Joe Cooley.

Jo heard laughter coming from the place and wondered what was happening inside. The music was changing, getting faster and louder, and she heard something crash and the sound of breaking glass. The big boy Boo stepped back out onto the porch, the slithering girl still in tow,

and lit up a cigarette. She watched as Joe Cooley, hot as fire, ran out to where Boo stood, put an angry finger in his face and called him everything but a child of God. Boo just looked down at him, his expression blank, and took a long drag at his cigarette. The girl just stood there laughing and clinging to Boo's arm, as if the whole thing were funny. Joe Cooley turned around in a huff and walked back into the Night Owl, leaving Boo blowing white circles into the air and the girl still laughing about who knows what.

Jo thanked God for old Joe Cooley, but she couldn't stop wondering how long she could keep this up. Boys like Boo had been coming round more often, no doubt thanks to Jimmy. But it's easier to keep a roach away than to evict one. And these boys were like roaches, crawling out from everywhere and multiplying faster than you could snuff 'em out. Men like Joe Cooley would be able to keep them at bay for only so long.

Jo left the window and went to her room. She'd seen enough.

###

Jo had never been able to sit idle. If she was on the front porch with Sister Moody, she was shucking beans. If she was out for a walk, she was going somewhere, usually with food in hand to deliver. She never understood what it meant to be a woman of leisure, with nothing in particular to do. Jimmy could lie around smoking cigarettes and listening to the fights on the radio, but she had to have a pot on the stove or a cake in the oven to be able to enjoy any show that had ever come on.

Jo awakened to the warmth of the sun on her face and reasoned it was a sign that she should go see about her garden. Something about the brightness of the morning made her feel upbeat, and

for a second she forgot about Jimmy, forgot that he had left, forgot that he had taken the watch Frank won playing bid whiz, the zoot suit that made Frank look like Cab Calloway, the Stacy Adams shoes, the coats and shirt that Jimmy was much too thin to wear and, worst of all, the photograph of her father Frank put in a gold-plated wooden frame. Pictures were all she'd had left of her daddy since a lynch mob ripped him away when she was just a girl. And now this.

Even with the burden of memory, she looked at the sun and felt this would be a good day. But was that even possible? She fought with the idea while she got dressed, while she made grits and eggs for her breakfast, while she read her daily Bible verses. But the sun just kept flooding in, breaking down her resolve, and she took a bowl from the kitchen and walked out into its bright hopefulness.

"Jo? Is that you?" Annie Moody was hurrying down the street as best she could, the arthritis in her hip having slowed her down long before it should have. Jo was walking toward the garden, but stopped to look in the woman's direction and wave, hesitantly, with the bowl.

At forty-seven, Annie Moody was just a few years older than Jo, but she had been answering to Sister Moody for years, ever since the day before Reverend Green died, when he gave her and not his son his precious leather Bible. Jo loved the woman like a sister but wasn't up for any I-told-you-sos, at least not today. What had the sun gotten her into?

"Jo, chile, I been wanting to come see you, but something just kept stopping me."

Usually, Jo would let Sister Moody chatter, but she didn't want her to linger too long on offers of consolation. "Come on round with me to the garden," Jo said. "I got some field peas that ought to be ready for the pot."

"It was like I set my mind to come round here, and then I'd get in one thing or another," Sister Moody said, following Jo around to the back of the house, where she kept rows and rows of vegetables: collard greens and green beans, okra and onions, tomatoes and bell peppers. "Miss Jessie from the Bible League, good gracious, that woman just keep calling me. It took me plum near an hour to get her off the phone. We been going to convention in Atlanta for years, and now she thinks we need to meet every week to plan the trip and pay dues to cover the expenses. We ain't never paid no dues, and we ain't never missed a convention, but she wouldn't hear that. No, she just had to fuss. I'm glad I'm a Christian woman, or I would have told her what's what. You know what her problem is, don't you?"

Jo smiled as she picked peas and loaded them in the bowl. "No, but I'm sure you can tell me."

"Yes, I can tell you. She's scared she might end up paying more than somebody else. That woman will pinch a penny until she make it scream. But we all God's children. Every one."

"You ought to stop pretending you like her. Everybody can tell she works your nerves."

Sister Moody smiled and rubbed her hip and squinted at the sun. "Back when Reverend Green was alive, I asked him to move her off the Bible League, just so I could have some peace."

Jo laughed up at her friend from where she was stooped down collecting peas in her skirt now that the bowl was full. Laughing, even at Jessie Hawkins' expense, felt good. Real good. Sister Moody was laughing too.

"Reverend Green didn't pay me no mind. He said, 'Moody, God puts some folks in our lives to be our sandpaper and smooth out the rough edges. You got yours and I got mine.'"

Jo laughed harder at that, nearly losing her balance and the peas as she stood to carry the vegetables inside. She made a mental list of all the people who might have been Reverend Green's sandpaper, and Sister Moody came in near the top.

Sister Moody followed Jo in the house and helped her empty the peas into a bowl. Then they sat in the kitchen, removing the vegetables from their shells.

"I never did see what you saw in that man." Sister Moody must have been about to pop from waiting to broach the subject of Jimmy, Jo thought.

"I guess he just caught me at a bad time. This old house can get awfully quiet sometimes. And it was nice having some help over at the store."

"Maybe it's time to close that Night Owl."

Jo stopped shelling peas and looked at Sister Moody.

"I know it belonged to your daddy, but it's getting wild over there. I heard all kinds loud noises and screaming and crashing over there last night."

"Joe Cooley was tending to it."

"Sounded like it was tending to itself. I heard Joe Cooley got himself in a fight with that big boy, Boo."

"I ain't heard no such thing."

"Maybe nobody wanted to worry you, but maybe you should be worried. Jimmy brought in that jukebox and had all them young people over there all the time, just sitting round like they ain't had nothing to do. A boy as big as that Boo could do the work of two or three men, but he just want to do what, shoot pool?"

“We ain’t got no pool table,” Jo said, angrily pinching away the shells. “And that jukebox ain’t done nothing but bring us up to the times.”

“So you’re defending him now, the man that just up and left you?”

“I’m saying there ain’t nothing wrong with having a jukebox.” Jo took the shelled peas to the sink to rinse and thought it might be time for Sister Moody to leave.

“Jo, what you got to do with them kids? You a churchgoing woman.”

“My daddy left me that store, and I ain’t never been sorry. The Bible never said folks couldn’t have a good time, have a little drink. We only sell the whiskey Joe Cooley makes. There ain’t no harm in it.”

Jo took her peas and dumped them into the pot of pork she’d put on to boil.

“I ain’t trying to make no trouble, Jo.”

“Then don’t.” Jo said and closed the lid on her pot.

###

The sun had tucked itself behind a cloud by the time Mabel stopped by Jo’s house, fumbling over herself trying to apologize. “I’m so sorry, Miss Jo. I thought everything would be OK. I never thought there would be trouble. Boo is as big as an ox, but he ain’t never made no trouble. Oh, Miss Jo.”

Mabel was crying and turning her face red again. Jo put her arms around the younger woman without thinking and began to rock back and forth, like she used to do with her brothers’ children. “Come on, now, it ain’t that bad. I called over to Joe Cooley’s, and he said everything is just fine. I done lost plenty of chairs in my day. You don’t see me over here crying.”

Mabel looked up and smiled and suddenly remembered her promise. “There wasn’t a drop of stew left, so I asked Beulah Ann to make some more for tonight. I gotta get it over there before people get ornery.”

Mabel rushed away before Jo could thank her or tell her she’d be tending to the store tonight. She could already hear the music and the soft din of laughter coming from across the street, sounds that had for so many years reminded her of what was missing. Jimmy never understood the rhythm of the place. He thought he had a mind for business, but he succeeded only at losing money, except for the jukebox. Jimmy was like a magnet for all the trash within a twenty-mile radius. Decent folks rarely came around anymore.

The sounds from across the street grew louder, the hoots of laughter more raucous, the music more grating and urgent. Jo had never heard the song that was playing and hoped to never be assaulted with it again. Someone screamed, sending the hair on Jo’s neck to attention. Glass crashed, and there was a boom.

Jo had never given much thought to business. Before she married Frank, she just ordered supplies when they were needed and used what little money she earned to buy the essentials. The house had been left to her by her mother, she didn’t use a car, and nobody ever refused her cooking. She sold dozens of cakes and pies without even trying to.

But when Frank came along, the store started making real money. Not just at night, but during the day too. He managed to always have what people needed. That was Frank’s way. He knew people, understood them. When Jimmy started running things, the store began losing money, and the bulk of the income came from the nighttime activities. Jimmy ran things then. Jo had never

been one for staying up all night. Only bad things seemed to happen in the cover of darkness; the lynch mob taught her that when she was still a little girl.

She meant to continue what her daddy started at the store, but she'd been handing the job off to her men, for better and for worse. There'd been enough fighting down at the store; a fight of some sort is what got her daddy killed in the first place. She heard the mild rustle of wind in the spare yellow room, and she suddenly knew what she needed to do. As an idea quickly became a plan, she began to wonder if maybe Jimmy had done her a favor.

Jo went into the yellow room and rummaged around among Frank's old tools and when she found what she wanted she headed out the door. A crowd gathered outside the Night Owl parted like the Red Sea as Jo walked by, hammer in hand. Inside, a spate of cards and broken glass littered the floor around one table, where a man who had his hair slicked back with lye was cursing Boo, his mama, and his children yet to be born. Joe Cooley stood between them, as if he could prevent either man from throwing a punch. The yelling ceased at the sight of Jo.

Joe Cooley rushed to where Jo stood with a hand on her hip. The muscles in her face seemed to be hard at work, moving from anger to something Joe Cooley couldn't quite decipher.

"Jo, what you doing here? We got things under control. I know it's been a little noisy over here, but them two was just leaving."

Jo scanned the place, taking in the familiar faces who seemed to have lost their minds all of a sudden and the unfamiliar ones who seemed to be growing more and more abundant. She'd known some of them since they were knee high to an ant, but the rest were virtually brand new.

They all seemed to want to tear up her place, the only thing she had left of her father's. She moved to where Boo stood.

"You handy with a hammer and nails?"

Boo looked her up and down before giving Jo an awkward nod, as if he weren't sure.

"Well then, make yourself useful." She motioned with her head for him to follow, and the two walked outside, a small crowd in tow. She pointed to the sign, always crooked, and handed him the hammer. "It's about time we got that thing straight."

Boo grabbed a chair from one of the checker tables.

"I don't need you owing me for another chair," Jo said. "You think that can hold you?"

Boo didn't answer, but stood on the chair, bringing him eye level with the sign. He lifted the crooked end and reached out a hand to take the nail Jo was handing him. He followed her instructions—a little higher on the right side, lower, no, no, not that low—then lifted the hammer and set the nail in place.

Jo stood below, her hands on her hips, and stared at the sign. Boo stepped down off the chair and handed Jo the hammer. She stared up into the big boy's face.

"Tell Joe Cooley I said to give you something to eat on me," Jo said. "Tomorrow you gonna start working off your debt, you hear?"

Boo looked confused but nodded anyway. Jo barely noticed, having turned her attention to the crowd standing around. She looked at their faces and silently said good-bye. The poker games and outside liquor would be the first to go. There would be no more late nights. This was her store, after all.

“This here place belonged to my daddy, and he gave it to me.” Jo scanned the crowd and waved the hammer without intending to. “It ain’t none of yours. You break something, you pay for it, you hear?”

Joe Cooley stepped between Jo and the crowd, as if they might try to attack. Jo felt nothing but certainty. She nodded to Joe, as if to say thank you kindly, then turned with Frank’s hammer in hand and walked into her house.

HAPPILY EVER AFTER

They were married on October 20, 1935, less than a month after they met. There was no romance. No whirlwind. He was twenty and said, “Will you?” She was sixteen and said, “Yes.” And with that she landed a ticket out of a town that was stifling and small.

They moved south, barely an hour’s drive from Mercury, and Rick started selling moonshine. Good stuff. He was busy all the time. But she was a worrier and thought he would get caught and hated the idea of going back home with the baby that was coming. They moved again, this time farther south, out of Georgia and into Florida, where he looked for honest work.

She had a boy. A chunky son they named Daniel.

Rick’s feet were too flat for the war, so he worked at odd jobs—paving roads and picking oranges—before he started cutting grass for Mr. Chilton. In two years’ time, he bought his own mower and developed a regular clientele, people Chilton didn’t know. He made a living, but ends didn’t always meet, so Joann worked odd jobs too, waiting tables mostly, and taking in laundry.

She met her husband’s other son the year Danny turned six and she found out she was pregnant again. The boy, Jeremiah, was five and had started attending Danny’s school. The teacher said, “His last name is Ford, and he looks just like your husband. I’m sorry, Joann. I thought you knew.”

She would have left if the baby hadn’t tried to come early, forcing her to stay in bed. Without the money from the washing, the Fords became something worse than poor. Rick would make her salt pork and cornbread for dinner, the kind of food their grandparents ate as slaves. Sometimes the neighbors gave them pots of string beans and potatoes or collard greens. Other

days, after she and Danny had eaten, Rick would say, “I already had my plenty.” And then he would leave.

###

They lived in a two-bedroom apartment on the wrong side of town. It was big enough for three, but another son, Jonah, came in 1950. It was if her womb suddenly opened up, and two children grew to four, then six, until Millie stopped breathing a few weeks after she was born, leaving Joann with five children, three boys and two girls, and a dark shadow that kept hounding her until one day she couldn’t speak. And then the washing started to pile up and she couldn’t seem to get out of bed.

Rick packed her and the youngest children in the Bonneville and drove them north to Joann’s sister, back into Georgia but not as far as home. The sister said, “It’ll just be for a spell, Rick. I seen this kind of thing before, when the world just get to be too much. You’ll see. It’ll be all right.”

Joann was gone for nearly seven months, and when she returned home, Rick had bought a television and was making plans to build a house. She heard talk that there had been another woman, a different one this time, but she packed the information away. She wanted a home, something to pass on to her children. She knew she’d stay.

They moved into a little block house with three bedrooms, one bathroom, and a kitchen furnished with secondhand appliances.

That year, Danny got married and moved into an apartment. And Joann found a job as a secretary for the college. She told Rick she had to work late some nights, but she was really taking classes to earn her GED. When the children were older she hoped to go to college.

One night, when Joann got home, she grabbed what was left of dinner and sidled up next to the children to watch contestants on *The Price Is Right* bid on furniture and dishwashers and automobiles and trips to faraway places like Europe.

She said, "It sure would be nice to have a new refrigerator. That one is either freezing the milk or letting the meat come to room temperature."

Rick said, "We get by all right."

She said, "It's alright to do something other than just get by."

That was the night he slapped her, alone in their bedroom, when the children were already sleeping. He said, "I work all day and come home to a house full of kids and no wife at night and then you going to sass me? In front of my children?"

He hadn't hit her hard, but Joann didn't see it coming, so she had to pick herself up off the floor before she could register what he was saying. She said, "A woman can't speak her mind? You got to be king all the time?"

He said, "In my house that I built? Yes, I got to be king."

###

They fought through most of the seventies, the decade when, one by one, the children started leaving home. The girls went away to college, to study business, to become a lawyer. The boys, spared Vietnam, went to work in mechanics, construction, landscaping.

In 1980, when Betty, the youngest, was twenty-one and close to graduating, Rick woke up one night and grabbed his chest. He was drenched in sweat and looked frightened. Joann called for an ambulance, and he was rushed to the hospital. Heart attack. Close call. Complicated by diabetes that had gotten out of control. Could have been the end, the doctor had said. They would put in two stents and teach him to monitor his blood sugar, and he'd be good as new. Except that he'd get winded more quickly and wouldn't be able to cut lawns for weeks and the hospital bills would be enormous and the black cloud that had chased Joann after Millie died would pack its bags and move back in.

In the hospital, Rick grabbed his wife's hand and said, "Please don't leave me." But when Joann opened her mouth to speak, her voice was gone again.

###

They fell into a pattern, a series of bad habits they just couldn't break. Rick spent half the morning in bed, then ate the breakfast Joann had cooked him before camping out on the couch, watching the old television for hours at a time. By dinnertime he'd find the will to shuffle into the kitchen to make something for the two of them to share.

No one wanted to send out their laundry anymore, so Joann supplemented her retirement money by doing hair at the house. She kept one eye on Rick and another on her customers, who she knew would steal from her if they could. The women chatted incessantly, undeterred by her silence. "My sister's husband's cousin lost her voice one time," said Louise Simmons, a regular. "She just went to open her mouth one day and nothing would come out. My sister say they ain't stopped thanking the good Lord. Don't he work in mysterious ways."

That was Louise's last visit. A woman with no voice can't cry out, can't call the police, can't scream for her husband to risk another heart attack to come see about her. Joann lathered the hair color on too thick, let it stay on too long, and washed Louise's hair down the drain along with the dye. "You some kind of crazy fool woman?" Louise had said. "Don't you even fix your mind to think I'd ever come back to this place."

Louise left her hair in the sink but took most of Joann's customers with her to a shop downtown that charged twice as much but served coffee during the wait. For the first time since the day he married her, Rick wanted out, but knew he couldn't leave. Not now. Not when his wife finally needed him.

###

Rick had never trusted a man who wore white during the week, like he was too good to get himself dirty with real work. So when the insurance man came—decked in white from his hat down to his shoes—Rick knew there would be trouble. The man showed Rick a piece of paper with a huge sum of money written in a box at the top. "You can be insured for this amount for just fifty dollars a month. Because your son knows Mr. Cummings, you were able to get the better rate. This is one of our best deals."

Joann walked to the front room and stuffed a handful of bills into an envelope and handed them to the man. Rick sat on the sofa, watching the exchange. "You're doing the right thing," the insurance man said, looking at Rick. "If anything happens, you'll want to know your family is taken care of."

Fussing had lost its thrill now that Joann couldn't talk back, so Rick just ignored her, letting the silence grow thick with time. Every day they sat on the sofa watching game shows one after the next. On one afternoon Rick blinked hard and rubbed his eyes with a clammy hand, wanting to be sure of what he was seeing. There was Joann, running down the aisle screaming and waving her hands in the air. Bob Barker asked her to guess the price of a refrigerator. She answered to the dollar. There were lights and streamers and balloons, and Rick heard Joann calling his name, but when he looked over at the sofa, there was nothing but a cloud. He felt a stabbing pain in his chest and then everything went blank.

At the funeral, Joann moaned and rocked and would not be consoled, the miracle of her newfound voice overshadowed by her sorrow. Danny held her against his shoulder while her daughter rubbed her back. She never thought she'd feel this way. She'd only thought about living without him. It was just something she imagined, like riding in a fancy new sports car or living in a million-dollar house.

She heard the preacher say, "We can't understand why the Lord would take him home." Then Joann felt something go pop in her head and felt drunk all of a sudden. She rested her aching head against Danny's chest, closed her eyes, and let sleep come. Her arms, her head, her legs all felt like lead, and she could no longer hold the weight. She felt Danny's hands around her waist—lifting, lifting—and heard someone scream. Then it all went black.

Happily ever after, till death did they part.

DOWN THE ROAD

Annie cocked one leg up on the post of Nan's front porch and waited for the children to run by. Annie liked sitting out there in the heat of the day, even with the washing still not done, just to soak up the warmth of the sun. There was something that ran cold in her blood, a thing she never understood. Other people might complain about Mercury's hot summer days, but not Annie. This was the only time of year she was truly comfortable.

"Gal, are you out there on that porch again?"

What Annie felt for Nan was not the way a person should feel for another child of God. The woman had given her a place, sure, but she treated her like a slave. Annie did all the washing and most of the cooking for Nan and the other women who rented rooms.

The house had looked like paradise when she first saw it, two nights after her daddy gave away her baby, but time had a way of clearing her vision. In truth, it wasn't much to speak of, just wood frame with five rooms and a porch that wrapped around to the side. But after the long walk from Hyattsville, some twenty miles away, the house seemed to be just about the finest thing Annie had ever seen.

Night was beginning to fall and Annie hadn't eaten in days. After her daddy gave away her baby, she thought surely he'd let her stay, but he threw her out like a pile of manure, the shame, he said, being more than the good Lord would have him bear. So Annie started walking east, with the little bit she had stuffed into a bag, and found herself in Mercury standing outside the plain little house with the fancy wraparound porch.

Four women, Nan and her boarders, were outside, snuggled close to their men, hands reaching well beyond what was decent. Annie gathered in one long stare exactly what kind of house this was, but when Nan hollered at her to stop staring and come on up the stairs so she could take a good look at her, Annie obeyed almost without thinking.

That night she slept in a bed, stomach full of decent food. She'd awakened to the sight of a woman's feet in her face, the bed having belonged to Essie, who liked to sleep with her head at the foot of the bed. Annie followed the feet to the other end, where she found a wild bush of sandy red hair with a pillow curled beneath it. Having solved the mystery of the feet, Annie turned over and went right back to sleep.

The next morning Annie learned how Nan expected her to earn her keep. She was a fine young gal, Nan had said, who'd do just fine here. Annie put her foot down then and there, said she wasn't no whore, no matter what anybody said, and she clenched both fists and got that mean look in her eye.

Nan had been perfectly calm as she sat at the kitchen table painting her fingernails. "I don't know who you been listening to, but ain't no whores live here. We just women who know what a man want. We know what they like, so menfolk come round here when they want to feel like men instead of boys. If I had half a mind, I'd turn you right out of here so you could go back to wherever you come from, or get back to going wherever you were heading. I done gave you food to eat and a place to sleep, and I got to sit here and listen to you call me a whore?"

Had the color been rising in Nan's high yellow cheeks, Annie might not have been so surprised. But when Nan stood up all of a sudden and slapped her hard across the face, the rings

on Nan's fingers leaving small welts, Annie never saw it coming. It was then that Nan told her how things would be from now on. "You will cook and do the washing. The sheets need to be changed every day, and the girls need their nourishment." Nan said this without a hint of irritation, as if a switch had suddenly been turned off, and she became the woman Annie first met on the porch, smiling and laughing like they would be the best of friends.

The other women had begun to file into the kitchen, some because of Nan's outburst, others because it was somewhere in the neighborhood of morning and they were hungry.

"You and the other girls going to get along just fine. Mary here don't eat nothing green," Nan said, pointing to a woman more fair than Nan herself, whose hair hung in thick ringlets down her back. "But nobody else is that hard to please. Right here is Essie," Nan said, waving toward the red-haired girl Annie had found curled up next to her in the bed. "You two gonna bunk together since Essie in the family way. And over there is Betty Ruth." Annie turned toward the woman with the book in her hand, the darkest of the bunch, but even with the annoyed look on her face Betty Ruth was especially beautiful as far as Annie was concerned. She'd never seen skin so silky smooth, cheek bones so high, or legs so long.

Annie couldn't explain why she did it, but she nodded at each of the women as Nan introduced them and then, with her face still stinging, walked over to the stove to make them something to eat.

Nan's voice on the porch lifted Annie out of her reverie. "There's still washing to do. Sun will be setting before you know it, and there's too much yet to do for you to be sitting out here in

the heat. If you want to sit out on this here porch, you can come out with us tonight. Raymond Moody been asking about you. He and his brother Ben be coming by tonight."

Nan hadn't bothered her about entertaining the men after Essie started bleeding one night and lost her baby. Essie wasn't showing, so even before the miscarriage she'd go out on the porch or into the parlor and sit on the men's laps, letting them kiss on her and touch her leg, her knee, her thigh. But Essie never let one of them take her behind closed doors. She teased and teased, letting the men run their hands through her wild red hair, but she always managed to slither away and send them out the door before things went too far. There was only one man Essie wanted in her bedroom, a man named George, who she was secretly planning to marry. She said he was saving money to take her away from the place, away from Nan, and Annie sure hoped she was right.

"I'll have the washing done before supper, Nan," Annie said as she summoned her leg from the post then stood up to finish hanging the spare sheets she'd made from fabric she bought with change the other girls had given her. The beds would be made before supper, and the extra sheets would be safely tucked away in a box under her bed until the next day.

Before she could get to the front door, Nan grabbed Annie by the arm and stopped her midstride. "I told Ben you'd be here to meet his brother. So get yourself fixed up, OK?"

Something in Annie's stomach dropped, and her mouth felt like cotton. She wasn't no whore, no matter what her daddy said, and Nan wasn't about to make her one neither. She wanted to scream, but she felt just as trapped as she did the night Joe Freeman cornered her in the storage

closet at his daddy's store, put his hand over her mouth, and stole the virtue her daddy had been so carefully guarding.

Joe was a big, solid man, with broad shoulders and a gorgeous smile. Annie, like all the other girls, thought he was just about the handsomest man in Hyattsville, and she couldn't help but think he'd picked that up, that she'd somehow invited him to take her whenever he wanted. So she didn't tell anyone what happened, and when her father took her baby before she'd even had a chance to see her, Annie figured she deserved her punishment.

Annie made the beds with trembling hands and burned the first batch of cornbread, her mind so distracted by the night that was coming. Nan had been watching her all day, glancing at her out of the corner of her eyes and sometimes just staring outright, as if she was waiting for Annie to do something.

In their room that night, Annie watched Essie getting dressed and hoped that when Ben's brother saw her red hair and compared her silk dress with Annie's simple cotton one, that he'd choose Essie instead and let her tease him for a while before sending him home drunk and disappointed. Annie didn't know how long Essie had been watching her through the dresser mirror when she looked up and saw the strange expression on the woman's face. Annie laughed to lighten the mood and sat down on the bed. "You scared me, Ess. What you doing staring at me like that?"

Essie had stopped putting on her powder but was now primping again. "Annie, you don't have to do nothing you don't want to. I'm just here until George saves up enough to get us a place. We done run off and got married after I found out about the baby. That's why I don't let nobody

touch me but George. Nan knows about us, and she looking to you to be my replacement, but you ain't gotta do nothing you don't wanna."

Essie had dark eyes that showed hints of green when the sun hit them just right. A spray of freckles covered a wide nose and broad cheeks, and if it weren't for that wooly red hair of hers, she might not be thought beautiful.

Annie looked down at the hands she had been wringing in her lap then back up at the face still staring at her through the mirror. "What am I going to do? I can't run off. I ain't got nowhere to go."

Essie left her powder on the dresser and walked over to where Annie sat on the bed. She put a hand on each of her shoulders and looked Annie in the eye. "I said you ain't got to do nothing you don't want to. Not with Raymond, you hear?"

Annie nodded, determined to put on a brave face, but not before a tear escaped and rolled down her cheek. She wished it were true, but she just wasn't convinced she had as many options as Essie seemed to think.

###

The radio hummed with a woman singing a bitter tune to a man who'd done her wrong. Betty Ruth was dancing with a man Annie hadn't seen before. Annie could hear Mary out on the porch, giggling softly and purring every so often, "Come on, now, stop." Nan was snuggled up with Ben in a dark corner where little could be heard besides a few low moans while Essie danced by herself next to the radio. Annie sat on the couch with her hands folded on her lap and Raymond,

Ben's tall, lanky brother, sitting next to her, looking as nervous as she did. He'd worn a hat, which was now beside him on the couch, and Annie thought she saw beads of sweat on his forehead.

"Sure is a fine night."

Annie nodded at his observation then thought she'd better speak up so he wouldn't turn to look at her. "Yes, it's a fine night. The breeze is nice after such a warm day."

Despite all the coos and chuckles coming from the porch, Annie figured Mary wouldn't be doing anything too indecent where everybody could see. If she had to sit with Raymond, she wished she could at least have one comfort and sit in her favorite place.

"You want to go outside since the weather's nice?" Annie couldn't hide her surprise at Raymond's suggestion. Had he been listening to her thoughts? Or had she been thinking out loud?

"Sure," was all she said before they got up to sit on the empty porch swing. Annoyed by the interruption, Mary and her date got up in a huff and took the place Annie had abandoned on the couch. Raymond moved one long leg and set the swing in motion, finding an easy rhythm that kept it gliding smoothly. Annie felt herself begin to relax as the summer breeze gently brushed her skin.

"I'm sorry to have been so forward, Miss Annie. I saw you in town one day, and I told my brother I didn't think I'd ever seen nobody as pretty as you. Next thing I know, he's got Nan setting up a date. I just want you to know, I know what kind of girl you are. I know you ain't never knowed a man like them others. I know you a good woman. I ain't saying Nan is bad or nothing. I know my brother got himself a little sweet on her. Nan just ain't the kind of woman I want for a wife, that's all."

Raymond said all of this without looking at Annie. “The truth is… Truth is, Miss Annie, I’d like permission to court you. I would ask your daddy, but, well, seeing how he ain’t around, I figured I’d just ask you.”

Annie hadn’t given much thought to matters of the heart since hers deceived her into thinking she wanted Joe Freeman to notice her. She didn’t know if her heart could yet be trusted, but there was something about Raymond, something decent, that reminded her of the girl she had been back in Hyattsville.

“Miss Annie, you sure know how to torture a man.” Raymond laughed and Annie smiled up at him. She didn’t realize how long she’d been lost in her thoughts before she answered him.

“I think that would be nice.”

They both sat back on the swing, Raymond continuing the steady rocking, and though Annie wasn’t looking at him, she could tell that he was smiling.

###

Raymond started coming by almost every evening, always taking Annie out of Nan’s house for one purpose or another. One night they went dancing. On another they sat out near Moss Lake, and Raymond told Annie about the things he planned to do. Annie watched the moonlight dance across the water as Raymond poured out all that was in his heart. He’d been sharecropping with his daddy, but he wanted his own farm. He’d plant new crops—corn and soybeans in addition to the cotton. “Diversification, that’s what everybody’s talking about these days. Can’t let one bad winter or one long summer wipe everything out.”

Raymond would build her a house closer to town. They would have a dozen children, and she'd get fat in all the right places. Annie liked listening to Raymond go on about the future. It always seemed so bright down the road where Raymond was looking. She liked the hope she heard in his voice, the light she saw in his eyes. She wished she could hope with him, wished she could see herself on a farm or in a big house, but all she could see was the moment, the night sky filled with stars, the shadows bouncing off the lake, Raymond's hand on hers.

When they arrived back at Nan's that night, Annie began to wonder if she knew what love was, how it would feel when it finally stopped by. She hadn't told Raymond about Joe or the baby, still wasn't ready for him to know who she was or who she had been. But she was starting to want him to know her, truly know her, the way she was beginning to know him.

Annie had just put on the grits the next morning when Nan appeared in the kitchen in her robe, curlers still in her hair. "What you been doing with my money?"

"What money? I ain't got no money."

"You trying to steal from me?" Nan reached out and twisted Annie's arm.

"I ain't stealing nothing from you, Nan."

"You expect me to believe Raymond been coming around here this long and you ain't been getting no money from him?"

"We just talk, Nan. That's all. He ain't never gave me no money."

"You think you better than us, but you ain't. You been telling Raymond you some kind of lady, but you ain't nothing. You cheap. I ought to tell him what kind of girl you really is. He got a right to know."

"Nan—"

"It's about time you started bringing some money in here. You can give Raymond something worth paying for, or you can come out into the parlor with me and the girls." Nan looked at the pot on the stove. "Scramble me some eggs to go with those grits."

Annie spent the day ruminating on what Nan said, chewing on it then ignoring it then pulling it back up to chew on it again. She asked Essie what she thought Nan would do, and this one had her stumped. All the girls knew to give Nan a portion of any money that came in; Nan rationed out to them what was paid to her directly. But they all knew the arrangement, had agreed to it in one way or another. Not Annie.

"You never know with Nan. She might change her mind." Essie sat on the bed while Annie reached underneath it to pull out the extra sets of sheets.

"But if she don't, what then, Ess?"

"You could sit with us tonight. You don't have to let them go too far."

"Ess." Annie jumped and almost hit her head on the bed.

"I know, Annie. I know. Ain't none of us thought we'd end up here. What about Raymond?"

"What about Raymond?"

"Don't he want to marry you?"

"He ain't asked me or nothing, but he seem to. I just don't know if I love him."

"You ain't got to love him. He a decent man who will treat you right."

"A man ought to have a wife that loves him."

"You could learn to love him."

Annie nodded at Essie, the two of them now making the bed, but she fell quiet, not sure why the thought of marrying a man she might not love left her with such a strange feeling. Annie wouldn't be the first woman to do what she had to; her grandmother was a slave. Her mother married a man her father had chosen for her. Annie guessed she had no right to think she should be any different, but every time she thought about getting married just to have a place to stay, something in her stomach curled. Essie might be right; she might grow to love Raymond. She might love him already, but she couldn't bring herself to say yes to him until she knew for sure.

If she couldn't look to Raymond to solve this problem, she'd have to figure out something else. Annie wracked her brain for any way she could make some extra money to hand off to Nan, but she spent all day and into the evening doing the washing and the cooking and the cleaning for Nan and the girls. As much as she hated it, she saw only one thing to do, just until she'd saved enough money to leave.

###

That night there were more men than there ever had been, too many for just a handful of women. The draft had come to Mercury, and a group of boys was getting ready to head to Europe to fight in the World War. Nan told the girls if there's anything these boys needed it was to be treated like men. The burgeoning soldiers had been instructed to come in waves, first three, then four, then three again, but the war looming over their heads made the boys unwilling to wait. They came to Nan's in something of a pack, hooting and carrying on before they'd even stepped foot on the porch.

Nan took one of the older boys, the one who seemed to be calling the shots, and distracted him with a dance. She let him move more quickly than she had with others, and before long she was leading him back to one of the rooms.

The other boys, not sure what to expect, seemed content to let Mary, Betty Ruth, and Essie stroke their egos with glimpses of leg and thigh, a lingering kiss or two, a touch where the boys knew their hands shouldn't have been. Essie had two of the boys just where she wanted them, full enough with liquor that they thought they were having a better time than she was actually giving them. Mary had taken another boy to her room. Betty Ruth had two men cuddled up next to her in a dark corner of the parlor when suddenly the girls heard a scream from Nan's room.

Betty Ruth tried to pry herself away to see what happened to Nan, but one boy, much stronger than he looked, held her down. Annie had been in her room working up the nerve to go into the parlor when she heard the commotion. She rushed out to find Betty Ruth wrestling off two men, Essie trying to push another away, and cries still coming from Nan's room.

Annie found a vase and hit one of the boys attacking Betty Ruth on the head. He fell as if suddenly asleep, and Betty Ruth grabbed a lamp and hit the other boy with it. The two trying to push Essie in a corner pulled back, afraid of the chaos that had erupted in the room. Annie ran to Nan's door and opened it to find the boy with a hand to her throat. How Nan had managed to scream at all Annie didn't know, but she reached for the first thing she could find—an iron—and lunged toward the soon-to-be soldier. He fell onto Nan, blood streaming from a gash on his head. The boy hadn't been knocked out, just stunned for a bit, and when he got hold of his senses he rushed toward Annie like a cheetah, swifter than anything she had ever seen.

“You want to kill me?” The boy punched Annie like she was a man, throwing her into the dresser, where she landed on her side. “You don’t see fit to give me decent pay but you can send me to Europe to fight for you? You still think I’m some kind of slave who just gonna run when Massa call him, huh?”

With every question the soldier struck a new blow, kicking and hitting Annie so hard she could no longer feel the pain. Curled into a ball on the floor, barely able to tell what was happening, Annie heard the man say Uncle Sam could kiss something, before he fell onto the floor, and this time he was out.

When Annie woke up she was in bed, but Essie was nowhere in sight. She smelled bacon cooking and heard voices coming from the other room. When she tried to sit up, searing pain shot through her head and her hip. She didn’t realize she had cried out, but all the girls and Nan had come running, with Raymond and Ben not far behind.

“You can’t move, Annie.” Essie stroked Annie’s head and it felt surprisingly good. “Doc said you can’t get up.”

It wasn’t what Essie said that made Annie anxious. It was what was left unsaid, the worry Annie could clearly see in her eyes.

“What else did the doctor say?” The pain in her hip was something Annie never knew could exist, worse than the hours and hours of labor before her baby girl finally decided to be born. Annie looked from Essie to Raymond, their faces telling the same story.

“Doc said you never gonna walk again.”

“That’s not what he said, Nan.” The color was rising in Essie’s cheeks, almost matching her hair. “He say that’s the worst that could happen if that hip don’t heal right.”

“She gonna be a cripple either way.”

“Cause she was trying to help you.”

“I ain’t ask for no help.”

“No? You was screaming for nothing? You just like the sound of your own voice? He would have killed you if Annie hadn’t gone in there.”

Nan stepped close to Essie, so close their noses were almost touching. “I said I ain’t ask for no help.”

“Well, she helped you, and now she got to lay up in this bed for who knows how long.”

“I can’t have no cripple in my house.”

Essie seemed to lose her balance at that, taking a step back and knocking into the dresser. “She ain’t got no place to go, Nan. What she gonna do?”

Raymond and Ben had kept quiet up to that point, but Nan’s words put everybody on edge.

“You can’t just turn her out on the street,” Raymond said. “Doc said she can’t move.”

“Doc didn’t say she had to stay here.”

“Nan, you don’t mean to say that,” Ben chimed in.

“I know my own mind, Ben. I can’t have a cripple in my house. Annie got to go.”

“Nan, she can’t move,” Essie said.

“If there was a fire burning down this house, she could move, Essie.”

Nan turned her attention to Annie, who was still trying to sort out what exactly was happening. “I been trying to tell you, but you ain’t been able to hear me, so now I just got to make it plain. We need more girls. I can’t have nobody in here who can’t pull her own weight.”

“Come on, Nan,” Ben said. Give her a couple of weeks to see whether she’s getting better. Doc will be back soon, and he can tell you whether that hip is healing right.”

Nan seemed to be thinking about this suggestion from Ben. She gave him a long, hard look, her eyes darting over to Annie then back at Ben.

“I can give her two weeks. No more.”

Nan left the room, and Annie felt herself breathe again for the first time since Nan started talking. The pain was excruciating, but she was going to have to figure out a way to move. She tried to sit up, but she felt Raymond’s big hand on her shoulder, forcing her to lie down on the bed.

“Please, Annie. Don’t let what Nan said disturb you none. Nan can’t mean that.”

“Nan meant every word.” Essie looked like she was about to pounce on someone. “She ain’t right in the head. She probably scared of cripples. Whatever’s wrong with her, she meant what she said.”

“You don’t know that. She just need a little time.” Ben said the words but seemed unconvinced.

Raymond knelt beside Annie’s bed and put her hand in his. “I don’t have much, but we can get married, and I’ll take care of you.”

“You don’t need to be tied down to a cripple, Ray.”

“Doc never said you was going to be a cripple. Besides, Annie, you is more than your leg.”

"A wife that can't hardly move? No man ought to have to live with that."

"You let me worry about what a man ought to live with."

"I can't do it, Ray. I can't let you throw yourself away."

"I ain't throwing nothing away. Wouldn't nothing be better to me than having a life with you."

Annie couldn't do it to him. She couldn't rob him of the chance to make a proper life with a proper wife. A man who spends his days in the field can't come home to take care of his wife. This was the worst time to be caught between a rock and a hard place, now when she could barely move. But of the two choices she'd been given, neither of them would do.

"I can't ask you to take care of me. If I was your wife, I should be the one taking care of you. This ain't the way. I know you want to help, but this ain't the way."

The small room overrun with people worried about her was just about more than she could take, and Annie asked to be alone. Essie kissed her on the forehead and left with Ben. Raymond departed reluctantly, squeezing her hand tight before he exited the room.

It had been a while since Annie had talked to God. She wasn't sure he wanted to hear from her, not after everything that had happened. Moving into Nan's house surely hadn't improved her standing with him. But she could think of nothing else to do, lying on her back in the worst pain she had ever known.

"I can't say I done much right, but I can't take no more punishment. Between Joe in that closet and Daddy taking my baby and now this, I done had all I could take. If you want to kill me, go ahead. But if it ain't my time, I need some help with this. Nan say I got to go, but I ain't got

nowhere to be. I can't be a proper wife to Raymond if I'm laid up in a bed. You can take me, do with me what you will. But I can't go on like this."

Before long Annie fell asleep, not resting especially well but better than she expected. For two days Annie lay still as she could be, embarrassed to have Essie change the towels she kept up under her in the bed. It was the third day when the miracle happened, when she felt a sudden relief from the pain. It wasn't gone, not by a long shot, but it was something in the neighborhood of bearable. When no one was around she attempted to lift the injured leg, and it moved. Ever so slightly, but it moved.

Doc, not much for believing in miracles, supposed that the hip wasn't as bad as he first thought. It wasn't broken surely; it must have been sprained and nothing more. That would explain the sudden mobility, the lessening of pain. With the ability to move, albeit slight, came something Annie never expected—the sense of a second chance, hope, possibilities like the ones Raymond was always dreaming of.

Annie hadn't allowed herself to dream since her baby was born. She'd left hope behind when she walked out of her daddy's door. But now, here of all places, she felt a lightness in her heart that made her think the future just might bring something good. And when she looked down the road, she saw Raymond there with her, and she knew she wanted to be Mrs. Moody.
She was as sure of that as she'd been of anything.

She told Essie and Essie told Mary, who told Betty Ruth. It wasn't the fact that Annie finally wanted to marry Raymond that got the women's attention; it was that she still wanted to marry him on day ten, when she stood up on her own and took that first painful step that proved to

her, Doc, and Nan that she would walk again. This was enough for Nan to give up talk about her leaving, but Annie still had her sights set on a different future. There was now only one important question left to be answered: whether Raymond would still want her after he learned about the baby.

Annie told Essie about her plan to tell Raymond, and Essie told her she'd be a fool to go digging up the past. "A man don't need to know everything about his wife. You think I done told George everything I done did?"

But Annie would not be swayed. One step had turned into three, and Annie felt the strength of a newfound power, the power to choose the kind of life she would have, to not let Nan or her daddy or even Raymond tell her who she was or who she was going to be. When Raymond came to visit her that day, she decided to come clean. She wasn't quite the girl he thought she was; she'd had a child, she told him. The father hadn't asked her permission. Maybe she'd given him the eye, but before she knew what was happening, he had her pinned to the wall and was doing his business. She hadn't thought to scream until it was all over; none of her senses seemed to be working until the deed was done, when he'd kissed her hard and left her in the closet, her mouth stinging with blood. She had felt sick to her stomach and the room started spinning, and that's when she began to realize just how much she'd lost.

Raymond listened to this with a hand over his mouth and a hurt in his eyes Annie hadn't seen before, not even when she woke to talk that she would never walk. When she finished her peace—when she'd told him about the baby and Joe's refusal to acknowledge what he'd done, about her daddy calling her a whore and punching her hard like a man when he'd found out she

was with child; about the hours she spent in labor to deliver a child she was never allowed to see, and about her daddy sending her away—only then did Raymond's expression change. Only then did he move the hand from his mouth and drop to his knees and bury his face in Annie's neck, crying the way men aren't supposed to, open and unashamed, his tears leaving a trail of warm heat flowing down her neck. Annie could tell his hands were searching for a place to be, so with her newfound strength she sat up enough to let him hold her the way he wanted to, and she held him, letting him share the pain she never thought she'd be able to carry alone, much less share with someone else.

It was with more tears and chaste kisses that Raymond responded to the news that she would marry him. Not today or next week, but when he'd found a decent place for them and she could walk proper. He released her then, allowing just enough space between them so that he could look in her eyes.

"I don't have my own farm. I'll be sharecropping like my daddy. But we can stay in a place on Mr. Dalton's land. It ain't much, but one day I'm going to build us a house with a fancy porch like Nan's—"

"No, Ray." Annie's tone was urgent. "I don't want no porch like Nan's."

She could tell Raymond wasn't satisfied with that, his heart having been set on spoiling her. "I don't need nothing fancy."

Raymond kissed her hand and held her palm to his cheek. They stayed like that for several long minutes before Raymond kissed her again and left her to get some sleep. Annie just lay there after he'd gone, eyes wide open and fixed on the ceiling. She thought about her baby and her daddy

and a pain shot through her hip. She winced, wondering about her future with Raymond and what hurt may be waiting for her down the road. She weighed the past and the present and decided on the future. This time she'd keep walking, to see where this road would lead.

SOUTHERN DISCOMFORT

It was the worst summer. Julia and her sisters had been visiting Aunt Jo for years, but with Georgia eighteen now and working a regular job and Ava attending summer school, Julia was alone in Mercury this time around. And she'd never been so bored. There had never been much to do besides help Aunt Jo cook. But this year nothing had taken on new meaning. It was like the heat: stifling.

Julia knew her parents had a reason for sending her all this way alone. They were tired of her rebellious ways. She didn't mean to break the rules; sometimes they just seemed so unnecessary. Julia figured her parents hoped the simplicity of life in Mercury, its old-fashioned Southern charm, would cure whatever ailed her and make her appreciate the good life she had. Their plan, such as it was, was failing. She was even more anxious for movement, to be headed forward, not standing still or, worse, stuck in the past.

Julia sat on the stairs of Aunt Jo's front porch picking greens and listening to two old women gossip. Sister Moody was devout, the kind of woman who was in church every time the doors opened. But when the doors were closed, she was usually with Aunt Jo, telling her about a cheating husband or a wayward child. Today it was Jenny Lee, who kept such a filthy house Sister Moody had been afraid to sit down.

"That was the worst thing I ever did see in a woman's kitchen," Sister Moody said. "Grease caked up on top of everything, bugs crawling on the dishes. I wouldn't eat her food with a borrowed mouth, I don't care what people say about her corn pudding."

"You stop that, Moody."

“Jo, I ain’t never seen nothing like it. The rug was crawling with fleas, and I’ve seen cleaner toilets after they just been used.”

Jo laughed out loud at that. “You know you ain’t right," Jo said. “She got all them kids round there. She probably doing the best she can.”

“She can do better,” Sister Moody said with confidence. “You didn’t see it. And nobody told her to have all them children with men who don’t know how to stay put.”

“Moody, you know it ain’t for us to judge.”

“I know, Jo. I just know what it means to have your back against a rock and a hard place, and I’m tired of seeing these young folk bring these babies into the world they can barely feed.”

“What are they supposed to do? Leave the babies out under a tree?” Julia didn’t usually interject when the women were talking, but Sister Moody was starting to get on her nerves.

“Jules.” Jo’s voice wasn’t loud, but Julia knew she’d crossed a line. “Sister Moody ain’t one of your friends from school.”

Julia felt heat rushing up her shoulders and neck. She wanted to blame the Georgia sun, but she knew it was something else, restlessness making her more impatient than usual. “May I go over to the store?”

“Them greens ain’t gonna pick themselves.”

“When I’m done with the greens can I go over to the store?”

Julia kept her eyes on the vegetables, not wanting to see Sister Moody gloat.

“You go on. Moody and I can handle that little bit.”

Julia didn't look back as she bolted from the porch, abandoning the greens in a few quick steps thanks to the long legs she inherited from her mother. The store was just across the street, but Julia felt like sprinting. The days moved slowly there too, but it was a different backdrop for her to watch nothing happen. And today anything would be better than listening to Sister Moody.

"Jewell." Martin's face always lit up when she walked in, a fact that Aunt Jo rarely failed to mention. He was the only one in Mercury who didn't call her by her given name, as if they had some kind of special relationship. Aunt Jo had asked her why she answered to it and just grinned when she said she didn't know.

Julia plopped down at the counter, and Martin handed her the soda she would have eventually gotten around to ordering. The store started selling Pepsis after Martin's daddy bought it from Aunt Jo years ago, and Jules almost felt like she was sinning every time she drank one. Her aunt believed in Coca-Cola like it was a religion. But it was hot and she was thirsty.

"Why do you call me that?" Julia said, taking a swig of the soda.

"Call you what?"

"Jewell."

"Why do you answer to it?"

"I asked you first."

"Jewell seems to fit you."

"Jewell sounds like a little girl's name."

"You are a little girl."

"I'm sixteen. Aunt Jo was married already by the time she was sixteen."

"You trying to get married?"

"Of course not. I'm not getting married till I finish college."

"I was just wondering. Because if someone asked you to marry him, you might want to go ahead and scoop him up before he gets his mind back."

Julia swatted at him as if he were a fly. "Stop being stupid."

The store hadn't changed much since Mr. Massey took over. They still sold odds and ends like any decent five-and-dime. The checkerboard set was still outside, and they still sold the whiskey Joe Cooley and his son, Pete, made, only now it came in bottles. Massey served food too, but nothing was as good as Aunt Jo's cooking, and everyone in town knew it. The stuff at Massey's was what they called getting-by food. It satisfied hunger but little else.

"There has got to be something to do in this town. I think I'm going to go stir crazy this summer. I head home in another couple of weeks, but I don't know how much longer I can stand this."

"Your Aunt Jo isn't keeping you busy?"

"No. Aunt Jo is retired. She just cooks and watches wrestling when she's not talking to Sister Moody. Sometimes I can't stand that woman."

"Sister Moody?"

Julia liked the way Martin kept up with her when she got on a roll. But only in Mercury would they ever be friends. He was decent enough to look at, but he was bookish, the kind of guy who'd measure out exactly one ounce of candy or count each chicken wing he put on a customer's

plate. He was good with numbers; everybody said he was a math whiz, which is why his father wanted him at the store and not in college, where he belonged.

"You think your dad will pay for you to go back to college?"

The smile that seemed to be painted on Martin's face faded, and he stopped leaning across the counter and busied himself wiping down every stray crumb he could find. "He came home with a car he bought in Atlanta. A Buick. Not new, but nice enough to pay for at least three semesters."

"He bought a car?"

"Yep."

"What are you going to do?"

"I don't know. I make money here, but I'd need his help unless I got a scholarship."

"Have you tried to get one?"

"Yeah. Meharry was interested. They're in Nashville."

"That's not too far. It's just a few hours' drive."

Martin's voice had been growing softer and softer, and now Julia had to lean in to hear him.

"It's a medical school, and my dad wants me to go into business."

"But if he's not paying for it, why does it matter what he wants you to do?" Julia found herself talking in whispers too.

"Not everybody is as good as you are at not caring what their parents think."

Julia wasn't sure how to take that. She didn't think of herself as a rebel. She just liked doing things her own way. And at the military base, there was always somebody watching, telling her what was and wasn't appropriate for a chief master sergeant's daughter. She hadn't enlisted. How had she become one of her father's troops? His rules felt like clothes that didn't fit.

Martin was talking but Julia hadn't been focused on his conversation, and the bits and pieces that were now seeping in didn't make sense. There were expectations and black doctors in demand for research being done on rats because there's more to it than Tuskegee.

"We should go somewhere."

"What?"

"Yeah, we should just go. Do something."

"Have you been listening to me?"

"Of course. I heard all about your father's expectations and you wanting to do research on rats, which is just nasty. Why don't you want to be a real doctor?"

"I said I want to raise people's expectations of black doctors and get more blacks to get checkups since we're prone to get certain illnesses like diabetes. They've been doing research on rats but still can't quite figure out why that is. And black folks won't cooperate with the studies because they think it's just another Tuskegee experiment. You were looking right at me, nodding your head. How did you miss all that?"

"You see? That's what I mean. I need to get out of here. I'm getting stir crazy."

"What makes you think it'll be any better somewhere else? The biggest city around here is Atlanta, and we'd have to drive three hours to get there."

"We don't have to go to Atlanta. Americus would do—anywhere. Let's just go."

"I don't know. I'd need to work on my car before I'd take it out on the road."

"Then let's take your dad's car."

Martin looked at Julia like she'd lost her mind, and maybe she had. Maybe now Martin would believe her.

"Come on. Take off tonight. Do something fun." Julia pulled at his arm, as if attempting to drag him away.

The fact that Martin hadn't dismissed her idea yet meant there was a chance; he was thinking about it.

"What would you tell your aunt?"

"I'll tell her I'm going to bed early. Wrestling's on tonight, so she won't notice much of anything."

Martin had a faraway look on his face, and Julia could tell the wheels in his brain were turning, calculating. It was always best to keep quiet when he did this. He wouldn't hear a word she was saying anyway.

"My dad has to go pick up a shipment tomorrow from Albany. It'll take him all day. He's been telling me I had a day off coming. I'll call Pete Cooley and ask him to watch the store, and we can go over to Americus tomorrow. It's just an hour's drive. We can get something to eat and be back home by dinnertime."

"What should I tell Aunt Jo?"

"Tell her the truth."

###

The next morning, Martin showed up at ten o'clock sharp in his beat-up brown Chevrolet. It ran, but that's about the nicest thing that could be said about it. Aunt Jo packed them fried chicken even though she knew they'd be stopping for lunch. "Y'all might get hungry before you get there. Or that restaurant might not be as good as people think. Never hurts to be prepared."

Julia was surprised that this felt good, being honest, not sneaking around. She hugged her aunt just because and whispered her thanks, like it was a secret.

Knowing she was going somewhere made the ride feel good, even though they were still in town and it looked like Martin was headed away from the highway. Before she could ask him what he was doing, they were pulling up to a mechanic's shop on the outskirts of town.

"What's the matter? Your car's still not ready for the road?"

"No, that's why we're not taking it."

He parked and walked over to a black Buick convertible. It was simple, without fancy trim or any of the upgrades, but it was a novelty in Mercury. No one had a convertible.

"Are you crazy?"

"No. Dad brought it here yesterday, but Joe can't get to it until tomorrow. So, I figured I'd borrow it. Joe sees us. No harm done."

Julia didn't think she could really be blamed for this. Martin was older than she was. Nineteen. A grown man. He usually knew his own mind. This couldn't be her fault.

"Are you sure about this?"

"Of course." Martin didn't seem at all nervous. "Let's go."

The air felt good against Julia's skin and for once she wouldn't worry about her hair, whether the wind would beat at her soft afro until it fell limp around her ears. She wasn't in a luxury car, but she still felt like a celebrity, turning the heads of the other drivers on the highway. The sun was bright, but the heat wasn't grinding. Maybe it was the wind whipping against her face, but Julia felt free, and she couldn't remember the last time that happened. She rested her head back against the seat and lifted her closed eyes toward the sun, watching shades of red dance beneath her eyelids.

"Whatcha thinking about over there?"

Julia turned her head toward the sound of Martin's voice with her eyes still closed. "I'm not thinking anything. That's what makes this so great."

She imagined that Martin was smiling and wondered, briefly, whether she was interested in him. Maybe she did go to his father's store for more than Pepsi. They drove in silence, even when she'd finally decided to sit up and watch the cars breeze past. There was something pure in the simple pleasure of being on an open road in a convertible. There were almost no clouds in the sky and barely a hint of traffic. Julia turned to Martin and smiled, letting him interpret it however he may. This felt close to perfect.

The car made a sudden sputtering noise, like a man choking on his food. "What's going on?" Julia sat straight up in her seat. The noise continued and seemed to grow louder as the car began to lose speed. Martin was focused on steering and moved the car toward the shoulder without saying anything.

"Martin? What's going on? Are we out of gas?"

Julia heard the crunch of wheels on grass as Martin drove the car off the road. The car sputtered to a stop and Martin tried the key in the ignition. It wheezed, as if trying its hardest, but wouldn't start.

"Martin?"

"I don't know what's happening."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean the car has stopped moving and I have no idea why."

"Did you put gas in it?"

"It says the tank is still almost full."

Martin got out of the car and Julia jumped out behind him. He opened the hood and she peered at the engine from behind him. Hoses stretched to and from the engine, and nothing looked out of place, but Julia wouldn't have known what out of place looked like. Martin pressed on a hose near the engine and pulled back abruptly.

"Man, that's hot."

"Do you see anything?"

Martin was back at it, pressing on wires and hoses, as if he knew where each was supposed to begin and end.

"Do you know what you're looking at?"

"Just give me a minute to think, will you, Jewell?" There was something in Martin's tone that made Julia stop. She'd never seen him angry before; he'd never reminded her so much of her dad.

"I think I see something." Martin was wiggling a hose hard.

"Don't break it."

"I'm not going to break it. It's loose. I need to … get it … back … on this tube." Martin was halfway under the hood, his shirt sleeves pulled up but still tracking grease. Julia watched from over his shoulder, not really seeing anything that looked like progress.

"Do you have it?"

"Think so. Get in the car and try to crank it up."

Martin stood with one hand on the hood while Julia slipped behind the wheel. On a different day, under different circumstances, she could have enjoyed this moment, savored the joy of almost driving a convertible. She turned the key, and the engine coughed and sputtered but refused to turn over and with that rebuff went the optimistic look on Martin's face.

"Try her again," he said, peering deep beneath the hood.

Still nothing. The silence seemed endless, with Martin staring under the hood and Julia sitting behind the wheel, her hands at ten and two, as if she were going somewhere. She imagined Martin's mind was whirling.

With every minute that passed, she was getting more and more anxious to be moving again. Feeling caught between here and there was worse than having nowhere to go.

Martin's voice broke the silence. "We're going to have to start walking. Americus is still a good ways up the road, but we should be able to find a town before too long."

Martin headed back toward the driver's side, but Julia wasn't making any moves to get from behind the wheel.

“We can’t just leave the car here, Martin.”

“We don’t have a choice.”

“Let me try the engine again.”

“You just tried it.”

Julia wanted to cry. She knew how fast trouble could rush in. When her dad was stationed in Oklahoma she learned about the Tulsa race riots, and the stories left her with a tangible fear of the unpredictable way people could turn on each other. It didn’t help that every summer she visited Mercury she was reminded of the fact that Aunt Jo’s daddy had been lynched. Julia didn’t know how much other people’s memories had frightened her until now. Georgia was no better than Oklahoma; she was no safer here than there.

“Come on, Julia. We can’t just sit around in this car.”

“Maybe it just needs to cool down some. Maybe we should let it rest a bit.”

Martin pressed his hands on the driver’s side door and let his head fall limp. In all the summers she’d known him, Martin had never won an argument with her.

“Since you’re such an expert mechanic, how much time does the car need?” There was neither humor nor anger in his voice, just weariness.

“Only a little while. We can check again in maybe twenty minutes. If it doesn’t work, then we’ll start walking.”

Martin plopped down on the passenger’s side and put his hands over his eyes.

“What do you think your dad’s going to say?”

“About what? Me stealing his car or it not cranking up?”

"Both, I guess."

Martin let out a deep sigh and shook his head. "I don't know."

The sun was no longer smiling on them. A convertible, when it's not moving, is a magnet for heat. The longer they sat the more sweat dripped down Julia's back, her legs, her thighs. Two big rings circled Martin's armpits, and they seemed to be growing. An occasional car whizzed by, the lack of traffic no longer a novelty.

"I wish I could take it back," Julia said.

"Take what back?"

"Wanting to come out here. Wanting to ride in your father's car."

"You're just mad that we're stuck out here."

"No, I mean it. I'm sorry. I wish I'd never suggested it."

Martin dropped his hands and looked at Julia for a long moment. "We're going to make it home, OK? We'll get to a town and find some help or call someone to pick us up, but we will get back."

Julia wanted to believe him.

###

The Chevy seemed to have come out of nowhere. Even with both of them just sitting in an unmoving vehicle, neither Martin nor Julia saw it coming. The truck parked in front of them, and a white man stepped out. His boots were caked with dusty red clay, and he wore suspenders over a plaid red shirt. Julia felt every muscle in her body tighten as the man moved closer to her door. Martin was sitting up bolt straight beside her.

“You folks having some kind of trouble?” The man scanned the vehicle before turning his attention to Martin.

“We’re OK. Just needed to give the car a little rest.”

Julia smelled the faint scent of peaches as the man stood above her. He had gray hair flecking from his temples and a weathered but youthful face. She thought of Tulsa, of Aunt Jo’s father, of white neighbors who suddenly became violent. The man was saying something to Martin, and he was getting out of the car. She reached a hand to grab his arm, but he was already too far away. He looked back at her, but she couldn’t read his expression.

The man pressed and jiggled one thing or another under the hood so hard it made the car shake. “That there is your trouble, boy.” The man’s words were thick with the sound of rural Georgia, stronger than any accent Julia had heard so far. Martin peered at the spot where the man was pointing and nodded his head, as if he now recognized the problem and was surprised that he hadn’t seen it sooner.

“You can rig it up like this and it ought to hold pretty good.”

Martin followed the man’s instructions and told him thank you. Julia hadn’t said a word and refused to look up. She felt the man’s gaze. Even when he was talking to Martin, she had the sense that his eyes were on her.

“Where y’all coming from?”

Martin lied and told him they were from Marysville, but the rhythm of the conversation was off long before then. She should be trying the engine, testing their handiwork. The man

shouldn't be making small talk. Julia took a chance and stole a glance at him. He was looking at her.

"Julia, try to crank her up."

The man smiled in Julia's direction. "Ain't nothing worse than a woman behind the wheel. You taking your life in your hands, boy."

Julia turned the key and the engine purred like it had when the first left Mercury. She exhaled slowly and realized for the first time that she hadn't been breathing. Martin was smiling and digging in his pockets for money to give the man. He pulled out a dollar, and the man looked at his hand and waited until Martin pulled out another dollar bill, then another. When Martin reached five dollars, almost everything he had with him, the man took the bills and stuffed them in his pocket. He walked by Julia on his way to his truck and let his hand brush her shoulder.

"Drive." Martin said as he slid into the passenger's side.

Julia turned the car back toward Mercury, and the man drove in the opposite direction. She couldn't wait to get home, back to Mercury and Aunt Jo and long uneventful days. She reached over and took one of Martin's hands, still caked with grease, and held it tight, not wanting to let go.

CHANGING TIDES

My mother went to the beach the day I was born. It was uncommonly hot for December, but this was Florida and the winters rarely dipped too far below forty degrees. She was kicking her feet in the ocean, letting the sand nestle between her toes, when she felt me coming, ready or not. She stayed quiet at first, but I was persistent, and her friends had to race her back to the car, then into the city, and downtown to the hospital so that I could arrive prematurely and live with the nurses for the next six weeks. There was nothing wrong with me really, just two underdeveloped lungs, a little trouble breathing. My mother says that's been the story with me—always in a hurry.

###

There's something wrong about double-dating with your mom. It's The Thing That Ought Not Be Done, under any circumstances, in the book of rules children follow in order to peacefully coexist with their parents. This is what I was telling myself as I slipped into the little black dress that loved my curves but not so much that I couldn't walk or sit or eat a steak, which was exactly what I was planning to do. Ralston's was the best steakhouse in town, and I wasn't going to miss the opportunity to have a decent meal. The curves couldn't live on salad alone.

Kelvin wouldn't know what hit him, but tonight wasn't really about him. This was Philson's idea, an awkward "meet the family" moment that he was forced into setting up. I don't know when I would have found out Mother was dating if I hadn't bumped into them at Pearl's Kitchen, giggling and holding hands across the table. Yes, I walked right up to them. And yes, I gave them that look—the one that says, what do you think you're doing here, without actually

saying that. I spared them the hand on the hip but only because I hadn't seen my mom laugh like that in years.

Kelvin was supposed to meet me at the steakhouse, and I was planning to let Mother assume we were a real couple. But when I arrived Kelvin was already inside the restaurant. He seemed to spot me as soon as I saw him, and he waved me over to a table near the center of the room.

Kelvin played football in college and spent two years in the pros. Running back. Now he ran a sports management business out of his house and coached a community team. He stood just under six feet, and had beautiful dark brown skin and eyes so gorgeous it was a shame they'd been wasted on a man. I knew women who'd kill for lashes like his. He was standing when I rounded the corner into the dining room, laughing at something I was still too far away to hear.

"Sorry we didn't wait," Kelvin said, standing up from the table to give me a hug and a kiss on the cheek. "Your mom saw me on the way in and asked if I was meeting you." Mom was smiling when I reached out to give her a hug, but I couldn't read her expression. If I didn't know better, I would have sworn I saw mischief in her eyes.

Mom wore a blue skirt set that skimmed a figure that could have belonged to a much younger woman. She'd never really looked her age, but with her new haircut, she barely would have been pegged for forty much less fifty-five. Philson was clearly out of his league. He was a stout man with light-brown skin and dark moles sprinkled across his nose and cheeks. He wore a casual polo shirt, a pair of slacks, and what seemed like a perpetual smile on his face.

“I hear the salmon here is really good,” Philson said, opening his menu and shifting in his seat.

“That sounds good,” Mother said. “What do you think you want, Patrice?”

The meal was on Philson, and I knew exactly what I was going to order, but I didn’t want to seem too eager. “Not sure,” I said. “I was looking at the steak.”

“The prime rib is good,” Kelvin said. “I brought a client here once, and he said it was the best he’d had.” This comment I believed to be for my benefit. Kelvin didn’t eat meat—at least not anything that couldn’t live outside the ocean. He was one of those ex-athletes who was super-health conscious, all egg whites, energy drinks, and hundred-dollar vitamins.

I ordered prime rib, Mom got the chicken, and Kelvin and Philson both ordered the salmon.

“So, Kelvin, how long have you two been dating?” It was the kind of question a mother would normally ask her daughter, but my mom knew she’d get more information from Kelvin than me. Ever since Stan, I hadn’t let my mother in on my relationships. She said I gave up on him too quickly, but I was sure the boredom that was my marriage was going to kill me, and what would Mother have said if I’d let that happen? Stan played in a reggae band when I met him, and we got married on a whim during a trip to Vegas. But the whole marriage thing changed him. He became a CPA, and before I knew what was happening, six years had gone by and we had a mortgage, a retirement fund, and no money for vacations or anything fun. That wasn’t the way my life was supposed to be. So I changed it.

I could tell my mother understood Stan, but she didn't understand me. She and my father had been together for twenty-five years when his heart suddenly seized up and he died. This my mother understood—muscles that worked until they quit.

Mother smiled coyly at Kelvin, waiting, I'm sure, to find out whether he was a guy she might see again.

"Her firm is coming up with a design for one of my clients. It's a charity that gives shoes to needy kids. We had drinks at a fund-raiser and talked off and on about the project. It took me a month to convince her to go out with me."

Mother laughed and told him I'd always been stubborn and he'd have to be persistent. But this dinner wasn't about *my* relationship, and it looked like someone was trying to forget that.

"So, Mr. Philson," I said.

"Please, call me Karl."

"OK, *Karl*. How did you and Mom reconnect?"

I could feel the air getting tense. If I'd been a better person, I would have let my mother off the hook. I would have given her some space, let her begin a new life. But I wasn't that girl.

Mom and Philson exchanged an uncomfortable look and a series of raised eyebrows and brief nods. "We met at the cancer support group. My wife died of lymphoma, and I met some great friends there. They helped me get through a bad time, so I stay in touch. When Bennie started coming, we decided to get a cup of coffee, just to catch up. And we talked for hours. Shut the place down." Philson was holding my mom's hand and looking at her like she was a miracle.

“I didn’t know you’d started going to a cancer support group.” Mother had been in remission for three years. It didn’t make much sense for her to suddenly start looking for a support group now.

“I wanted to help other people. You know Joann Wilson at church found out she had breast cancer, then Marilyn Tolliver. And now Jesse McCrary’s mother-in-law has been diagnosed with stomach cancer. It just seemed like so many people around me were being diagnosed or knew people being diagnosed, I felt I should be doing more.”

This sounded reasonable, like something in a maudlin TV movie, but I knew where this conversation needed to be going. I refused to look at my mother but kept my eyes on Philson. Did he really think this was going to go well?

A pain in my stomach seemed to be growing more intense, but I tried to ignore it. “So, Karl, how well did you know my mother before Daddy died?”

“Patrice!” Mother looked so angry and embarrassed that even at thirty-three I was glad we were in public. “This is not the time or the place,” she said, adjusting her volume so that it was as low but not so low that I couldn’t hear her.

“It’s never the time or place,” I hissed.

Kelvin put a hand on my arm. “I’m going to order a drink. Do you want anything?” Kelvin raised his hand in a vain attempt to change the subject. But Philson plowed ahead.

“I think your mother can decide for herself what will make her happy. If that includes me, I’ll be the happiest man in the world. If it’s not…” Philson had turned toward Mother and was holding her hand.

Something in my stomach seemed to be tying itself in a knot, and I wanted—*needed*—to leave, to be anywhere but here. Kelvin smiled politely at Philson and my mother, but he hadn't taken his hand from my arm. He pulled me toward him and put his face close to my ear. "You want to get out of here?"

I wanted to go, but I couldn't find my tongue. The knot in my stomach was getting tighter, as if that were possible, and before I could think twice about it, I was standing up and making a beeline for the ladies' room, nearly toppling a waiter on my way. I patted water in my face and stared at my reflection in the mirror. I felt like I was watching myself make a big mistake, like this whole scene was something in a movie and I was an actress, delivering my lines as rehearsed. This felt wrong, like I was supposed to be happy for her, supportive or something. But I didn't know how to change course midstream.

I heard the din from the restaurant as my mother walked into the restroom, bringing with her a gush of wind from the air conditioning. I lowered my head, not wanting to look at myself or at her. Mother seemed to just stand there forever before she finally spoke.

"How dare you?" I looked up into the mirror to find my mother watching me, her face angrier than I'd ever seen.

"You cheated on Daddy and you want me to just ignore that? You broke his heart. And then he died."

Mother reached out a hand and turned me toward her. She was stronger than she looked.

"You have no idea what you're talking about. I never cheated on your father. Even when he started sneaking off to that woman, I was faithful to your father. So don't tell me I broke that man's heart."

I thought of Candie and her mother, the ones who turned our lives upside down all those years ago. Mother screamed at Daddy for having a mistress, but I was ten, and I couldn't help but be curious about the girl just a little older than me who was almost my sister.

"That was years ago. He broke things off with Candie's mother when I was a little girl."

Mother looked down at her feet, but I could see her working her jaw like her Aunt Jo used to do when she was trying to calm down. Then after what felt like forever, she looked back up at me. "Well, it seems like you don't know everything after all."

All this time I'd blamed Mother. Sometimes she seemed so cold toward Daddy.

"I thought—."

Mother took a paper towel and began to dab at the tear stains on my face. "I know."

I wanted to stay like this. I wanted to be ten again so I could crawl up in my mother's lap. Instead I reached out and grabbed Mother and held her tight.

Mother pulled back and held my face in her hands for a long minute before stepping back and folding her arms nervously across her chest. "When I met your daddy I thought he was a dream come true. He was handsome, he had a good job, and he wanted to spoil me. There was a time in my life when that was all I wanted. To be pampered. To be the pretty lady on a powerful man's arm."

That sounded nothing like my mother. She was self-sacrificing. Good. I wondered where the old Bernice had gone. “What changed?”

Mother was quiet again before she answered. She had an expression on her face that I couldn’t read. I always thought I knew my mom so well.

“At first, I wanted the life your daddy could give me. Then after you came along, I wanted you to have what I never did—I wanted that more than I’d wanted anything. I wanted you to have a daddy who would love you and protect you, and your daddy did. He adored you from the moment you were born. I wanted to be the kind of mother who would put her child above herself. My mother never did that for me. I was determined to do better by you, no matter what. So your daddy snuck off to his other family and came back to be there for you. And I was willing to live with that.”

I felt my heart sink, and I wondered how much more I didn’t know about my mother.

“Why didn’t you ever tell me?” I asked.

“There wasn’t anything to tell. Your father loved you. That was the important thing.”

This time it was my turn to wipe away the tears from Mother’s face.

“So this Philson dude. Are you serious about him?”

Mother was smiling coyly. “Let’s just fix our faces and walk back out into that restaurant and have a pleasant meal with two nice men,” Mother said. OK?”

I nodded and managed a smile. I wanted to be happy along with my mother, but I’d settle with just being happy for her. The queasy feeling was beginning to wane.

###

Mother and Philson got married on the beach. The day was as clear as they come, and I gave her away in the place where I first demanded her undivided attention. We soaked in the sun's warmth and danced ourselves silly well into the evening. Late that night Kelvin and I took a long walk on the beach, kicking our feet in the ocean and curling our toes in the sand. The waves crashed and rolled back into the Atlantic. The wind whipped across our cheeks. I sensed the pull of the tide and felt strangely alive. Free. Hopeful.

THE TROUBLE WITH THE LEG

April 1911

John shifted behind the desk, his bad leg giving him fits again. It had been like this since the accident, when his father's tractor had sliced the leg almost in two. He'd decided then and there, at the age of seventeen, to have nothing more to do with farming, and he set his sights on the law. He'd planned to be an attorney with a fancy office in Atlanta. But an ill-timed affair made him a father, and no decent man would just up and leave a girl in the family way. So for the last fifteen years he'd found himself stuck in Mercury, in the sheriff's office behind this desk, watching the occasional prisoner who was too drunk or stupid or mean to be let off with a warning.

The leg, it seemed, would be relentless today. It wasn't pain exactly, more like the nerves dancing on end, sending an icy sensation up and down. There was no real rhyme or reason to it. He felt it before storms, yes. It had bothered him for days before the flood of 1903. But the leg acted up at other times, odd times, like before his daughter came down with yellow fever and then again right before the fever broke and she took a turn for the better. It happened before Old Man Wiggin just dropped dead while he was out plowing his field, leaving a perfectly good farm for the townsfolk to fight over. John often wondered if he could have helped somehow, if he could have coaxed Wiggin to take it easier or kept his farm from being chopped up and sold to the highest bidder. If the leg wanted to give him messages, John didn't know how to interpret them. He'd spent years trying but had never discovered the code. This day seemed ordinary enough—the whole week even. And yet here was this leg, refusing to give him any peace.

John was turning again at the desk, trying to find a more comfortable position that would not be found, when he heard the familiar sound of footsteps. The sheriff's office wasn't exactly the town square, but John got his share of visitors who wanted to ask his opinion on one dispute or another. At some point in his thirty-two years he'd developed a reputation as a man with good sense about him. He read the legal dispatches and knew a thing or two about the law. Not much as lawyers go, but more than most folks in Mercury, including Sheriff Watkins. So if someone wanted to buy some land, or sell a horse, or draw up a will, John was usually the one to be asked what he thought of the arrangement, if it was good deal or something that would stand up in court. Even without formal training, John always felt confident in his advice; somehow he always knew just what a person should do.

The steps outside the door had belonged to Tom Sanders, who blew in a waft of warm spring air along with a trail of red dust that marked a clear path to the chair near John's desk. Tom's boots sounded especially loud after such a quiet afternoon at the jail. Even after Tom was seated, John still heard a faint echo from his footsteps reverberating in the room.

"He ain't here, I see." Tom made himself comfortable, slouching down in the chair and setting one boot on the desk.

John shoved the boot away, like he always did, before trying to shoo away Tom's question. He didn't know who Tom was expecting, but he didn't want to appear unprepared, especially not to a hothead like the one sitting next to him.

"Ain't nothing special happening today, Tom." John kept his eyes on the paper he'd been reading, refusing to give Tom the satisfaction of catching a glimpse of doubt in his eyes.

“That ain’t what I hear. I hear that Negro’s coming back today. Gonna be right in this here jail, and I’m aiming to be here when he come.”

Why this was the first John had heard about a transfer, he didn’t know. It didn’t make much sense for the sheriff to keep something like that from him, especially since it meant someone would have to stay overnight at the jail.

“Look here, Tom. This ain’t the place to grab a beer, put your feet up, and have yourself a time. I ain’t got no use for you or nobody else loitering round this here jail.”

“Loitering? You think you can guard a cold-blooded murderer all by your lonesome? This town ain’t safe long as he’s here. You ain’t safe, gun or no. I say the sheriff ought to deputize me. And Sam Rush and Joe Cleveland. You gonna need all the help you can get.”

In all the years John had been in the law, he’d never met a prisoner he couldn’t handle, Negro or white. Not here in Mercury. But if for any reason he did find himself outmatched, Tom, Sam, and Joe were the last men he’d ask for help. They were always hungry for a gunfight. Sam once shot a man for allegedly stealing milk from his cow. How Sam knew his cow had given milk to a stranger, John didn’t know. It didn’t matter, just like the poor man’s protests before Sam shot him in the shoulder, missing his heart by a long mile.

“The sheriff and I can handle any prisoners that come to this here jail,” John said, keeping his tone even, unconcerned.

Tom jumped to his feet, pounding both fists on the desk. “What the sheriff’s doing with a fool deputy like you, I ain’t never knowed. If you think that Negro ain’t got no one to help him

escape, you got another think coming. What you gonna do when a mob of Negros come running on this place?"

"Who's gonna run on the jail? Harper and Scooter? Black John and Moe? That's the posse you worrying me about?" John stood up at that and walked around the desk. Standing at his full height—all six feet two inches—John made an imposing figure. "Why don't you go on home, Tom? Sheriff and I can handle things around here."

Tom held John's eye, but John knew he'd back down. He'd always been able to use his size to his advantage against Tom. "Moe, Black John, and Scooter would shoot you dead if they had half a chance. You can't trust not a one of 'em. You don't know what be going on in them fields or when they be in their churches shouting and hollering. You don't think they ain't looking for a way to kill us all? And that Dawson, he think he smarter than the rest of 'em. I wouldn't put nothing past that one. Anyone who would kill a white man in cold blood…. Judge Conyers should've never put it to a trial. Should've dealt with it on the spot, the old fashioned way."

"Why don't you get on out of here, Tom? This town don't need nobody starting a panic. Go on over to Bootsie's and get yourself a drink."

Tom worked his jaw, the vein in his neck suddenly conspicuous. He gave John a hard look before standing up, kicking his boot against the desk, and taking a step toward the door. The calm outside belied the tension now in the air. Tom stopped, one boot inside and the other out, and turned back toward John. "You can't let that Negro play us for a fool. If you don't stop him, somebody will. You mark my word."

John hoped Tom was just making noise, but he had to admit he was worried. The town had been in an uproar after Dawson's arrest for Hank Wilson's murder. The man had been shot dead in Dawson's store. What Hank was doing down there had remained a mystery to John, but it would be hard for a Negro to explain away killing a white man, even one as smart as Dawson. He had land; he had his own business. John knew for a fact that several of the men in town suspected he had money stashed away somewhere. He'd managed to hire himself a lawyer; the man surely wasn't representing him for free. If Dawson was coming back into town, he and the sheriff would have their hands full until the trial was over.

###

John hadn't seen the sheriff all day, had no idea where he was or when he could expect him. He figured they needed to work out a plan to keep order in town during the trial. He hoped Sheriff had more information than he'd given John. He still wasn't sure Tom had his facts straight; he wouldn't put it past him to be wrong. But there was something about Tom's tone, the leg, a feeling he had in his gut that made John think Tom might be right about this one. John felt he should be doing something, but there was nothing to do but sit and wait for someone to show up: either the sheriff or the prisoner.

The sun was just beginning to set when John finally got his answer. A man walked in with a prisoner in tow; the marshal had come in from Columbus to bring Dawson back for his trial.

"You Sheriff Watkins?"

"I'm his deputy."

"You got a cell ready for this one? "

John nodded and escorted the marshal to one of the empty cells. Dawson Jordan had always been a handsome Negro with wavy black hair he kept slicked back and a mustache he kept trimmed. The man who returned to Mercury was skinny and disheveled, wearing dirty prison rags made for the men in the chain gangs. The only vestige of the old Dawson was in the look in his eye and the way he held his head, like a man who would not be told what to do. In that way, Dawson had not changed.

"You gonna be all right?' the marshal asked.

"Is there something I need to know?"

The marshal shook his head. "He ain't said a word the whole trip. I can't figure what's going on in that head of his, but he didn't try nothing, at least not with me.

John didn't know if that meant he'd have an easy night or if this one had something up his sleeve. He wished the sheriff would show up.

"I can stay till you get some backup."

"I reckon I'll be all right. I done dealt with worse."

For a reason John couldn't figure, he liked the prospect of the marshal leaving more than him staying. To John, the man's presence was disturbing a delicate balance in town, a balance that would set itself right once the man was gone. "Thank you kindly, though."

With that the man tipped his hat at John and took his leave. It was only when John could no longer hear the man riding away from town that he began to wonder if he'd done the right thing.

###

What went on inside a man's mind just before he committed a crime, John hadn't quite figured out. He imagined there must be a moment when the person no longer cared what would happen or what people thought, a point at which time seemed to pause and the only thing that existed was the present. Not that the past didn't matter. Surely it must. But there could certainly be no thought of the future. If there were, the man would put down the knife, the gun; he would uncurl the angry fist.

John watched the prisoner lying on the cot, his face turned toward the wall, and wondered at what moment Dawson stopped caring enough about the future to shoot a white man dead. John thought about the things Dawson had started—the business, the land, the child on the way—and suddenly wondered if he was really as smart as he'd seemed. What could possibly possess a Negro to kill a white man?

What John didn't know, what John could not have known, was that Dawson never gave up on the future. It was the past that he had no thought of. The land, the house—that was the future. The store—that was the future. The children—that was the future. Standing still while a man, black or white, tries to force himself on a woman, a woman he had known all his life—that was the past.

The first shot rang out as a warning. No matter how raucous things could get down at his place late at night between the drinking and the dancing and the poker playing, Dawson had never been one to tolerate disrespect. His wife called him arrogant, but Dawson couldn't bring himself to listen to her. Mamie knew what she was getting into when she married him. This had always been his way.

As John watched the man, he couldn't stop the questions racing through his mind. The more he thought about it, the less sense it made. When he'd finally had enough of wondering, John walked over to the cage where Dawson lay and stood in front of it, resting a hand on one of the bars. The one thing that bothered him more than anything else was Hank. What was he doing down there in the first place? White folks didn't venture down to Dawson's, mostly because they didn't want to give him the satisfaction of making any money off them. Dawson sold a little of everything—from farming supplies to fishing line to groceries—then at night, whiskey—too much whiskey if anyone had a mind to ask John. But white folks never had need of anything Dawson had to offer, and they were never down at The Bottom unless someone was sick or in trouble.

There wasn't anyone around, and he wasn't a lawyer, so John figured it wouldn't hurt anything to just ask. "I been wracking my brain trying to think what could've happened down at your place. What was Hank doing down there?"

John might have thought Dawson was asleep if he were not so completely still, the kind of stillness that can only be reached on purpose, when a man is trying not to move. He spoke again, hoping Dawson would see that he wasn't going. "I know you hear. I can tell the sheriff you was cooperative or I can tell him you gave me some trouble. Choice is up to you."

Dawson turned over at that and gave the man a hard look. Everything had changed the minute Hank Wilson walked into his place. He hated the thought of it, wished he could rid himself of the memory. Nothing could have been done differently; once the man was in, the deed was all but done. It takes more than flesh and blood to change a man's mind; something has to do the convincing that there is another path to walk. The words alone are not enough. So when Hank

walked in looking for a certain woman he'd been raping for just over a year, ever since the boll weevil started killing his cotton, changing his mind wasn't Dawson's objective.

The woman had attempted to hide but was found. Hank had grabbed her by the neck and with his other hand started loosening his belt before he'd even gotten her outside. Dawson had known his share of women, especially when Mamie was with child, and he'd never fancied himself the heroic kind. He couldn't say it was the look on the woman's face that set him into motion. It wasn't the sheer anguish in her eyes. It was the nerve of this man to come into his store and grab one of his customers by the neck, as if he were running the show.

The first shot was just to get his attention. Then another rang out. The next thing he knew the white man was doubled over, blood running into a pool on the floor. The woman was screaming like she couldn't be sure where she was or if she'd been hit. The crowd spread faster than lightning. Dawson stood frozen as he watched the life leave the man's body and exit the building. It was then that he saw the future, his future, and he began running so hard and so fast he barely felt the ground beneath him. With each step he went deeper and deeper into trouble, but he couldn't stop what was happening with his feet. Nothing could have persuaded him to stay put. Nothing in him would have waited for the sheriff. He hadn't even thought about running, the rightness or wrongness of it. His feet seemed to have made the decision for him.

He found himself at the house, Mamie and the children already in bed. He wanted to kiss Mamie, to wrap his arms around her big pregnant belly. He wanted to give his little girl a kiss, to hug his boys. He needed time, but there wasn't enough. The sheriff didn't have to go far to reach his house. It was closer to town than the store. He couldn't linger. He'd already stayed too long,

wanting to give himself a chance to think, to plan, to remember. He heard the sounds of horses in the distance, and he hurried to the trap door in the front room, the room Mamie had insisted on painting yellow because of the brighter days that lay before them.

The door led to a space under the house that ended at an opening in the back near the woods. Dawson was lying still beneath the house, his face in the dirt, when he heard Mamie scream. He didn't want to imagine what the sheriff might be doing to his wife, so he pushed through the moist ground until he was clear of the house and ran noisily into the woods, where horses, not feet, would chase him like he was a dog.

He wondered if he'd be hanged on the spot, but when the sheriff caught up to him, he carted him off to jail then to the judge then to Columbus to await trial. Whether a Negro could get a fair trial in Georgia was a matter for the speechmakers to debate in lecture halls on college campuses. It was the kind of thing W.E.B. DuBois and Ida Wells would write about in their Negro newspapers. Dawson didn't need to debate; he knew that answer.

John pushed himself away from the cell as if time was running out for Dawson to reply.

"Seems to me he came by looking for someone." Dawson chose not to say any more. The woman had a reputation that wouldn't gain her any sympathy in court. She didn't need another white man thinking he could have his way with her.

"This somebody got a name?"

This time there was no answer, nothing but silence from the cell. John chose to be satisfied with the answer he'd been given. For most everyone in town, what happened down at the bottom of Mercury's only real hill didn't matter as much as what would happen next. The month before

Hank was killed, Dawson's brother Jerry hit a Negro across the head with a hammer. That man died too, his blood staining the floors just like Hank's. But there had been no manhunt. Jerry left town and that was that. There wasn't much crime in Mercury; rarely was anybody murdered, and now there had been two at Dawson's store in a matter of months. The news had spread as far as Atlanta, and there was little chance the town would put up with the embarrassment.

###

Even though Dawson had barely spoken a few words, John was beginning to feel strangely comfortable with his prisoner. He wondered if Dawson would eat anything or if he'd hunger strike like other Negroes had been doing lately. He'd heard the stories from Atlanta, Americus, Athens.

"You hungry?" After the long silence in the room John felt like he was shouting.

Dawson turned over and gave John a nod that would be noticed only by someone watching for it. John kept cans of beans in the back room. Nothing fancy for him or the sheriff, but plenty enough for a man looking for something to eat. John lit a fire in the stove perched in the center of the office. Nothing too big or strong since this had proved to be a warm April. One can would be enough, but John grabbed two just in case it had been a while since he'd eaten.

Something in John's gut knew there was more going on with the murder at Dawson's store than met the eye, and he was still bothered by the questions left unanswered. Hank could be a cantankerous man, especially since his crop had begun to fail. The boll weevil had been giving everyone a rough year, but Hank was taking it hard, getting into fights and drinking into all times of night. There were rumors that he was destroying other farmers' crops, that he put something in Burt Marshall's well that made all his workers sick and that he set fire to Neal Canning's barn.

Nothing could be proved, but John always suspected that Hank might have been involved. If Hank just happened to wander into Dawson's place, trouble was probably following him.

John found a small pot and heated up the beans, stirring them ever so often like his wife would do. When the beans were getting too hot, when it seemed they might burn, John dished up two bowls, and passed the fuller bowl through a small opening in the cell.

Dawson sat up on the cot and ate like he hadn't seen food in a week. John grabbed a chair and perched himself in front of the cell.

"It don't take no genius to know Hank could make trouble."

Dawson gave no indication that he was aware of this dark side of Hank's. He just continued to eat, his attention on the bowl.

"If he were to have come down there to your place and started some trouble, that's what your lawyer would need to tell the judge."

Dawson paused over his bowl. "Who's to say the judge don't already know?"

John had hoped he could get Dawson talking, but when the man finally spoke it took him by surprise, and he was hoping Dawson hadn't seen him jump. If the judge knew a thing or two about Hank, Dawson was not going to be tried for murder. He was going to become an example. John didn't like to see the law manhandled, and he felt suddenly sorry for the man in the cell.

The beans seemed to lose their taste, and the leg started giving him fits again. He tried to ignore it by focusing instead on Dawson. "You seen your wife and family at all?"

Dawson looked up with something like hope in his eyes. "Ain't seen my wife or children since January, before they took me to Columbus."

“They can come down here. I can make sure they get word. Word travels fast in this town; they may already know...”

Dawson fell quiet and John thought he’d lie back down and turn toward the wall, but he suddenly spoke up. “If anything happen to me, will you tell Mamie to go see Mr. Starks?”

“I thought your lawyer was from out of town.”

“This ain’t about the trial. Mamie gonna need to give him some papers. She know already, but I need to be sure she don’t forget. When she pregnant her memory ain’t so good.”

John nodded and twisted in his chair, trying to appease the leg. “I’ll tell her.”

Dawson pushed his empty bowl toward John and lay down again. John stood up to head back toward the desk, and he worried for the first time whether the leg would hold him. The pain was the worst it had been all day.

###

As the night wore on, Dawson’s breathing grew even and steady, and John could tell he was asleep. John almost envied the prisoner his cot. The desk had never been a good place for sleeping whether he propped his feet up or not. John had just begun to doze off, the leg having finally given him a little peace, when he heard the sound of men on horseback. The door burst open and in came a gang of men with hoods over their heads and guns trained at John.

“One moved to the desk and opened the drawer where the sheriff kept the spare key to the cells, then he unlocked Dawson’s cell. Dawson attempted to run, but the man at the cell blocked his path and threw him back against the cot. He raised the gun, as if to hit him with it, but lowered

it instead and grabbed him by the shirt, shoving him out of the cell and into the cluster of masked men.

To John, the men seemed familiar. Even with their faces covered. The one holding him at gunpoint held his gaze, and he knew he'd seen that look, those eyes, that expression before. No one spoke. The men gave one another signals, and Dawson was pushed among the men until he was out the door. John could hear Dawson making grunting sounds and assumed he was being put on a horse. Only then did the man with his gun aimed at John back toward the door and leave with the crowd of men. Shots rang through the air as the men galloped away with his prisoner. John wasted no time before rushing out to his own horse and racing to follow the trail of horses.

The field seemed to be on fire, but it was really just dozens and dozens of torches set ablaze. A noose hung from a large tree, and it was being placed around Dawson's neck. Despite the noise from the men on horseback, John could hear sounds in the woods. Watchers. There were likely Negroes looking on this scene, the need to know what was happening stronger than the need to stay safe.

There hadn't been a lynching in Mercury for as long as John could remember. The last one he recalled was when he was still practically a boy. He didn't know what the man had done. It didn't seem to matter as much as the punishment. People stood around for hours after the man had died—men, women, and children. For days afterward John kept hearing the sound of the rope rubbing against the tree, straining from the burden it carried.

John grabbed his gun and aimed for the rope tied to the tree, moving close enough to get a decent shot. If he missed, he'd put Dawson out of his misery. In the frenzy, no one seemed to notice

him until the deed was done. One shot then Dawson was down and bolting toward the woods. Shots rang out like thunder, and Dawson was down again yet bullets continued to fly. And fly and fly. Into a corpse with a broken noose around his neck.

Men on horseback circled the body, yelling and screaming like warriors on a raid. One man pulled his horse near John and tipped his hat. John felt sick to his stomach. It wasn't just the blatant disregard for the law that had him reeling; it was the idea that he'd become part of the plan.

John turned around and rode away as fast as his horse would carry him, unsure of where he was headed. He needed to clear his head, but in truth, that was the problem. His head was clear. He knew exactly what had happened, who had done it, and that Dawson had very likely acted in self-defense. The law could be fickle, John knew. Sometimes innocent men were punished and the guilty went free, but this was something different. The law had simply been put away, as if on a shelf.

Dawson's body had been taken to the coroner, and a hush seemed to fall over the town. If the mob intended to instill fear, their plan had more than worked. The Negroes were subdued and so were the whites. Everyone had heard the ruckus. Joe Shaw even contacted the paper in Atlanta to give them a report. Dawson's body had been riddled with dozens of bullets. Lynchings were rare in Mercury, and "the people generally deplore" them, his article had said. The people. Generally. Deplore. The words seemed hollow. The people generally had no power to stop them, and with that knowledge came a sense of loss, the quietness that felt like an entire town in mourning. The people generally deplore.

With this newfound clarity, John knew exactly what he needed to do. John had ventured many times across the invisible line that separated two sides of the same town. When he was a boy, his father used to send him to fetch the men who helped on the farm. Later with the sheriff he went to snuff out trouble that was trying to get stirred. But when he rode into The Bottom the day after the lynching, he felt like an intruder, a foreigner in his own town. In the faces of the people he'd known all his life—Eula Mae and Moe, Black John and his wife, Ann—he now saw a burden that he thought he understood. It was heavy, and he imagined that over time it would leave a person feeling weary for reasons he or she could not explain.

John rode up to a small house just a couple of miles from the center of town. Every Negro in Mercury seemed to be there, with people spilling out of the house and covering the front porch. That is, until John dismounted and tied his horse to the post. The guests seemed to part like the Red Sea when John walked by and within minutes they were gone.

John entered the house and was surprised to find a bright yellow room right at the front. It wasn't a color he expected to see in Dawson's house, though he couldn't say why. Glancing inside, he noticed what looked like a trap door on the floor, and judging from the uneven way the panes fit in place, he imagined it would let in a draft when the weather was right.

He kept walking toward the back of the house to the living room where several women were sitting on the couch with a very pregnant Mamie. She was as pretty as she'd ever been, mixed with some other kind of blood by the looks of her, with her fair skin and long, silky black hair. Two small boys played together on the floor, and a little girl who looked a lot like Dawson ran to her mother's side the minute John walked in.

John felt truly sorry for their loss, sorry for the way the town refused to give Dawson his day in court. He knew better than to say as much. He took off his hat and squatted down in front of Mamie so as not to tower over her. “Your husband asked me to tell you to see Sam Stark. Said it was important. I reckon you already know what for, but he wanted me to tell you just the same.”

Mamie looked frightened, uncertain, and John worried that his presence might be too much for her. The little girl clung to her mother’s side, crying.

“If you have any trouble, you come see me, you hear? Your husband would want me to see to it that you and the children are taken care of.”

As John moved to leave, he looked at the little girl still clinging to her mom, tears filling her eyes, and thought about his own daughter. He knew what hopes Dawson must have had for his girl. When he stood up, John felt the familiar sensation in his leg, but the weakness he’d felt yesterday was gone. He turned to leave the small house, hoping with every step that the leg was trying to tell him something, that things might be making a turn for the better. But he could never be sure. That was the trouble with the leg. He could never be sure.

AWAKENINGS

Senator Obama was interested. I could tell. My brother had only recently introduced us, and already he was willing to leave her, the gorgeous woman sitting cross-legged on the floor behind him. The senator hadn't opened his mouth, but in dreams you just know things, and I knew this: If I said the word, I'd be the new woman in his life.

It's important for me to note that the woman on the floor was not Michelle. She was African and young and used to systems that asked women to share men. That was another thing I just knew. But even asleep, I wasn't crazy. So of all the elephants in the room, there was just one thing I wanted to know. "Will you leave her?" The senator didn't say a word. I asked again, "Will you leave her?" More silence. I glanced back at the woman squirming on the floor then to the senator. I asked again.

In real life it was 2008, and I was still deciding my vote. I'd been listening to the senator casually, but now that he had won the Iowa caucus, I had to take him seriously, and I still couldn't quite tell what he believed.

"Will you leave her?" He gave me only a charming smile and a look that could be taken a dozen different ways. I read it like this: I could get on the Obama train or let it pass me by. I shook my head no. I'd have to be sure. The expression on the senator's face never changed as he turned and walked away.

###

I've always been a little slow to grasp the seriousness of things, those moments in life when everything could change. The truth is always there; it's just out there in the distance and veiled by a cloud.

My grandmother had been hospitalized for what was supposed to be a routine surgery, and now she lay in ICU connected to a machine that was helping her breathe. The surgeon hadn't expected her lungs to be as weak as they were, and he wasn't especially pleased with the progress of her recovery. My grandfather, however, didn't need a doctor to tell him the situation was grave. Grandma had been calling out in her sleep for her sisters, Barbara and Alice, both of whom were dead. In the old school, the one my grandparents are from, everybody knows this is a bad sign, a very bad sign that the dead are coming to take the living. So my grandfather stood above his wife with pain etched in his face.

On some level, I knew this was bad, too, but Grandma had been saying a lot of things. My aunt told me she'd been calling out my name too, and I was still very much alive. My grandmother was no stranger to hospitals. For as long as I could remember, it seemed Grandma was being hospitalized almost every year for one thing or another. She'd had heart surgery, knee surgery, hip surgery, back surgery, and was plagued by a series of chronic illnesses—sarcoidosis, diabetes, a weakness in her lungs—all of which were keeping several doctors very gainfully employed.

Normally, Grandma endured surgery as well as her doctors expected; sometimes she exceeded their expectations, but she always woke up. In more recent years, though the procedures were lightweight in comparison to her earlier surgeries—adjusting her pacemaker, repairing the

box inserted in her back that shot out regular doses of morphine—each time it seemed to take longer for her to swim up from the anesthesia.

For the last five years or so, it seemed that when she awoke from any procedure, and there had been three or four during that time period, she was disoriented. Sometimes she didn't seem to know who we were. Other times she remembered things that didn't happen, like the evening newscaster who suddenly changed networks (the anchor had done no such thing). During one especially troubling hospitalization, Grandma was convinced the nurses were gossiping about her, disconnecting her phone calls, and refusing to administer her insulin. None of these things was true (though, I must admit, my grandfather did investigate), but that didn't keep Grandma from tearfully begging us to take her home, because if we didn't these people were going to kill her. We asked her doctor what was happening to her. He said it wasn't dementia; in older patients, anesthesia could do that sometimes.

As I stood beside her hospital bed, Grandma was telling her sister Alice to get the coin. It must have been important that she obey because Grandma's voice became urgent—"Alice! Alice!"—and then broken, as if she were crying in some other place.

"She's been doing that," my Aunt Val said from beside the bed as she stroked Grandma's hand. Aunt Val worked at the hospital and stopped by Grandma's room as often as she could. She asked my grandfather if he knew what she was talking about, if something had happened with Aunt Alice when they were kids.

Granddad shook his head no, his eyes looking more tired than I'd ever seen them.

"Well, that's something to ask her about when she wakes up, huh?" I said, trying to stay upbeat. I knew it was possible that Grandma might never wake up, but I didn't think it was likely. Her body was weak, I thought; it would take her longer to swim upstream, but she would get there. Her recovery was just beginning. It was too soon to give up.

My grandfather looked at me and attempted to smile. My aunt nodded, as if determined to stay positive, to think the best and not the worst.

"We just need to pray for her lungs to get stronger so she can get off this machine," Aunt Val said.

Granddad kept his eyes on Grandma, but I thought I saw his head move slightly in agreement. No, not yet. It wasn't her time. Aunt Barbara and Aunt Alice would just have to wait.

###

I was standing on Main Street noticing for the first time that it was too quiet for a parade, that the street was much too clean for anything like a crowd to have gathered there. I was supposed to be reporting on a speech the president was making, one that would presumably draw the droves of people who followed him on the campaign trail, but I seemed to be one of only a handful of people waiting to see him. There were banners and streamers, though. Surely I was in the right place.

President Obama walked up from behind me, flanked by small clusters of people who came in waves, but everything was still oddly quiet, like the whole town was on mute. The group looked like freedom marchers on their way from Selma to Montgomery, except the president didn't look

resolute like Dr. King, just relaxed and cool. An aide was going over notes for his speech, and when he saw me he motioned for me to come over.

That weird quiet kept me from hearing my own voice, but I was talking and the president was listening intently. And then the crowd seemed to have dispersed, and it was just us two and a sprinkling of Secret Service agents and aides handing him an incessant stream of memos. Even dreaming, I knew this was impossible. He was the president. He needed to be leading the country. And yet he was talking to me, like I mattered as much as everything else. I said something that I still couldn't hear, and he replied with something that made me smile, even laugh a little. Was I really just chatting away with the president? It felt nice, and I didn't want it to stop, but his aides needed him. There was a speech to be made, and before that, an important phone call. He had to go.

"Yes, yes, I know. Of course. Please go. Yes, it's totally fine."

And then he was gone.

I should explain that I have a long and, perhaps, unusual history with dreams. I've been dreaming all my life, in Technicolor and with surround sound. When I was very young, I had a series of nightmares that seemed so real I was afraid to sleep in my own bed. But in time the bad dreams were replaced by run-of-the-mill dreams and some that seemed to carry messages. I once dreamed that my uncle the firefighter was trapped in a fire. I told my mother, and she seemed surprised and said there *had* been an incident at work. His body was OK, but mentally and emotionally he was still trapped, what we might call PTSD today. What was I to do? I wanted to know. My mom shook her head, flummoxed, and said, "God must want you to pray."

On another occasion, I dreamed that my great-great grandfather, who had been lynched in the early 1900s, was standing next to my bed, trying to talk with me, the fact that he was dead being the big problem. His eyes were pleading, but his voice wouldn't work, and I couldn't hear a thing he wanted to say to me. The dream frightened me so much that I woke up in a sweat. I didn't want to talk with him; I was of the opinion that I didn't need to hear anything dead people had to say. But even wide awake I could still see the look on his face.

When I finally went back to sleep that night, I dreamed again. This time I was talking with a young Native American woman, just about my age, who was seeking justice for her people. She said in the dream that she could hear their blood crying out to her, and she wanted their voices to be heard. When I woke up, I have to admit, I wondered if God was trying to tell me something. So when I dreamed about President Obama, twice and with such clarity, I paid attention, just in case God had something to say.

###

After three weeks, the doctor decided to try lifting my grandmother out of a drug-induced coma. She still needed the ventilator, but her lung function was improving. Maybe seeing her family would help the recovery process. When we walked in, she was sitting up slightly in bed, her skinny legs crossed at the knee, as if she were a queen. Her face seemed to register a vague recognition, and she smiled politely, like she understood why I might be star struck, like she gets that all the time.

I kissed her cheek, her forehead. I held onto her hand. My mother and her sisters did the same thing, kissing her head, rubbing her feet, her bony little knees, touching any piece of her brown skin that wouldn't hurt. The breathing tube inserted in her neck prevented her from talking, but she spoke to us with her eyes. She was glad to meet us and looked forward to seeing us again soon. It didn't matter. Sleeping Beauty was awake. That was enough for now.

Every day she seemed to get a little stronger, to remember each of us a little better, and within a week she was being transferred out of ICU and into a regular room. My grandfather bought the nursing team a bouquet from Edible Arrangements to thank them for taking such good care of his wife, but we were moving on now. First stop, downstairs. Next stop, home.

Our excitement was short-lived. The day after her transfer—or what seemed like the next day, the whole thing happened so fast—we arrived at the hospital to learn my grandmother tried to pull out her feeding tube, staining her hospital gown with blood and forcing us to realize how far away she still was.

"Mama, what were you thinking?" my mom's other sister Jackie wanted to know.

Now that Grandma was awake, the nurses would occasionally plug up the hole in her neck and let her talk to us, which required her to breathe on her own. She sounded a little like a chipmunk when she chose to speak, but why she would pull out her feeding tube apparently needed no explanation. So she just sat silently in the recliner beside her hospital bed with her arms tucked under her breasts and her legs crossed at the knee.

Within days, she did leave the hospital for a facility called Select, where she'd receive longer-term care and continue to pull out her tubes. We'd walk into the hospital and get knowing

looks from the staff when we asked to see Raye Jordan. We felt mildly ashamed, like we were the parents of an unruly child. The stints of breathing on her own had been too much, and Grandma needed the ventilator almost all the time now. And she'd caught a respiratory infection that racked her body with painful fits of coughing and created thick mucus that had to be sucked out regularly from her breathing tube.

Because Grandma wasn't allowed to use the purple plug that closed the hole in her neck and enabled her to talk with us, we became adept at reading her expressions and her lip movements. This wasn't as hard as it sounds. She said basically two things: "Help me" and "I'm ready to go."

The latter was mouthed not in a pleading, helpless way, but as a matter of fact. Like, "I'm glad you finally got here. I'm ready to go." The former, too, wasn't exactly a cry for help. From her bed, she had glimpsed enough of the hallway to plan her escape. There was a door at the end of the hall. If we moved quickly, we could get out before the nurses caught us. "Help me," she'd mouth, as she attempted to pull herself loose from all the tubes keeping her alive.

"Mama," my mother would say in her sweet, soft voice, feigning shock. "Are you trying to pull loose your tubes? I can't believe that." She sounded just like she was talking to a three-year-old.

My grandfather was more firm. "Raymond." He'd always called her that. "You can't do that. You need those. You can't do that."

My Aunt Val was the toughest of the bunch. "No," she'd say, like she was talking to one of her children when they were misbehaving. "Don't you pull out that tube. You stop it."

I was the weakest link, and Grandma knew it, so I tried not to be the last one to leave her. I'd gotten caught once.

"Help me," she mouthed, her eyes pleading.

"No, Grandma. I can't do that."

"Yes, you can," she said, each word exaggerated since her voice wouldn't be of any use. She motioned with her hands how I could get the job done, but I shook my head no.

"You need those," I said, pointing to the feeding tube, the breathing tube still piling up with mucus, the IV filling her body with fluids.

"I'm ready to go," she said, her eyes growing wide.

"I can't, Grandma."

"Yes, you can," she said again, kicking herself, perhaps, for not succeeding in making me tougher.

"No, Grandma. I can't. I'm sorry. I can't." I couldn't handle her pleading and told her I'd have to go. I kissed her on the cheek and made my way down the hall, into the parking lot, and to my car. Helping her escape was unthinkable, but I still felt like the world's worst granddaughter, and I buried my face in my hands and cried.

###

The president had invited me over to his house. This was a side of him I hadn't seen before. He wasn't the senator vying for votes or a newly elected president trying to prove he was interested in what the average American had to say. He was taking care of his daughters, making sure his wife was comfortable, telling me about the great fish place down the street. This wasn't the White

House either; it was an elegant brownstone located who knows where. Dreams frequently resist convention.

The fish place was so close we walked there, and it also wasn't what I expected. It was nothing more than a joint, the kind of place known for its food and not its ambiance. The president ate fish from a hole in the wall? Licked his fingers? Seriously? And what had he done exactly to make me think he was such a good dad, a loving husband, a kind individual? All we did was talk over a plate of what turned out to be really good fish, and now I was some kind of raving fan?

He brought fish back to the brownstone for his wife and daughters. But there was still business to attend to, and he went into his office, which was overflowing with papers, and rummaged around for something I couldn't decipher. He said I could stay, but I couldn't figure out why I was there in the first place, even in a dream. So I told him thanks for the walk and the fish—it was nice of him, just plain nice—and I let myself out.

###

In some ways, Grandma seemed to be getting better. The infection was improving, and the mucus was all but gone. But after Thanksgiving, "I'm ready to go" turned into, "Take me with you," and there were tears. Why wouldn't we help? Why couldn't we see the misery they were putting her through? My grandfather practically lived at the hospital. He watched the nurses bathe her, change her diaper, and treat the bed sores that were forming. He was there for every doctor visit, except the odd ones in the wee hours of the morning or late at night. After her shift at the hospital ended around 11:30 p.m., my Aunt Val would often drop by and just sit there, watching Grandma sleep.

Still, it was impossible for us to know the torture she was experiencing. On Thanksgiving, the whole family dropped by—all four daughters, their children, and another generation of great-grandchildren just beginning to be born. We took our turns, wearing blue or yellow gowns and gloves for her protection now that she'd contracted C-Diff again.

Perhaps we shouldn't have told her about our plans for dinner. My younger cousin Syerita was making Grandma's sweet potato pie. I was trying my hand at collard greens. Grandma's eyes grew wide at that. Of course it was a bad idea, but these were extraordinary times. We all had to chip in. I wanted to do my part.

We stayed for several hours before making our way to my parents' house for dinner, but things were never quite the same after that. Grandma's attempts to leave became more aggressive. She'd pull her tubes out right in front of us. The nurses eventually had to tie her hands to the sides of the bed, like she was in jail. We'd rub her hands and her feet as she lay in bed with tears streaming down her cheeks, crying silently. Occasionally one of us—my grandfather usually but sometimes my Aunt Val—would loosen the restraints. But if we didn't watch her, she'd reach immediately for her breathing tube, pull it loose, and stare at us with a triumphant look in her eye.

"This is why the nurses tie you down," Aunt Val would scold as she reconnected the tube. And this was why we had to let them do it.

Christmas was coming, and Mom, Aunt Val, and I were dreading it. We hoped she didn't know the days of the week, hoped she might not realize how close we were to the holiday. We avoided any talk of shopping, of why Aunt Val's daughter Jessica was coming down from Baltimore. The whole thing was getting ridiculous, especially when my grandmother asked, in

shaky handwriting during a brief period of freedom, what we planned to get my grandfather for Christmas. After that, we talked of beef roasts and mashed potatoes and holidays past. Of real eggnog and why we never made any. Of the year I fell into the Christmas tree, a story my mom still thinks is hilarious even after two decades.

By the time Christmas arrived, Grandma had been behaving long enough to be fitted with a less restrictive boxing glove-type thing with an adjustable strap that was supposed to make it stay on her tiny wrists. Sometimes it worked, often it didn't, but she hadn't been trying to get away of late.

She was surprised on Christmas Day with a visit from her sisters and nieces, who drove down from Jacksonville. What they said or did, we don't know. We all talked, laughed, prayed, just like always. But after Christmas, for whatever reason, Grandma broke through. She was finally taken off the ventilator, which set in motion a ripple of improvements—relearning to walk, to talk, to eat. She was transferred yet again to a nursing home that promised us it could handle emergencies, but there weren't any. She learned to dress herself, to bowl on Wii. She made friends and started gossiping again. I had no idea how much I'd missed that.

She spent her seventy-fourth birthday—April 25, 2009—at my parents' house, sitting downstairs on a chair from the dining room that she said was more comfortable than the recliner. "It'll keep my back straight." We sang "Happy Birthday" and marveled at how far she'd come since her surgery the previous October. It took me another year to ask her if she remembered anything about being in the hospital or Select, anything about pulling out her tubes.

"I did what?"

"All the time," my mom said, backing me up. "You'd pull out your breathing tube, just yank it right out."

Grandma looked genuinely confused and shook her head no. She didn't remember any of that.

"Sometimes I remember things, but it's like a dream. I used to ask Douglas, but he wouldn't tell me anything." I could understand why Granddad wouldn't have wanted to relive any of those months.

"I asked the doctor about it, and he said, 'Mrs. Jordan, if you don't remember, don't worry about it.' So I said, 'OK.'" She motioned with her hand like she was waving the unknown away, but it's never that simple.

"I do have flashes sometimes, though." She spoke slowly, as if the memories were still trying to come. "It felt like I was far away, and I felt like I was tied up. And I remember feeling like I was crying all the time."

We told her she was tied up because she kept pulling out her tubes, but I had no idea how much pain she was in. Suddenly, I didn't want to remember either.

"Sometimes I remember a river, like I was floating or something." She looked at me and my mom like we might be able to clear that up as well. But that memory was like Aunt Alice's coin, one only Grandma would ever be able to explain.

###

President Obama wasn't in the Oval Office. He wasn't even in the White House. But he was surrounded by a flurry of mail and reporters and aides trying to get his attention. The health

bill had recently passed, and I'd privately been optimistic that this was a good thing for America. I wrote a story about it at work, a relatively positive one as news reports go, one that I thought the president would be happy to see.

He glanced at me when I walked in the room and nodded in my direction. I started to speak but was cut off when an aide stepped up to give him a message. He looked at me and thanked me for stopping by—what was I doing here anyway?—then he turned back to the aides and the reporters vying for his attention, back to the American people who needed him to be president. I couldn't deny my disappointment, the sting I felt. What happened to the guy at the parade, the one who licked fish from greasy fingers? This wasn't personal, it was politics. It always had been.

I realized then what had gone wrong. I was never supposed to get on the Obama bandwagon, to like him or think he was a good person or feel flattered by his interest in the media. I was a reporter, and I needed to stay alert, to not compromise simply because, finally, we had a president who was brown-skinned like me. My readers, even if the numbers were dwindling, needed more from me. Thankfully, I was beginning to wake up.

Dedicated to Raye Elizabeth Jordan

1935-2011