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FINDING SUNDAYS:
A COLLECTION OF STORIES

by

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B.A. University of Central Florida, 2010

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
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in the College of Arts and Humanities
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Major Professor: Darlin' Neal

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ABSTRACT

Finding Sundays: A Collection of Stories is a collection that explores the lives of people in the fictional town of Hickory Springs, Virginia. The title story “Finding Sundays” follows the life of Deacon Taylor and connects him to the characters around him in the proceeding pieces. These stories explore the lives of Deacon, his family, and his childhood friend, Sandra.

The focus of this collection is not meant to be about spirituality or religion in general, although these exist as themes in the background of the stories. Instead, it is meant to look at how the lives of people connected through a church and a small town setting can affect them and lead them on different paths through the choices they make. Their personal struggles and challenges help them to either discover who they are or lose a piece of themselves in the process, which is especially true for Deacon. He is the character who appears as a child, as an adolescent, and as an adult. Self-discovery is not always peaceful or satisfying for him or any of the characters around him, and their individual journeys show this process and the different events that come from the choices they make. This collection focuses on how religious roots, friendships, and familial connections, or the lack of such bonds, affect the characters' own personal views and decisions as well as how they relate to those around them.

To the people who pursue rigorous degrees in higher education and still have no
idea who they're going to be when they grow up.

To those of you who breathe, live, and bleed words, both your own and the words of
others.

This is for you and for me.

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To God – It's hard to write about faith without exploring my own. Thank you for believing in me and teaching me how to do it for myself. Through faith, all things are possible.

My Family – Thank you for supporting me, encouraging me, and reminding me that I could get through the hours of each day. You have faith in me, and because of that I know I can do anything as long as you all are with me along the way, whether physically or spiritually.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

STORIES.....	1
Finding Sundays.....	2
The Apple Orchard.....	37
Fruitful Moments.....	65
A Simple Profession.....	75
Riding.....	104
Answers.....	110
Remembering.....	137
APPENDIX A: CHARACTER/STORY TIMELINE.....	158
APPENDIX B: WRITING LIFE ESSAY.....	160
APPENDIX C: BOOK LIST.....	172

STORIES

Finding Sundays

When my mother takes me to church for the first time, I am six. On this Sunday, the last one in July, I sit on Nana's lap in the kitchen as she hums to me. It's the same tune that brings her voice high enough to have my ears tremble and low enough for my body to shake against her chest. She does this every morning after I've had bad dreams. The night before, I dreamt that a growling dog chased me up to our shack. When I reached the front door, it refused to open. I remember hearing the dog pant and feeling its hot breath creep up my neck, but before it gets me I wake up. Nana rocks me, and I try to forget.

Mama comes in wearing a dress I've never seen on her before. The white material glows on her skin, tinted brown from the sun, the color of Willow's bark. A dark blue belt wraps around her waist. The dress melts and sways with her as she walks toward us. She reminds me of an angel I saw in one of the books she used to read to me, but that was before she started going to meetings every night. She would lie on my bed and send me to sleep with words. A time before she left me for a place called church.

"You need to stop babying him," Mama says to Nana. She looks at me with her lips curled to one side. It's the face she makes when I've done something wrong.

I look down at Nana's feet. She wears her winter boots even though it's summer. The shiny rubber tips peak out from the bottom of her gown that has

sunflowers everywhere. Although I can't see the tops, I know they're tied extra tight to keep her feet from slipping out and that extra lacing drags on the sides. I've never seen Nana without the boots on. Mama told me once that they used to belong to Grandpa before he died. Nana didn't wear any other shoes after that.

“I'm his grandmamma,” Nana says. “I'm supposed to baby him.”

“If you keep it up, he won't ever be able to learn on his own. He'll have to grow into a man sometime, Ma.”

Mama opens the icebox and takes out the glass milk bottle and pours some into a mug.

Nana whispers to me. “Don't mind her. You'll always be my li'l Deac.” She kisses me on the cheek.

“I heard that,” Mama says. She sips from the mug as if the milk is hot against her lip.

“I'm glad your ears work properly.”

“You shouldn't talk like that. Deacon may pick it up and start talking back to both of us.”

Nana sighs. “God forbid.”

“Pastor Jones told us not to use the Creator's name in vain.”

“Seems like all that man wants to do is talk, talk, talk. I don't know where he gets all that energy. You'd think he'd need to save it up to breathe every once in a while.”

“Pastor Jones isn't hurting anybody, Ma. He's just passionate about Jesus.”

“Mmhmm.” Nana mutters under her breath. “I bet that's not all he's passionate about.”

“What'd you say?”

Nana shook her head. She took in Mama's outfit by looking her up and down slowly. “Is that where you're going now in your Sunday best? To see Master Jones?”

Mama sits her mug down with so much force that the milk sloshes out and spills on the sink. She takes a deep breath before saying, “I'm going to church, and Pastor Jones will be there. This week's sermon is supposed to be a good one. You should come.”

“I'm fine here at home.”

Mama sits down across from Nana at the small wooden table. It only has three chairs, one for each of us. Marks from knives used for cutting meat and vegetables and rings from wet cups stand out on the surface of the table, but its thickness keeps it standing strong for meals and daily sitting.

Mama places a brown-wrapped box on the tabletop. She takes a ribbon out from the pocket in her dress and wraps the ribbon around the box. As she ties the ribbon into a pretty bow, her voice hums a tune I've never heard before.

A smile dances across Mama's lips as she fixes the gift. I want to know what's inside it, and why it makes her so happy.

“Is it somebody's birthday?” Nana asks.

“No,” Mama says. “This is just an appreciation gift for Pastor Jones.”

“I can't believe you're giving that man gifts now,” Nana says.

Mama's eyes come away from the gift long enough to glance at Nana. “It's not too late for you. Pastor Jones says it's never too late to repent for your sins and come to God.”

“I've been a Christian all my life, Sarah.”

“A Christian doesn't keep a shotgun locked up near the front door to scare off visitors or hide moonshine in the dresser drawer.”

Nana stops rocking me. “That gun is for our protection. What do you expect when we have no man in the house? It's not my fault your church friends don't know when they aren't welcome. They should learn to call before just showing up. As for my medicine, you know I need that to sleep at night. Otherwise I just toss around in pain.”

“But, Ma ... ”

“Don't you 'But, Ma' me, Sarah. This is my house and I will do what I think is right.”

Mama sighs. “Why won't you come with me just once?”

“I don't need church,” Nana says. She reaches for her old brown leather Bible on the kitchen table. I lean with her as she picks it up with the hand not holding me. It has pages hanging out the edges that are dark and crinkly. “I can find Jesus right here. I knew Him long before you did, girl.”

“But you never go to church,” Mama says. “What’s the point of having a Bible if you never go to church?”

“If you wanna take someone so bad, take your son. Take Deacon.”

She looks at me as if she just realizes I am there. Her eyes graze over me as if figuring out if I'm ready for something or not.

“He doesn't need Jesus yet. He's too young to understand. All the kids in Sunday school are at least seven.”

Nana laughs so loud that the table and chair shakes around me as her rumble flows through my back and into my limbs. It surprises me at first, but it becomes comforting.

“What's so funny?” Mama asks her.

“So I'm not too old to come to God, but your son is too young?” Nana laughs again. “I think the Bible says something about hypocrites.” Nana squeezes me close, as if to give me one last moment of comfort.

That's how I am delivered into Mama's hands. She pries me away from Nana's arms to dress me in my only suit. My hair refuses to stay down no matter how hard she brushes it because it's just like hers. The matted clumps stay up and go down when they want to. The black, stiff belt she loops around me digs into my waist. A matching silk tie makes my neck itch, but Mama slaps my hand away whenever I try to loosen it.

I drag my feet as I follow Mama out of my small room nestled between her and Nana's bedrooms. The material feels too heavy on my shoulders when I walk.

Nana sits in the same chair and looks at me, starting with my hair. Her eyes settle on my legs.

"That suit is too small for him, Sarah," she says. "His pants are riding way up over his ankles."

"I know, Ma, but it's the only suit he owns."

"You could have gotten him something else."

"Well, it was all we had at the last minute. Nothing I can do now. We're already running late for church." Mama grabs her car keys from the hook by the door. "Come on, Deacon. Let's hurry now."

"Go on out," Nana says. "He'll be right behind you." When Mama looks like she's going to protest, Nana says, "Go on. He's coming."

Mama walks out the door without saying bye to Nana, which she usually does.

Nana smiles when she turns back to me. "I guess this will have to do. Your Mama's going to have a stroke if she doesn't leave soon."

"Do I have to go?" I ask. I look at my feet and try to see my reflection in the glossy black tops.

"It's time you experienced church. Everybody's got to sooner or later."

"But you're not going."

She puts a hand on my shoulder and squeezes. "I'm too old for that nonsense now. I had to go when I was young, just like you, and again when I married your granddaddy. It may not be fun, but it's an experience."

"I still don't want to."

"Do this for your Mama. She needs a little company."

I nod without glancing up from my shoes.

"I want you to do this for me too," she continues. "Keep an eye on your Mama for me, okay?"

"Okay, Nana," I say.

Mama honks her car horn, and I look at the door.

Nana places a finger under my chin and turns my head around.

"Remember, Deacon, keep your eyes open for me. Sight is usually more truthful than sound. Don't worry about what people say to you. Look at what they're doing. You can tell a lot about folks that way, more often than not."

I nod although I don't really understand everything she tells me. Look. She wants me to look.

*

Mama opens the passenger door of her 1972 Chevy truck, which can be done only from the inside. The monstrous hunk of metal is six years old, like me, but Mama always talks about how it still runs like new. Alternating red and white

panels go around the side of it. Mama told us she bought the car used from Pastor Jones, but when Nana asked to see the receipt, she couldn't provide one. Nana responded by saying that she hoped he didn't just give it to Mama and that a man only gives you something when he expects something back. I asked Nana if that was similar to the Puritans trading goods with the Indians in one of the books Mama used to read to me. She only smiled and said, "Something like that, baby."

We drive on a small two-way road to get to the church. Our shack, which is what Nana calls it because it's so small, is located farther out in the country than the church. The church is closer to the outskirts of Hickory Springs, Virginia. It sits in front of a hill that looks low enough to run up and roll back down. Without a painted sign that says Pentecostal Church of the Redeemer, the building could be mistaken for a house. New glossy black shutters fail to hide the white paint peeling off the wide paneling that covers its exterior. Small stones of different shapes sit in uneven rows beside the church. I see the names and dates on them as Mama leads me by the hand inside the narrow building. I ask Mama what the names and dates are for.

"The stones help the living remember the dead," she says.

I grip her hand as we pass the names of the dead.

"Hallelujah!" The lean pastor shouts and jumps up and down like a sputtering rocket that's full of energy, but he only has enough fuel to jump a few feet off the ground. "Praise Him! You better praise Him!"

Mama whispers to me as we sit in the front row. "That's Pastor Jones," she says. She stares at him, smiling and clapping. "You can enjoy the service from here." Her head never turns to me. It stays focused on the man called Pastor Jones.

I'm upset that she won't look at me. I don't like the man Mama stares at with happiness. She has the same joyful smile for him that she used to give me. The one that went so high, it invaded her cheeks and made her look younger than twenty-four. The smile she gave me when she had fun reading to me or taking me to Quarterman's Lake in the summer for a swim. She stopped doing both with me. She stopped giving me her happy smiles. Tiny rocks sit in my tummy as I watch Mama, but I don't know how they got there.

"God wants you to worship him," Pastor Jones shouts. "If you don't, how will he know you care about him?"

His voice comes out loud and pierces my ears as the sound vibrates off my skin, giving me goosebumps. The noise bothers me, and I can't help shifting around in my seat. He moves closer to me and Mama. It feels like he's staring directly at me, so I look away.

I study the small room that feels like the side walls will close in on us. The windows have painted pictures on them that have faded, leaving colors that look bland and worn out. Some images show uneven crosses, while others depict angels with no faces. Their blank expressions make my skin feel like worms are crawling on top of me, slow and patient.

“God wants to hear your praise,” Pastor Jones says. “He longs for the praise of his believers. How does the verse go?” He looks at the audience like he expects them to know what he's about to say.

Some of the people look at each other and shrug. The pastor goes behind a wooden stand that holds an open book. He turns frantically until he finds something.

“Oh, yes. It says, ‘Make a joyful noise unto the Lord, all ye lands.’” He looks back up at us. “Are you a part of this earth?”

Some people say, “Yes.” Most of the church sits in silence.

“I said, ‘are you a part of this earth?’”

People force out a “Yes” that echoes throughout the room.

“Then you ought to be giving him some praise,” he says. “Can I get a ‘Amen’?” When the response is not to his liking, he repeats it again. He does this three times until the church response is so loud it makes the pictures of the faceless angels shake and the crosses tremble.

I feel like the walls are going to crumble down on me, so I glance up at the ceiling. Wooden arches round up into the ceiling to hold it up. Each beam supports another one until it looks like a puzzle.

My feet dangle from our pew that shines so much I can slide on it. It gives me the sensation of gliding. I do this until Mama tells me to stop.

Summer heat creeps inside the tight space. Women lift up their wide hats to fan themselves using flat cardboard attached to sticks with a picture of a white

man who has long brown hair and a bright light over his head. The same man is on all the fans, so I figure he has to be important. Some of the men in the church also fan themselves with a picture of the strange looking image. They pat their foreheads with cloth that doesn't seem big enough to catch the sweat falling from their faces.

The rows in the back are packed, but the front ones are scarce. Sunlight breaks through the windows and chases the hidden shadows on the floor out of view. I trace my swinging foot around the small shadow outline my other foot makes on the dark red glossy floor.

“Stop fidgeting,” Mama says to me as she places her hand on my legs.

She turns back to the pastor, who has finally stopped moving too. He wipes the sweat pouring from his face.

“If you want a blessing today,” he says, “or if you just need prayer, I want you to come up so I can lay my hands on you.”

Mama grabs my wrist and pulls me to the center aisle where all the other women in the church rush to stand. Some men in black and dark gray suits stand out between the women in line. The women's brightly colored hats and flowered dresses hurt my eyes this close up. On each side of us, some people stay seated. A few men and women sit clapping to music that can barely be heard. Others sit in stiff positions as if they are in pain. In the back of the church, two men guard the front doors we came through earlier.

We file in line with a few people ahead of us. It's hard to see past their towering bodies, so I lean over to peer around them.

Pastor Jones has his hand on a woman's head. I can't hear what he whispers to her, but her hands are high in the air. I wonder what she's reaching for. He uses his hand to push her back, and she loses her balance. One of the men standing at the doors runs to her and stands behind her. The preacher pushes again, and she falls into the arms of the man. He catches all of her weight before placing her down on the ground.

I pull on my mother's hand. "Is she sick?"

She looks ahead of us and says, "No, Deacon. She's happy. She just felt the hand of God."

I stare at the ceiling to look for the big hand of God.

"I don't see God's hand," I say.

She doesn't respond, and we move up in line. I hold Mama's hand.

Waiting feels like forever. The line shortens until it's the woman in front of us who goes next. The preacher lifts her hands. Although I still can't hear his words, his rumbling voice comes out in bursts.

He doesn't lay his hand on her head like the woman before. Instead, he taps her on the forehead, and she screams. He taps her again, and she speaks loud and fast. Her words come out as nonsense. The words sound foreign to me.

I grip my mother's hand tighter.

“Don’t worry, dear,” she whispers to me. “Sister Thomas is speaking in tongues. She has God's happy language.”

I cringe and wonder what part of her gibberish is supposed to be happy as she makes a face that looks angry and confused. I try to translate her words. I make out things I've never heard before.

Her words slow down for me to hear her say, “Blug mada shaday.”

I try to connect the odd words she says to words I know. *Bug mad show day.*

I pull on Mama's hand and ask, “Why is she afraid of bugs today? Are they really mad?”

“What?” Mama asks with a sharp tone in her voice. When I point to the woman and repeat my words, she says, “Don't make fun of Sister Thomas like that. She's happy. You don't want God to strike you down for making fun of his happy people, do you?”

I squeeze her hand and shake my head. I look up in the ceiling for the hand of God again and hope it doesn't strike me.

“But Mama ...”

A woman sitting in a pew next to us turns around. She wears a bright orange dress suit that hurts my eyes. She looks at me like I make her sick. It's the same look Nana gives one of the rats she finds caught in one of her kitchen traps.

“I’m sorry,” Mama says to the woman. She bends down and whispers, “Stop interfering, unless you want me to take you outside for a smacking.”

I stay quiet, so she stands back up.

A man moves the woman still speaking the odd language to the side of the floor that doesn’t block the line. Then we’re left facing Pastor Jones. This man touches people and changes them. I don’t want his hands on me.

Mama grips my hand tighter and pulls me with her as she moves closer to him. My attempts to move away don’t save me. I grab the edge of a pew to keep from moving, but my fingers slip off as she drags me forward.

He tells Mama to lift her hands. My hand falls free until a stranger walks up beside me. It’s the other man who stood at the front doors. He takes my hand, the same hand Mama held. His fingers dig into mine harder than Mama’s. I look down and see my hand hidden in his. I feel the gold ring he wears pinching my skin. When I glance up at his face, he smiles with his teeth in a way that reminds me of the dog that chased me.

The preacher speaks fast like the Thomas woman as he touches Mama.

I try to go to her, but the strange man holds my hand tighter and keeps me away. Pastor Jones hits her once on the head and she falls to the ground.

I stare at her motionless body, confused and scared.

Pastor Jones kneels down to face me, and I dislike him even more as I stare into his clear eyes. They look like hollow depths without life.

“Morning, Deacon,” he says in a drawl.

I look at Mama, but she doesn't move.

"Don't worry. Your mother will be fine."

His words sound funny to me. I don't trust them as they float off his lips.

He places a hand on my shoulder. His straight teeth and crooked smile make me take a step back. "Don't be scared, son. Just lift your hands."

I look at him without glancing at his eyes. His hair slicks back over his head with his ears flat against them. I don't want any of the happiness he wants to give me.

"Raise your hands," he says more firmly. I want to go to Mama, so I lift my hands as high as I can. I want it to be over so I can go to her. I'm supposed to watch over her, and I don't want to disappoint Nana.

Pastor Jones touches me and pushes me back. "Let the spirit fill this boy!" he shouts.

He pushes a second time. I stumble but don't fall.

"Fill him now!" he repeats even louder.

The third time he pushes me, I go back more as I feel my balance leaving me. I want him to stop shoving me.

"Now!" he shouts one last time.

His hands stay on me as he pushes one more time. I back up until I run into one of the pew ends. The hard structure keeps me from moving.

Pastor Jones removes his hands and scrunches his brow at me. He shakes his head and walks away. I hear his voice go up louder as he touches the next person with raised hands.

I run over to Mama and kneel next to her. Her words come out weird. She sounds like the Thomas woman. It angers me that Pastor Jones has hurt her. I don't want Mama to have the happy language when all it does is scare me and hurt her.

I try to move her, but I'm too small to even roll her over. Her eyes don't open. Tears run down my cheeks as I try to rock her again. She trembles as if I've hurt her. I move my hands away. I want her to wake up so we can leave.

"Please, Mama," I beg her. "Wake up." She doesn't move or react to my words, so I feel helpless. If only I were bigger. Big enough to help Mama.

No one else comes to help her, and it angers me. They walk around me and her. We don't exist to them.

I hear more words I don't understand, but this time men and women screech out the odd sayings. Their voices mix with tambourines and clapping. Each sound tries to outdo the other in rattles and beats. The loud noises make my head hurt, so I cover my ears. I want to close my eyes and imagine that this is a nightmare Nana will wake me out of. I want her humming to replace the sounds that surround me. But before I can close my eyes and wish it all away, Mama opens hers.

*

When we exit the building, we are still with the church people. I see kids my size and bigger run to greet their families.

“They were in Sunday school,” Mama says. “You’ll be with them next Sunday.”

I want to scream at her, but I stay quiet since we’re outside. No barriers stand between me and God if He decides to hit me.

A woman with her hair in a bun and small glasses perched on her nose walks to us.

“Good afternoon, Sister Taylor,” the woman says. It takes me a few seconds to remember that this is our last name. I don’t understand why this woman calls Mama her sister. I heard Mama call the woman who spoke the weird language “sister.” It confuses me since I know Nana said that Mama was her only child and that I was the son she never had born through Mama.

“Afternoon, Sister Gooding,” Mama says.

I tilt my head up at the woman who looks nothing like Mama.

“Is this your boy we’ve heard so much about?” the woman says.

“Yep. This is Deacon.”

“Oh, he has cute little cheeks.” The woman kneels down so we face each other. Her hands reach out and grab my cheeks. Her cold fingers knead my skin and stretch it as far as it can go.

Her pinching hurts. I try to push her away, but she keeps grabbing my face.

Mama smiles. "Deacon, this is Sister Gooding. She's going to be your Sunday school teacher."

"You get to be with me and the other children next Sunday," the Gooding woman says.

I say nothing since I never want to come back to this scary place.

Mama walks us to her car, and as we pull away from the church, the children play with each other as their parents talk. A boy, who looks a year or two older than me, chases a younger girl around the church as they both laugh. All I want to do is run over there and play with them, but I wonder if the kids are as scary as the adults.

The church people go out to eat after the service, and we follow them. Crooked letters on top of a small building say *Ol' Country Buffet*. Inside looks bigger than the outside shack-like structure that reminds me of our home. Brown booths line each wall and matching plastic chairs surround smaller round tables in the middle of the floor. A long table stands in the back. It stretches the length of the room covered with steaming trays of pot roast, cornbread, mashed potatoes, greens, and other dishes.

The people from church fill up the empty restaurant seats. No one moves to pile up their plates. We sit and wait for the pastor before we eat.

I sit beside Mama, looking at her. She talks and moves like normal, but the image of her falling out stays with me. I want to touch her to make sure she still feels like Mama, but I keep my hands to myself.

“Stop looking at me like that, Deacon,” Mama says. “I’m perfectly fine.”

I can’t help staring, but she gets annoyed with me.

“Go out to the car and get the gift I have for Pastor Jones,” she says, handing me the key. “I want him to have his new handkerchief for the next service.”

I look at her until she shoos me away.

Mama’s car is right in front of the restaurant. I have to use the key on her side since my door won’t open from the outside. I find the brown package in the back seat. When I have it in my hands, I lock the doors like Mama taught me to do.

Before I go inside, I see a big Cadillac parked around the side. I know the car by the symbol on the back that looks like a crown because Nana always describes it and says it’s her dream car. The sun glitters off the light blue panels, making a mirror reflection of the sky. I’ve never seen a car like this before. I walk up to it so I can run my hand over the spotless sides. The shiny panels pull me closer to it. With my free hand, I glide my fingers along the smooth surface, barely grazing it.

I look inside, through the back door. Pastor Jones comes into view. I jump back, afraid that he’s seen me looking into his car, but he doesn’t move. I

remember the package in my hand. I don't like this man with the uneven smile and greasy hair, but Mama would be happy to know I gave him his gift. I walk around until I see him from the rolled-down window. He bends over and takes a deep breath before rubbing his nose. After he sits up, he turns to me.

White dust covers his nose. It looks like the flour Nana uses to bake morning biscuits when she feels up to cooking. Pastor Jones opens the car door.

“Hey there, Deacon,” he says to me. He looks around us and over my head. “What are you doing out here by yourself?”

“Mama wanted me to get your gift,” I say. I hand him the small bundle wrapped in pieces of what used to be a brown paper bag.

“That's mighty kind of her,” he says. He looks me in the eye without blinking.

I point to his face. “You have flour on your nose.” I turn and run back to Mama. I don't stop, even when I hear Pastor Jones calling my name.

It isn't until I put my plate down at our table that I see Pastor Jones sitting on the other side of Mama. The flour is gone from his face. I can't stop watching him. I don't want him to make her sleep again and not wake up.

“Deacon!” Mama's voice makes me jump. “That's all you have? Dessert?”

I follow her eyes to the three cookies on my plate surrounded by a slice of pie and a brownie.

“Go back up to the table and get real food.”

I look at my plate without moving. It's not that I want dessert. The other food on the serving table was out of my reach. The only things I could grab were the desserts.

"Why don't you let him enjoy his dessert first, Sister Taylor?" Pastor Jones says.

I stare at him. His help doesn't make me like him.

"He can celebrate his first day of church," he says.

Mama smiles at him with a smile that looks big enough to slide off her face. "Well," she says, "maybe just this once."

"Great," he says in a voice loud enough to echo and bounce off the walls. "Let us hold hands and pray."

Mama grabs my hand and a strange woman in a brown dress wearing glasses takes my other hand. Everyone at the table bows their heads and closes their eyes. I try to do the same, but Pastor Jones holds Mama's other hand.

I stare at him and hope if I look hard enough his hand will let her go.

"Father," he says, "We ask you to bless this food in front of us. Let it give us strength and endurance." He turns and stares at me. I don't turn away, but his gaze makes me tremble. "And let us be thankful for all that we have. In your name we pray, let everyone say, Amen."

Everyone at the table repeats, "Amen."

All the people around the table let go of one another's hands except Pastor Jones. He doesn't let Mama's hand go.

“Stop it! Stop holding Mama's hand.”

The people around us pause from eating and stare at me, but I don't care.

The only one I don't turn away from is Pastor Jones.

“Deacon, that was rude,” Mama says. “Apologize.”

“No,” I say.

She starts to scold me again, but she's interrupted.

“It's alright, Sister Johnson,” Pastor Jones says. “I'm sure Deacon didn't mean any harm. He's just protecting his mother.” He turns to me and says, “I only meant to show my gratitude to your mother.”

I don't say anything because I don't want to talk to him.

He smiles and turns back to Mama. “Thank you for the handkerchief, Sister Johnson,” he says. “I am blessed to have a friend give such a thoughtful gift.”

Mom giggles and I see her cheeks change colors. When I turn to eat a cookie, she is still laughing.

*

For a week, Mama talks about taking me back to church. She even buys me a new suit for the occasion. Every time she mentions church, I run away from her and hide in my room, but she runs after me each time. I don't want to go back there.

The following Sunday, before the sun seeps through the small cracks of the wooden shed, I hear Mama moving around her room. She's getting ready for church, and she wants to take me again. I try to not make any noise as I sneak out of my room. Although it sits in between Mama and Nana's bedrooms, my bedroom is the smallest room in the house.

When visitors first walk up to our shack, they pass through the screened porch with a green metal glider that all three of us can sit on at one time. Little squeaks can be heard whenever it moves back and forth. The kitchen is the first inside room with the small wooden table and our chairs around it. Both the deep porcelain sink and icebox sit side by side under a window that allows daylight to seep through. Nana's room, the biggest one since it used to be for her and grandpa, is the largest bedroom with the washroom across from her. Mama's room is the last one with the only view of the backyard. I know if I'm careful, I can avoid running into her before she goes to clean up.

Nana's door is cracked, so it's easy to slide in. I hear her deep breaths and know she's still asleep. Her back is turned to me, so all I see is her knit cap. I slide under her bed and wait.

Being in Nana's room reminds me about the times I would hear her crying at night. Our walls were thin, so I could hear her sobs even when she closed her bedroom door. It was hard to make out everything she said through our connecting bedroom walls, but I could hear her voice saying, "Oh, Bobby.

Bobby.” She kept repeating the name I knew belonged to my grandfather. She was sad because she missed him.

I would go over to the wall and press my hand on its cold barrier, trying to push through it to comfort her. I didn't want Nana to cry, and it took a lot to keep me from going to her and letting her know it was fine. Everything would be okay as long as I could make her happy again. She'd done the same for me whenever I was sad. Part of me knew that she wanted to have the moment alone, so I sat in the darkness of my room and waited with her. I waited until I no longer heard movement on the wooden floorboards or the creaking of her bed. Only then did I crawl back under my covers and close my eyes to sleep.

I never told Nana what I heard because I didn't want to make her sad again, and I didn't want my mother to know because she told me that crying made people weak. She didn't want to see me cry, so whenever I did it I went to my room like Nana.

I am brought back to being under Nana's bed when I hear Mama's footsteps in the hall as she goes to the washroom. It's quiet until she turns on the bath water. I stay as still as I can so she doesn't hear me. My body stiffens as I become aware of each part of me that could move and give my presence away. When the water cuts off, I know I'm safe for a little while.

My breathing moves fast like I have been holding it. It doesn't slow down until I spot a daddy longlegs in the corner of Nana's room. I feel the air enter my lungs and then leave me. The daddy longlegs crawls towards me. Air goes in and

out. It's close enough for me to reach out and touch. I want to, but I hesitate. The last distance closes as it makes a move for me and crawls on my hand. My skin tingles, and I try not to laugh. I use my other hand to reach it. A finger grazes its leg, but it surprises me when it moves. My finger leans on the leg too much, and it comes off.

I want to tell it I'm sorry, but it moves around fast with no direction. It no longer walks a straight line, bumping into the bedpost. I've ruined it.

I remember when Nana told me how she had a dog named Brownny when she was twelve. She said that she didn't take good care of Brownny, and he got sick. Her father took the dog out back and shot him. I cried when she told me.

"Why did great grandpa shoot Brownny?" I asked her.

"To end his suffering," she said. "He didn't want the dog to be in pain."

I thought of that as my hand went down over the daddy longlegs and squashed it. I made it hurt, so I had to stop its pain. My face became wet, and I knew I was crying. I put my face over my arms to keep Mama and Nana from hearing me.

I didn't know I had fallen asleep until I woke up to a smell that brought thoughts of wood burning with sweet spices. Fire made my nose burn, but this made me relax. I recognized it after inhaling a few times. It was Mama's perfume. She called it Opium, and she only wore it during special days.

"There you are," Mama says. "Trying to hide from church I see." She grabs my hand and pulls me from under the bed. She keeps pulling until I'm forced to

stand. "I don't care whether you want to go or not. I finally bought you a new suit for church, so you are going to wear it and be grateful."

I cross my arms and stamp my foot.

She leans over until her face is only a few inches from mine. "Don't make me tell you again, or you'll have to go outside and choose a switch for me to beat you with."

I run past her and into the kitchen. I hear Mama's fancy shoes clicking behind me. I don't stop until I bump into Nana. I don't have to look up to know it's her because I see her boots. I wrap my arms around her waist as tight as I can, and Nana's hands pat my back.

"Don't you threaten him like that," Nana says. "He can't help it if that place scares him."

"Scares him?" Mama asks. "They were nothing but good to Deacon last Sunday."

"Just leave the boy alone, Sarah." Nana wraps her arms around me even tighter.

"No, Ma. It's fine if you want to stay and not go to church, but I won't have my son do it too." She reaches out to pull me away from Nana.

I close my eyes and keep them tight. I hope that'll make her leave me alone. Mama's hands reach for my back.

"He may end up resenting you for it," Nana says.

"No he won't," Mama says. "He's going to thank me when he's older."

Nana yanks me to her side and out of Mama's reach, but Mama still tries to hold on to me. "You say you're so concerned about our souls, getting us saved, but I know the truth," Nana says.

Mama removes her hands from me. "The truth about what?" she asks. I hear her voice shiver.

"You have your eyes set on that pastor." Nana's voice comes out sharp with anger. Her tone is new to me. I've never heard her yell before or seen her get angry. The anger floats over me to Mama.

"Don't be silly, Ma."

"He's single isn't he?" Nana snaps at her.

"What's that got to do with anything?"

"All the unmarried women in this town flock to single men like vultures. You know that. That man may call himself a pastor, but he's still a man."

"Pastor Jones is a man of God."

"Keep telling yourself that. All the Joneses who claim to be men of God are alike. That man is going to hurt you too if all you can do is dream about him."

"I don't dream about him."

"The Joneses who preach at that church treat you well at first, then they dog you later."

"What would you know about Pastor Jones' family?"

"Enough," Nana says.

“You don't know about Pastor Jones or his family,” Mama says. “You have no right to judge them.”

“A few of them may be fine people, Sarah, but I don't trust Pastor Jones. Even if you don't listen to me, you must've heard about his shady dealings. Yet, he has the nerve to get up in that pulpit every week and preach about sin. Your Pastor Jones is a hypocrite and a fool.”

Mama stays quiet for a moment. When she finally speaks, it is like all emotion has left her voice. “I don't listen to gossip, Ma. You should do the same.” Her heels click back down the hall.

Nana sits down at the kitchen table, and tears fall down her face.

“I'm sorry, Nana,” I say. “Don't cry.” This is the first time I see Nana cry outside of her bedroom, and it makes me sadder than when I could only hear her sobs.

I wipe the tears on the side of her face with my thumb the way she does to me when I'm crying because of a bad dream or a scraped knee.

“I'll go to church if it'll make you feel better.”

“I know you don't like that church, Deacon,” she whispers to me. “I don't either, but Nana needs time to rest. Can you be my big boy and go with your Mama today?”

I nod my head even though I don't want to. I don't want Nana to hurt anymore. “I'll go.”

Her arms wrap around me so tight that I can't breathe, but I don't pull away. I am comforted by her secure grip and happy as her tears slow down. I want to be there for Nana like she is for me when I'm sad.

*

Sister Gooding is there to greet us as Mama takes me to Sunday school. Mama told me that sister and brother were the names people used for each other in the church. She said that didn't mean they thought they were really related as brothers and sisters. I still don't understand why they call each other something they aren't.

The entryway sits to the right of the church with a door painted red, the opposite of the front double white doors that lead to the big part of the church I was in last Sunday.

"Good morning, Deacon," Sister Gooding says to me. "Glad you could make it today. Come on in."

I look up at Mama. I don't want to go into the service with the adults because they scare me. I'm happy to be with kids my age, but I don't want to leave Mama. What if she falls out again and no one is there to watch her? I don't want to disappoint Nana any more by leaving Mama alone to get hurt.

"Go on," Mama says. "I'll be back to get you after church."

I walk as slow as I can into the large room. Six kids are inside. Two boys are bigger than me and stand to one side of the room together. One has on a suit with double buttons going down the front, which makes him look older than anyone else in the room, and the boy next to him wears a shirt that is wrinkled so much that it bunches up around him. The other four seem closer to my age. A boy with hair that sticks up like little fingers and two girls wearing fancy dresses the color of pink and blue cupcake icing sit on a large rug that has a picture of an angel dressed in white with a rainbow colored halo. The boy waves at me as the two girls smile.

My head turns to my shoes. They're dirty with spots of old mud stuck to them, but it's hard to tell with the new dark blue suit Mama bought me. The old one was too short, but this one is too long. Even with the rolled-up ends, I have to try not to trip over them.

"What's your name?" asks a girl a little taller than me with long brown braids hanging on each side of her round face.

"Deacon," I say, but I can barely hear my own voice.

"That's a weird name," she says. "I'm Sandra."

I try to smile at her, but I don't think I'm doing it right by the way she tilts her head.

She laughs and takes my hand. "You're funny. Come sit by me in the circle."

I follow her without knowing what circle she means or where she's taking me. When she sits down on the angel rug, I sit next to her with my legs crossed over one another like her and the other children in the room.

Sister Gooding comes in, and the two older kids sit down the same way. She sits in a chair in the middle of the circle facing us.

"Now that we're all here, we can start story time," she says. "What do you kids want to hear?"

Everyone starts shouting out names I've never heard before.

"David and Goliath," says the boy in the wrinkled shirt.

"Adam and Eve in the garden," says the girl in pink icing.

"No," says the boy with the hair standing up. "We should hear Moses and how he parted the Red Sea."

Sister Gooding raises her hands to quiet everyone. "Why don't we let our new person decide," she says. "What would you like to hear, Deacon?"

Everyone turns to me, waiting for an answer.

I don't know any stories other than the ones Mama told me. "Little House on the Prairie," I say.

When most of the kids start laughing, I want to run out of the room.

"That's not a Bible story, silly," says the girl dressed in blue icing.

"It's not nice to make fun of people when they don't know something,"

Sister Gooding says. "Didn't your mother or grandmother teach you any Bible stories?" she asks me.

Instead of answering, I stay silent. I'm afraid they'll laugh at me again.

Sandra raises her hand.

"Yes, Sandra? What is it?"

"Why don't we tell Deacon the story of Noah's Ark?" She smiles at me again. "It's one of my favorites."

"That sounds lovely," Sister Gooding says. She walks over to a book shelf and grabs a big book that doesn't fit, so it hangs off the shelf.

When she comes back, she sits in a different chair that's bigger than the first. This one is a light brown wooden rocker that has legs that curl up like a large bow and arrow.

She rests the book in one hand and fans herself with the other. The fan is the same one I saw people using when Mama brought me to church the first time. I asked Nana who the man was.

"What man?" Nana asked.

"The man on all the fans in church," I said. "He was wearing a white robe, and had long, brown hair. Light was on top of his head like it was coming out of him."

Nana laughed. "Oh, honey," she said, "that wasn't a regular man. That was Jesus."

I didn't understand who Jesus was, but he still looked like a man to me. How could he not be one?

Nana just said, "I'm sure that church will tell you all about God, Jesus, the Holy Ghost, and all those other people, especially if your Mama keeps dragging you to that place."

Sandra shifts closer to me as Sister Gooding reads from the book. I look at Sandra and see her staring at me with a big smile. It reminds me of Mama. I turn away and stare at the carpet as my cheeks get hot. I rub them to get the burning sensation to go away. When they feel normal again, I watch Sister Gooding as she reads out loud to us.

"The story of Noah," Sister Gooding says, "begins with God's anger and disappointment in man." The book she reads from has a large wooden boat on the front that wraps all the way around the spine to the back cover.

Sister Gooding's face changes as she describes Noah's Ark and how he gathered two of every animal in the large boat.

I raise my hand.

"Yes, Deacon?" Sister Gooding says.

"How did two of every animal fit on one boat?" I ask. I think of all the animals I've seen in our backyard and the animals Mama showed me in the books we used to read together. I couldn't imagine even two of the animals I knew about getting in one boat without tumbling over each other.

I am reminded of an old globe Nana owned. It was light brown and had a fake golden metal base. When she showed me the state we lived in she said, "Think of our town as small pencil point on there. Now imagine a tiny speck on

that pencil mark, one that isn't even visible to the human eye.” I closed my eyes and imagined as she talked. Her voice took me farther into the images in my head. “That speck is where we live in Virginia.”

Although I didn't know the exact size of the world, I realized that it was big enough to consume the pencil point hundreds of times over. If the world was that big, two of every animal wouldn't be very comfortable or even fit in the boat that seemed small on the book cover.

“What do you mean, Deacon?” Sister Gooding asks.

I point to the picture on the book. “How did Noah get all of the animals of the world in that?”

Sister Gooding smiles, but it doesn't seem right. I can see her face squint up. She's frustrated from trying to answer me.

The girls in the bright colored icing dresses laugh. The one dressed in pink looks straight at me. “Are you stupid? Mommy says that stupid people are sinners.”

“Becky!” Sister Gooding screeches. “We do not say stupid!” She turns back to me and says, “Deacon, the animals were able to get into the ark together because God made it so. They fit perfectly because God allowed them to fit so they could be protected.”

I look at the picture again, but I still don't understand.

Sandra whispers in my ear. “It's okay,” she says. “I didn't get it the first time either.”

The confusion makes me upset, but I look up and see Sandra smiling at me again. I can't stop myself from smiling too.

When Mama comes to get me, she asks, "How was Sunday school?"

"It was okay," I say.

"Good," she says. "Maybe next time I won't have to chase you before church."

I stay silent, but the thought of church doesn't scare me anymore. Not when Sandra smiles and makes me feel better.

The Apple Orchard

Before I became Deacon's Nana, I was Maybelle Louise Taylor. I was a woman who loved God, my husband, and our beautiful daughter, not always in that order. Bobby, Sarah, and I went to church every first and third Sunday to hear Reverend Jones give us the holy word. Sarah always went to the back for children's church while we stayed in the sanctuary. It took months before I was comfortable being away from her for a few minutes let alone for a two-hour church meet, but she seemed to enjoy spending time with other children her age during Sunday services.

Reverend Jones was the second man in his family to take over the church as the head pastor, and he wanted his son David Jones to continue the tradition. The problem was that David didn't want to pick up his family's legacy in the church, so he packed his bags and started traveling the country. His father was disappointed in his son's choice. David had been gone for three years. All of a sudden, Reverend Jones said God wanted him to fast from food and that doing so would bring his son back home. He only drank water and milk. No solid food passed his lips. It sounded like starvation and a bunch of nonsense to me. Who could live on water and milk without anything else to eat?

My life wasn't affected by the fasting idea until Reverend Jones made an announcement one Sunday.

“Brothers and sisters,” he preached to us one Sunday. “I’m here to tell you that God can perform miracles. He performs miracles in our lives as long as we are willing to make a sacrifice.”

A few members of the church shouted their Amens and Hallelujahs to encourage him to continue. Bobby and I sat in the front, our usual seat, and listened to him.

“As many of you know, I’ve been fasting for the past thirty days. It’s been difficult, but I’m here to tell you God answers prayers. My son will be coming home in the next two weeks! Can I get an Amen, everybody?”

“Amen!” the congregation shouted.

Bobby’s “Amen” rumbled out with the rest of the church, but I stayed quiet. I watched as Bobby clapped with them. He smiled and nodded his head. Did he really believe in this fasting idea?

I didn’t understand why the pastor would starve himself just to get his son back. Wasn’t he more useful to his family healthy and alive? I was still unfamiliar with the church experience. I went as a child, but I grew away from it as I got older. It wasn’t until I married Bobby that I started going back to church with him. He’d been in the church all of his life, so he wanted his wife to be a part of the spiritual journey. I loved him enough to accept going, but that didn’t mean I agreed with all of their practices. Fasting was one of things I didn’t agree with because it made no sense to me.

“To celebrate this miracle, I want you all to experience God's hand,” Reverend Jones said. He started walking close to us. “This is why I'm asking all of you to fast with me.”

I felt my mouth open at his words. This man didn't really think I was going to starve myself and live off milk and water, did he? If Bobby even suggested such a thing, I was going to smack him.

“Keep in mind, my friends, you can fast from other things beside food,” Reverend Jones said. “Start with something that may be hard to give up. Then try to fast from it, and see God move.”

On the ride home, Bobby brought up the fasting subject.

“I think we should fast from sex,” Bobby said, not taking his eyes off the road.

“Excuse me?” I asked. There was no way he said what I thought he did. I glanced to the back seat to make sure Sarah was still asleep. She was probably too young to understand what we were talking about, but she had a habit of picking up random words we said.

“Sex,” Bobby said. “I think that should be what we fast from to see God move in our lives.”

“And you decided this for the both of us when?”

“Well, after service, I asked Reverend Jones about it, and he said –”

“You spoke to him about our intimate life? Bobby, how could you?” I felt rage build up in me. I rolled my window down to get some fresh air. I felt I was going to suffocate or scream. Maybe both.

“He's a man of God. We can talk to him about anything.”

“You can tell him anything, you mean.” I took deep breaths of the nippy air. The fall draft helped to clear my head. I felt my hands clench into fists. I wondered if I hit him if it would affect his driving. I had to occupy my hands to distract myself, so I opened the glove compartment and found a wrench and a flashlight. I took out the flashlight since that seemed like the safer option and played with the on and off switch. When I realized I could hit Bobby with that and do more damage than my hands, I put it back in and shut the door. I didn't need anything else in my hands at that moment.

I hated when he shared our private life with the pastor. Bobby saw Reverend Jones as a second father. Bobby and Reverend Jones's son, David, grew up together, so I guess it made sense that Bobby looked up to him. Still, I didn't know him as well as Bobby did. Certainly not well enough to discuss our marriage bed.

“He understands, May. He's been married for thirty years. There is nothing the man hasn't heard.”

“I'll bet,” I snapped. “Why, exactly, did you decide on this type of fasting?”

“Well, we haven't been intimate in a while. I figured it would be easy to do the same with prayer and encouragement from the church.”

“I thought we had to give up something hard,” I said.

“Don’t be like that, May. Since you’ve never fasted before, the reverend and I thought you should start off easy.”

“I’m glad you both thought of me.”

He glanced over at me like he wanted to say something else, but common sense kept him quiet.

I couldn't believe it, but as much as I wanted to think he was joking, I had to accept that he was serious. Bobby rarely joked when it came to our marriage. I was upset that he thought it would be easy to keep living without the lovemaking. It wasn't for my lack of trying. I'd snuggle up to him, hoping he'd do more, but he usually turned over or seemed clueless to my advances.

I didn't know what else to say to him. I never wanted a gap to exist in the first place. *God help Reverend Jones for putting this silly idea in Bobby's head*, I thought. *Was it a sin to punch a man of God?* I stayed quiet all the way home, and prayed silently that Bobby would forget about his fasting suggestion.

I knew my sex life was over the next day when Bobby brought home the king-sized bed. He dragged the monstrous looking thing in by himself, refusing to ask for my help. I cursed it under my breath as I watched him set it up. I knew then that his fasting plan was going to happen. We had already been sleeping on opposite ends of the bed, but the distance between us kept getting wider.

“We can afford it now, May,” he used to tell me whenever he brought home a new bed size.

He first switched our old full-sized bed for a new one. That was when he still came to me without my advances. He replaced that three years later when we got a queen, which was barely able to fit in our bedroom. I'd never heard of such a thing. Did the mattress companies think royalty lived among us common folks? Bobby just said that it was what people slept on in the big cities.

Then, I was lucky if we were intimate once a week. Still, I missed our first full bed. The old mattress had memories of our closeness because it was our first marriage bed. It became worn down and the springs came through in certain areas, but it kept Bobby near me for the first five years. There was always a chance for gentle touches, whispering loving words, or feeling the warmth radiating off each other during chilly nights. Each moment sparked opportunities for lovemaking. I never once doubted that he wanted me. Those moments slowly got smaller with each replaced mattress in the last five years and after I got pregnant with Sarah. Bobby seemed interested in only validating our worth, when I just wanted him to hold me.

I didn't blame Bobby because running our business took a lot out of both of us, making us feel like we were in our forties instead of our thirties. We had an apple orchard in our back yard, which was our livelihood. It contained apples of every kind: Golden Delicious, Red Delicious, Macintosh, Concord, and various others. Having the Virginia weather made the apples a guarantee every year. The orchard stretched out to equal one football field in length. Millions of yellow and white dogwood flowers showered the area, making the land rich in color.

I ran the store next to the house, while Bobby did the physical work of picking and maintaining the apples. He would gather the apples and I would sell them. It was so relaxing to come up with creations for the apples, including the classic apple pie, canned apples, baked apples, and even apple chips. The work helped us to advertise in the local fairs. Tourists wanting to own a piece of the area contributed to our success. I thought of it as a great partnership and trade off, and it was for over eight years. But working together had become easier than sleeping together.

When we earned enough money to pay off our debt, Bobby started to buy the beds, while I thought of ways to dissuade him from it. He'd stopped buying beds until the fasting idea popped into his mind. The new bed was big enough to do just what he wanted: keep us further apart. All I wanted was personal time with him that wasn't apple or church related, but Bobby never wanted to hire anyone to help us with the work. He always did the harvesting by himself, no matter how many times I protested.

"Maybe we should consider bringing in someone to help," I tried convincing him again one morning as we were getting ready for the work day. He sat on the end of the large bed as he strained put on his navy-colored wool socks. He had recently pulled a muscle in his back from loading one of the apple crates. It seemed like the perfect time to reopen the subject. Sometimes it was easier to get Bobby to agree with me when he was distracted.

"No," he said. His words were stern and felt unmoving like usual.

“Why not? Each year business picks up. It’s probably going to be worse this year, especially with the Apple Festival celebrating its twenty-five year anniversary. We’re going to have to take more apples this season.”

“I don’t want men hanging around here.” I ignored his jealous reasoning.

“I told you before, Bobby, we can afford it.” I loved throwing that one back at him since it was the phrase that came with each new mattress. “Besides,” I continued, “we only need one hired hand. It would do us a great deal of good.”

“I’m not comfortable giving strangers the chance to leer at you. You’re not easy to ignore, honey.”

He always implied that I was beautiful, but when I looked in the mirror I never saw the breathtaking image he claimed to see. Not since I had Sarah. I loved her, but childbirth made me feel like I had lost a war with being desirable. All I ever saw when I looked at myself was an average-looking woman with dark-brown hair that shaped my unsatisfied round face. I was never insecure before I was pregnant, but his lack of attention was starting to annoy the hell out of me.

A year and a half had passed since we’d last had sex. I had only been pregnant for a few months before Bobby became afraid that he would poke our baby in the head. Even though the doctor said it was safe, Bobby avoided me. Since then, I never saw myself smile back at my reflection. I tried to force my face to do it, but it wasn’t the same. Not like when we were in the first years of marriage and gave each other reasons to laugh and be happy. He was different. Maybe I was different too.

“Oh, is that right?” I said to Bobby as I went up behind him and wrapped my arms around his neck. He usually noticed my sarcasm. I used it whenever he gave me the same old excuse. “You don’t have to worry about me running off with some strange man. How would you sell all those apples without me? You shouldn’t be doing hard labor anyway. You should be spending most of your time in bed.”

Taking advantage of the moment, I kissed his neck tenderly. I felt him relax as his head fell back. *Was that a moan?* Encouraged, I moved my lips to the tender spot behind his ear. That did it. He scrambled away from me and moved off the bed. It was if he was becoming a professional getaway artist whenever I tried to show affection.

“Let’s pray,” he said.

“What?” I heard him, but he couldn’t mean it. He wanted to pray? Right now?

“Let’s pray to God for strength.” He got on his knees at the foot of the bed and held his hand out for me.

I took his hand and knelt beside him. I bowed my head and closed my eyes, but I opened them as soon as he started his prayer.

“Lord,” he said, “we ask you for strength right now. We know that since we are fasting, the Devil will try to tempt us in many ways, especially through each other.”

Wow, I thought. *My husband thinks I'm in league with Satan and tempting him with sex. When did something that married people were supposed to enjoy become a sin?* I couldn't help feeling my head with my free hand. I wanted to check for horns.

"Thank you father for strengthening us during times of weakness," Bobby continued. "In Jesus' name we pray, Amen"

I closed my eyes just in time to repeat his Amen.

"That was a good prayer, honey," I said. I tried to give him a sincere smile, and he returned it with one of his own.

I figured this was a good time to persuade him for something else.

"Now, about that help I was asking for."

When his smile weakened, I made a pout and stared at him with my hazel eyes that usually got him to comply with my wishes. He couldn't help but laugh when I made another funny face.

He stood up and put his suspenders over his shoulders. "Okay, I'll tell you what, Reverend Jones' older brother, Thomas, is coming back to town soon. I'm sure he's going to need some work. Let me call him to see if he can help out. I would feel better if you were around someone I know instead of some random person for hire."

"That's fine by me." Bobby didn't comply with my advances, but at least he gave way to something. "As long as you get someone to help out around here, I don't care where he comes from. All we ever do is work, go to church, eat, and

barely sleep. Maybe this will give us our own time together every once in a while.”

I stood up and went over to him and gave him a peck on the lips. Without thinking, I started to kiss him with a more forceful effort. When I tried to make it more passionate, he pulled away.

“We have to get ready before the day gets away from us. I have a call to make in town too, remember?” He left me standing alone in the room.

It was no use arguing with him about his commitment to this ridiculous fast. It was a problem for me that didn't seem to exist for him. I sighed and slowly made my way to Sarah's room to get her ready for the day.

*

A few days later, the Reverend's brother agreed to help us out with the work. I didn't really like the Reverend, but Bobby had finally agreed to hire someone to help with our workload. I didn't want to ruin it by being picky. I didn't remember seeing Thomas at our wedding, but Bobby said it was because Thomas was always traveling across the country from job to job. According to Bobby, he was fired from his last position because he refused to work after being suspected of stealing. The boss found the money on another employee. Apparently, Thomas' pride was hurt by then, so he quit.

I was home alone when I heard the doorbell. It had only been a week and a half after Thomas accepted our job offer. Bobby had gone to the apple festival site to register us for the merchant's booth we reserved every September. The ringing startled me because Thomas wasn't due for a few more days, and we rarely got house calls from the neighbors that time of year. It was getting too cold outside for random visits that occurred during summer and spring. Startled by the interrupting bell, I dropped the knife I was using to cut the hot apple pie that I had pulled out of the stove.

"Come in," I said. "It's open." I turned around to go greet our visitor, but a tall man stood in front of me.

"Oh my goodness!" I had to catch my breath from his sudden appearance.

"I didn't mean to startle you, Missus. I just came in when you told me to."

"That's alright. I thought it would take longer for guests to find their way into the kitchen."

"Sorry about that. Always been a fast walker. It's a habit."

"Oh. And you are?"

"Thomas. I'm the Reverend's brother."

"Thomas." It took a moment to take his appearance in. I thought he'd be older-looking since Reverend Jones was the younger brother, but this man looked like he was older than my father. I realized I was quiet for longer than what seemed polite. "It's nice to finally meet you. We thought you would get here later this week."

“I caught an early train. I didn’t have anything to keep me in Georgia, so I left early.”

I stood and observed his features. Although the man appeared older than I thought, he moved with the speed of someone half his age. His face was broad and sturdy, and mixed gray and black hair bunched up into a ponytail in the back of his neck. Sweat poured off his face although it was about fifty degrees outside.

“Would you like a glass of apple juice?”

“Sure, Missus. I would appreciate it.”

“You don’t have to call me that. May will be fine.”

“Well, thank you, May.”

“Please, have a seat.” He sat down in one of the wooden kitchen chairs and tossed his large duffle bag beside him.

I stared at him a little longer than socially allowed before turning to the refrigerator. I couldn’t see this man helping us with our workload in the orchard or in the store. Although he made movements that didn’t show his age, he looked like he would break if you touched him.

After I got the juice from the icebox, I placed it along with two glasses on the table. I poured Thomas a cup, and watched as he drank the amber liquid down. His parched lips covered the glass rim. He gulped the juice down in two swallows like he was a step away from dying from thirst. For some reason, I thought of a freshly cut Christmas tree. I realized that he smelled like pine. The scent wasn’t overbearing; it just lingered in our country kitchen.

I was so entranced by Thomas' simple act of drinking juice that I didn't hear Bobby come in.

"We're registered, honey," Bobby said before noticing the man next to me. "Thomas. It's great to see you." He went over to embrace the man and gave him a strong pat on the back that echoed through the kitchen. "When did you get here?"

"Just a few minutes ago," Thomas said.

"Does the Reverend know you're in town?"

"Not yet." Thomas' voice was careful and measured. "I'm hoping to put that one off for as long as I can."

"You can't avoid him," Bobby said. "It's a small town, remember? Besides, he's your brother."

"He's a pastor first," Thomas said solemnly. His voice sounded so sad when he said those words that I wanted to hug him and make whatever was bothering him go away.

I realized then that Reverend Jones' son wasn't the only one who didn't get along with him. It made me wonder how the man became the pastor of the church besides being next in the family line. *What kind of pastor had a son and brother who both went out of their way to avoid him?* I thought.

"Let's show our new help around the property, honey," I said to disrupt their silence and my own internal noise.

"Good idea," Bobby said with a half-hearted grin. "Where's Sarah?"

“She’s still over at Lucy’s house. She cried when I tried to bring her home, so I decided to let her play a little longer.”

“Well, Thomas. I guess you’ll have to meet our little firecracker later.”

“I look forward to it. She sounds like a handful.”

“Oh you have no idea,” I said. Sarah had woken up during odd hours of the night for the previous two weeks, which made running the store extra exhausting. I was relieved to have her entertained somewhere that involved supervision by another parent. I loved her, but I still wasn’t adjusted to being a full-time mother.

We took Thomas into the store first. Our store wasn’t big, but it was well stocked. The brown walls were made of wood and gave the atmosphere an old country feeling. Our main source of business came from the apple related items, but we had other supplies like nuts, honey, sugar and other perishables. Various women and housewives in town helped me with cooking, canning, and packaging of the apple products that lined the shelves. Most were volunteers from the church. They came every once in a while in exchange for us donating to the church on their behalf, which allowed us to skip over hiring them full-time. Although Bobby didn’t want outside help, I demanded assistance with the preparations. There was only so much I could do on my own.

Bobby gave Thomas a guided tour while I followed in silence. I watched as Bobby did all the talking and our new hired hand listened. Thomas nodded when he understood and asked questions when he didn’t.

When we went out into the apple orchard, the Virginia wind picked up force and got colder. I pulled my woolen scarf over my neck. Thomas smiled back at me, and his eyes crinkled like he was concerned. When I returned the smile, he seemed content and continued to listen to Bobby.

Thomas kept up with Bobby's fast walking, which made me feel better about the work Bobby was putting him in charge of. I felt like it was disrespectful to have this man work for us. My parents taught me to respect my elders when they reared me, and this didn't feel respectful.

That night, as Bobby and I got ready for bed I told him about my concerns.

"Bobby, it doesn't seem right to make Thomas work for us," I said.

"Why not, May?"

"Doesn't it seem like too much work for him?"

"He's really good with outside work. Reverend Jones used to tell me stories about how he and his brother grew up on the farm. He's been doing stuff like this since he was a kid."

"That's the thing. Doesn't he seem too old to be doing hard labor?"

"Nonsense," he said. "If anyone can do it, Thomas can." That was the end of our discussion. If Bobby knew Thomas better than I did, maybe he would be okay.

*

The next morning, Bobby told me he wanted Thomas to spend the day with me in the store. I was worried about working with someone else. The store was my area, while outside belonged to Bobby.

“I thought he was going to help you in the orchard. That’s where we could use him most.”

“I know, May, but he could learn how the store works first since he’s going to be spending most of his time out there with me. It’ll give him the chance to see both sides of the work. Besides, I don’t think he’s adjusted to the cold weather yet. If he stayed inside today, it may be easier for him to adjust to the temperature. Would you mind, honey?”

There was no excuse I could give. I didn’t know Thomas well enough to hate him, and I didn’t want to appear ungrateful. We finally had someone to help us. If I did something to run Thomas away, Bobby may never replace him. It couldn’t hurt to have extra help in the store. Sometimes it was exhausting, but most days the redundancy was peaceful: taking inventory and counting the money. There was a rhythm to it that kept me sane.

“I don’t mind,” I replied.

At breakfast, Bobby caught up with Thomas by asking him about his travels. I listened intently without staring directly at him. When I wasn’t feeding Sarah, my eyes stayed on my scrambled eggs and sausage, glancing up only when addressed.

“So, Bobby,” I tried to say with disinterest, “did you ask Thomas about helping me in the store today?” I hoped he'd changed his mind since last night.

“You bet. Thomas’s happy to have you show him how everything operates in there. Aren’t you, Thomas?”

“Absolutely. Bobby tells me you do a great job with the store. You’ll have to show me how you do it?”

“Oh, it’s nothing compared to the physical work Bobby does. It’s just a matter of stocking and running numbers.” I took a sip my coffee hoping to avoid talking about myself.

“She never gives herself enough credit,” said Bobby. “We wouldn’t be half as successful if it wasn’t for her. Did you know May has a business degree?”

“No,” Thomas replied. “I didn’t know that.” He shifted back in his chair and gazed in my direction. My coffee became the most interesting thing in the room.

I didn't like that the attention shifted to me. I wished I could sink into the chair and have them talk about something else.

“It’s nothing really.” I shot a glare at Bobby. “He just likes to make me sound professional.”

“Of course I do,” Bobby defended. “Who wouldn’t brag about their intelligent wife?” Bobby leaned over to me and kissed me on the forehead. It wasn’t unusual for him to kiss me. That was about all we did, but there was something about this one that made me feel disappointed, even upset. I pulled away.

I caught a glance at Thomas, and a sad expression crept up on his face. He bowed his head as if a past memory had reappeared for him.

“We better head over to the store,” I said as I got up, collected the empty dishes, and put them in the sink.

“Don’t want the day to get away from us.” I thought I saw Bobby smile at that.

“I’ll be outside if you need anything, Thomas.” Bobby kissed me one more time and gave a second one to Sarah before heading to the door. “May should be able to answer your questions if you need help inside.”

“Thanks, Bobby. I’m grateful for all the help she can give me.”

I took Sarah to the screened-in porch adjoining the store. She had her own play area, and it allowed for Bobby and me to keep an eye on her when we worked.

A rich smell of cinnamon and spices filled the store. The scent kept the store warm and relaxing. I started by showing Thomas what we stocked. We roamed each section, mentioning each product at least once. There were canned preserves stacked in one corner. The apple butter and jams came from our own orchard, and the rest was supplied by other local farmers and canners. Bobby was big on selling products from other people in Hickory Springs to help bring more attention to our small town.

We moved on to the apple juices and dessert areas. The store wasn't packed with items because we made them gradually since there was only the

two of us. Sometimes Bobby helped me with the canning and processing when the church ladies weren't available, but most of the time he stayed outside.

"What's this?" Thomas said as we continued going over the merchandise. He pointed to a section of hats and other accessories that covered the front glass window sill.

"That's Hickory Springs memorabilia, at Bobby's insistence."

"What? You don't like advertising your quaint little town?"

"It's not that. I just find it a little...tacky. Bobby suggested selling it as another source of income. I can't argue with the numbers, though. Tourists love it when they come in. Business usually picks up when they arrive in the spring and summer. Since fall kicked in, the selling has been slowing down." I frowned at the small row of embroidered clothing and blankets.

Thomas seemed to study my explanation. It made me uneasy.

"Let me show you what's behind the counter and how the register works."

I watched as his face turned into something different. I thought he was scared, but I didn't understand why. The store was simple enough to run.

He followed me as I headed toward the counter. When I turned around to face him, I realized he stayed at the end of the counter.

"You'll have to come closer to see how it works," I said.

He eased closer and moved each foot at a slow pace until he was close enough to see the old-fashioned register. It was about twenty years old, but it worked well.

I showed him how a simple transaction would look if someone bought a can of apple butter. I went slow and pointed to each button before pushing it.

His face looked pale as his lips pressed together. I saw his eyes dart from me to the store and back to the register. His look confused me. I wasn't sure if he was overwhelmed or scared.

“Are you alright?” I asked.

“It's just...” His hands trembled as one made circles on the counter and the other played with a button on his jean overalls. “...I don't know how to count money.”

“What?” It took a moment to sink in. “How is that possible?” Reverend Jones usually counted the money in the church with the deacons and ushers, so I didn't understand why his brother couldn't count too.

“I'm not that good with numbers,” he said. “I never got the hang of them. My brother was always better with that.”

“How'd you know how much your last employers owed you?”

“I asked the other workers, usually. I'd try to make a friend or two and ask them. Other than that, I just trust that people are being honest. Most times people are fair.”

“Not all the time,” I said. “Like the one who accused you of stealing.”

He looked at the ground, and I knew I'd embarrassed him.

“I’m sorry,” I said. “Don’t pay me any mind. It’s good you give people the benefit of being honest.” I smiled and meant it. “You can help with stocking instead.”

His face looked up then. “Okay,” he said. He wasn’t confident yet, but the tension looked like it had seeped out of him.

I finished showing him where all the items went and how to stack everything up properly.

“How’s everything in here?” Bobby poked his head inside.

“Great.” I said, and Thomas nodded in agreement. He was starting to grow on me.

“That’s good news. Are you ready for lunch?”

“Lunch?” I could have sworn we had breakfast only a little while ago.

“It’s one in the afternoon, May. We always have lunch at this time.”

“Oh.” The time had passed so quickly. “I’ll get it started.”

As I prepared, I could hear Thomas’ asking Bobby more questions about store operations.

After lunch, Thomas helped me restock our supplies. He was quiet as I continued to show him the remaining tasks.

“Are you happy, May?” Thomas question came at me while we were stocking the last of the cans on the bottom shelves.

“Of course,” I said without thinking. I didn’t understand where the question came from.

“You don't seem happy,” he said.

“What do you mean, Thomas?” I asked.

He shifted and sat on the corner stool next to the lower shelf. “I see a lot of Rosalind in you.” He smiled as a thought seem to form for him.

“Who's Rosalind?” I asked.

“Bobby never told you?” I shook my head, and he continued. “She was my late wife. She died only five years after we were married. You remind me of her.”

I knelt next to him. “How so?”

“In the last year, she was unhappy too.” He looked at me. “I see the same sadness she had in you.”

“I'm not sad, Thomas. Life is okay. There's nothing to be sad about. I have a good husband and a beautiful girl. I have nothing I should complain about.”

“Sadness is probably not the right word. Maybe I should've said loneliness.” He smiled at me. It didn't go all the way through to his cheeks, which made the expression less effective.

I thought about the people in my life. Sarah usually played on the porch with her toys, Bobby kept up with the orchard outside, and I stayed inside because that's what I knew how to do. I didn't realize that I was that alone until Thomas joined me in the store. I was starting to enjoy having someone to talk to besides an audience of apple preserves. It was my turn to look away.

“I didn't get to spend much time with Rosalind in her last year,” he said. “I came home off and on, but I was out looking for work most of the time. Whenever

I came home, it looked like Rosalind got smaller and smaller. We had no kids, so she had no one with her whenever I went away for long days.” He looked out of the store window.

Outside the wind blew the branches enough for them to wiggle back and forth, but it wasn't strong enough to be fierce. We both watched as the tree near the window clanked against it gently, making a small knocking sound.

“How did she pass?” I asked without taking my eyes away from the tree.

Thomas kept staring at it too as he answered. “Her heart just stopped. She was born with an enlarged heart. Her father had the same condition. It took more energy to pump blood through her veins than it did for most people. The doctor who examined her said her heart gave out on her, but I can't help thinking that she died because I left her alone too long and too often.” He turned to me then. “You need to tell him.”

I don't know how I knew that he was referring to Bobby, but I did. “Bobby's stubborn, Thomas. What would I say to him anyway? 'I don't want to work in the store by myself because it's too lonely?' It's not realistic or business smart.”

He smiled at the last part. “I've never heard that from a woman before.” I could tell he meant it as a compliment instead of an insult because his tone was lighthearted. “Bobby's right. You're definitely one bright cookie.”

That made me smile along with him.

“I'm serious though,” he said. “Do you know why my brother and I don't get along?” Since I shook my head he continued. “When I wasn't home one night,

Rosalind broke down. She cheated on me with my own brother. The loneliness got to her I guess, but you want to know something? I didn't blame her. Not for a moment. How could I after leaving her to fend for her life alone? So I took it out on my brother."

"That's awful," I said.

He waved it away. "No it's not. It's two old stubborn fools who act up because that's what families do. They fight. Marriage is different though. Fighting can be a good thing, but it's the silence that kills you. I can tell there's distance between you two, and if anyone's going to fix it, it probably needs to start with you. Men can be stupid. That's why God blessed them with women. To straighten them out and call them out on their stupidity."

I laughed so hard that I had to catch my balance on the shelf beside me.

"How come you seem to be so much smarter than the Reverend?" I asked.

"Better genes come out the second time around." We both laughed then.

*

That night, for the first time in I don't know how long, Bobby came over to embrace me. He didn't try to kiss me or anything. He just held onto me in a way that felt like he thought I would escape him somehow. I leaned back into him.

"Bobby?" I asked.

“Yes, May?” His voice sounded tired like sleep would claim him soon.

“Why did you suggest we go on a fast from sex?”

He must have woken up after that, because I felt him sit up on his elbow.

I turned so I could face him and see his expression. The bathroom light lit up the room with a small brightness and the moonlight blended in with it, so I could make out the confusion that set wrinkles in his forehead.

“I’ve been neglecting you, haven’t I?” I wasn’t expecting that question. It seemed more like he would complain about my questioning the fast rather than that.

“What do you mean?” I couldn’t accuse him of avoiding me then. Although I had brought it up many times before, his pitiful look kept me from placing blame.

“Even before the fast, we were growing apart,” he said.

It wasn’t a question, so I stayed silent. I felt braver when it was daylight for some reason. In the quiet night of our room, I couldn’t get angry at him or even try to argue.

“I think...I know I’ve been avoiding you. Do you know why?”

I couldn’t answer him. I didn’t think there was ever a reason behind his lack of affection. Since I didn’t answer, he kept talking. “I felt like I failed you. I worked so hard to try to make this place successful, yet I couldn’t.”

“What do you mean? Last I checked we were doing fine.”

“Business is fine, but what about us?”

“Oh.”

He wrapped his free arm around me. “I had my mind so focused on our success, that I forgot you. I can’t even remember the last time I held you like this.”

“Me neither.” I sunk in closer to him. I could smell hints of the fresh apples he'd been picking. Even after washing up, it was a smell that lingered. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath.

“Well, that has to change.” He leaned in to kiss me. It was warm and certain. I was cautious, fearing the slightest move would cause him to pull away, but he never left me.

When I opened my eyes a little, it took me a moment to adjust to his profile in the dark. I could see his eyes were open, but the moonlight from the window glared into my face, preventing me from making out his full view. His body seemed almost ethereal, a combination of shadows outlined with light.

My eyes opened fully, feeling a passionate embrace I hadn’t experienced for a long time. He moved back and looked at my bewildered expression.

“Why do you look so surprised, my lovely May?”

I smiled at his endearment for me, one he hadn't used for some time. I hoped he didn't think I was pulling away. His attentions just surprised me. “We haven't ... ” I couldn't even say the words, which wasn't like me since I always spoke my mind.

“You can say it, May. Take your pick: made love, knocked boots, did the horizontal hula.”

I slapped him on the shoulder. “Bobby, I’m serious,” I said. “It’s been a while.”

“One year, six months, and twenty-four days,” he said, all the humor gone from his voice.

“You counted?” I thought I saw him nod, but it was hard to tell.

“It was a few months before Sarah was born,” he said.

“You were so afraid you were going to hurt her, which was silly.”

“I just didn’t want to injure you or our baby.” He pulled me closer so his lips were next to my ear. “I love you,” he whispered.

“I know.” I smiled as I looked up and kissed him back.

“What about the spiritual fast?” I taunted. “You know the no sex one?”

“Forget the fast,” he said. “No one said it was required, and right now I think I know what’s best for my marriage than the reverend.”

“Wow. I didn’t even have to use the wrench or the flashlight in the glove compartment.”

“What?”

“Never mind, dear. Never mind.”

As my husband made love to me, I felt happy as the moonlight wrapped around us like a sheet and kept the shadows at bay. In that moment, the king-size bed didn’t seem so monstrous.

Fruitful Moments

I found God more by sitting under the pink and yellow dogwood trees in my backyard than I ever did by stepping foot inside a church. The trees stood strong and sturdy with hundreds of little white flowers covering each branch. As the wind blew, petals sprinkled down to the ground and made a thin bed of flowers around the trunks. Circling air lifted the sweet floral scent to me, and I breathed in as much as my lungs could hold before releasing it back to nature.

I remembered looking in a backyard full of apples. They were so plentiful they covered our view of the sky. That was before the orchard dried up and stopped making fruit. Before we were forced to move to a smaller hut. But I still had trees, and although they weren't part of our apple orchard, the dogwoods still kept my open link to God.

“I know you're here, Lord,” I said. “I can feel you flowing through my bones.” But it wasn't just in my bones. A heat sensation traveled out into my muscles, rounded each ligament, flowed through each vessel and vein, and felt as if it built up so tight that some invisible power would shoot out of my fingers and toes. If I opened my mouth, I knew more than a voice would burst out of there. I thought of it as invisible energy God allowed me to share with nature, and by sharing nature with God I could keep a bit of God bottled up inside of me. This was my church. My holy place. My sacred ground.

I wished that my daughter, Sarah, understood this moment, but I never tried to explain how being consumed by nature could feel. I couldn't. No words transferred into this feeling, and I knew deep down my daughter could never feel what surrounded me. Not until Sarah realized that spirituality didn't always rest inside the church.

"Forgive me, Lord," I said to the air. "But you know that girl is quickly taking months off my years." I was only fifty-five years old, but I felt like I was going on sixty-five. I sighed as I thought of the new pastor and how fast Sarah was getting attached to him. My daughter claimed she'd been "saved and sanctified" by the Holy Spirit, but I knew that spirit she claimed to have was fueled by Pastor Jones.

I always tried to blame Sarah first. She was the easiest because she was mine, my flesh and blood. Sarah had Deacon six years ago, when she was eighteen. I was happy that my daughter at least got the chance to finish high school before her belly started showing, which silenced one train of gossip. That left our neighborhood, which had more widows on the street than any part of Hickory Springs, Virginia. It was nicknamed Widows Lane by the locals because of it. The sad part was that widows and divorcees were the worst and fastest talkers in the town. If you didn't want anybody to know your business, you avoided them like curdled milk in July heat. It was natural that I learned about my daughter's pregnancy through them.

“That girl of yours sure is getting big, Maybelle,” Mrs. Howell would say. Her voiced always peaked at the end like she was implying everything she could behind each word for it to cut true and deep. She was the ringleader of the widows. Mrs. Howell got the most money from her husband's death out of all of them. He died in the meat-packing plant when his arm got stuck in one of the grinders and caused him to bleed to death. Mrs. Howell never said exactly how much she got, but the rumor, which I guessed Mrs. Howell started, said she got enough to never work another day in her life and still have some left over for her son and grandchildren. I would have taken the way my Bobby died in his sleep any day over the gruesome way Nosey Mrs. Howell's husband left this earth.

“Oh she's not getting big,” I said back. “She's just getting healthy.” I understood what Mrs. Howell meant, so I took Sarah to the doctor the following week.

Sarah and I moved to my sister's house until she had the baby. If Bobby was alive, he would've made our daughter marry the father, but as soon as the boy tried to pay to “get rid of the damn thing,” I knew Bobby wouldn't have wanted that idiot anywhere near our family. I'd threatened him with my shotgun the last time he tried to shove money through our screen door. He took the hint when a shot ricocheted through his butt-flap overalls as he ran away.

No. I couldn't blame Sarah. The poor girl was only looking for the love of a man. If only she could meet a man like my Bobby.

*

I tried to remember the last afternoon we had together. Bobby had gone to take a nap because he was tired. When I got in beside him, the sun was setting behind a horizon of trees. It was still bright enough to fill the entire room with a steady orange glow. I tried not to shake the bed and wake him, but his warm arms wrapped around me.

“Did I wake you?” I asked him.

“No,” he said. “But if you did, it'd be a happy waking.” He hugged me even tighter. Bobby’s voice was familiar and comforting to hear in the growing darkness.

“You're so silly,” I said, feeling a smile inch across my face. I turned over to look at him. His arms remained circled around me. We usually bantered back and forth. It was our way of loving and teasing each other at the same time, but he remained quiet. “What's wrong, Bobby?”

Then he kissed me. I was still so concerned about his quietness that it took me a while to take in what was happening.

“What was that for?” I could feel a satisfied grin creeping up on my face, warming up my cheeks.

“I was just thinking about our first date. Remember?”

“A woman never forgets that.” I smiled again from the memory. “You brought a bottle of homemade wine on that date. I thought your mind was half gone.”

“You never told me you disliked it before.”

“I didn’t say I disliked it. I just told you that good Christian women didn’t drink.”

“Whoever said Christians couldn’t drink? Jesus had wine at the Last Supper and even turned water into wine. Besides, I got you to drink the whole bottle with me, didn’t I?”

I held my hands up in surrender. “No complaints from me. I never said I was one of *those* good Christian women.” I couldn’t help giggling. “It was sweet.”

“What was sweet, the wine or me?” he asked.

“Both.” My hand traced the shape of his face as he held me tighter.

“When we came here, I promised I would take care of you. That’s why I work so hard. I wanted to keep my word and take care of you myself.”

“You do take care of me and Sarah. Why would you ever think you don’t?”

“Things have been hard since we left the orchard. Haven’t you felt it, May?”

I couldn’t answer him. He kept putting in overtime in the local vineyard ever since we lost the apple orchard and property attached to it, and I was taking care of Sarah and the house.

“I worked so hard to try to make sure we stayed ahead of everything,” he said.

“You still do work hard, Bobby, for all three of us.” I leaned in closer to him.

“Yeah, but I’ve been working hard at the wrong things. My job isn’t important. Not even all the stuff we lost matters. You and Sarah, you’re the ones I keep forgetting.” He rested his head near mine so he was hidden under my hair. He took a deep breath in as if doing so would take me completely inside his lungs.

We stayed quiet like that, entangled in each other, for hours before I fell asleep. The next morning, I couldn’t wake him. Still, something about his face let me know that he was at peace, and although it broke a part of me to lose him, I was at peace for him too.

*

I walked to the biggest dogwood tree that stood in the middle of our yard. I ran my hands across the carving made years ago. Bobby had put both our names in the trunk. It read, “This tree belongs to the home of Bobby and May.” Since we were forced to sell the old property because we couldn’t pay the taxes, we had to relocate. We weren’t making enough money to keep it all. When we moved into the smaller place, Bobby took me in the back yard and chose the biggest Dogwood tree that stood up from the ground. He said that he wanted

something that we could call ours that no one could take away from us. If the tree lived for years and generations, Bobby was going to get more than a tree we'd own. I traced my fingers along his name. It was the only memorial I had for him.

*

The doctors told me a blood clot had burst in his sleep and that he didn't die in pain. It didn't make losing him easier.

We didn't have much money, and the insurance plan we had on each other had expired. We didn't have enough to renew it. That was the time the widows were on their best behavior. They found out that I didn't have enough to bury Bobby, and started a collection for me. That's when I realized that Mrs. Howell had more money than the other widows. She bragged about her donation and how much she gave. I still appreciated all of them. I wanted to give Bobby the sendoff he deserved.

I went to the church to pay them since Bobby was going to be buried on their property. Reverend Jones was the only person there. He sat in the main sanctuary reading his worn-down Bible with his glasses on the tip of his nose.

"Sister Taylor," he said looking up. "I'm glad you came. Everything has been prepared for you."

I looked at him. None of what he said made sense. "What do mean everything is prepared?"

“We cremated Bobby for you,” he said. “Don't worry about the money. It's all been taken care of.”

“You did what?”

“Bobby,” he said, walking up to me. “We knew you were low on funds, so the church paid for his cremation.”

I fell to my knees and cried. “You burned my husband without my consent?”

He came to me to try to comfort me, but I shrunk away from his hands. “Who are you to do such a thing?” My voice came out in sobs.

“I remembered him saying he wanted to be cremated, Sister Taylor. It was his will.”

I couldn't control the rage that poured out of my voice. “How dare you stand there and say you knew what he wanted.” I remembered the talk I sometimes had with Bobby. We wanted to be buried next to each other. It was what we thought about if anything happened to one of us or, God help Sarah, if both of us died together.

We never had a will because we thought we had time. Bobby was forty when he died and only five years older than me. Now, I couldn't even be at peace with burying him.

“Sister Taylor, there is no need to overreact. He's with God now.”

Reverend Jones was so tame about it, which only made me upset.

“Where is he?” I asked, with all emotion drained from my voice. When Reverend Jones handed me the white vase painted with blue flowers, I wanted to cry. I held Bobby in my hands, and it was a man of religion, supposedly of God, who had been responsible.

I turned my back on him and the church after that. How could I trust them after they made such a horrible decision for the man I loved? The man I wanted to grow old with?

Sarah and I had our own service for Bobby in our back yard surrounded by the dogwoods. The top of the canister was hard to open, but it finally gave way. Under the big tree with our name carved on it, I dug a hole, one foot by one foot in size. My hand shook as I sprinkled some of Bobby in the ground under our tree. I forced back the tears to be strong for Sarah, who already had streaks sliding down her face for her daddy. It was then that I realized we had to go back and live in the house alone, without Bobby there to tickle Sarah or hug her at night. Our life had to go on without him there, and the thought made the crack in my heart a little larger.

*

I touched the earth where I remembered scattering some of his ashes. The rest were inside hidden in my bedroom closet. I didn't want the vase Bobby's

remains were in to be a constant reminder for Sarah that she lost her father. She and I both needed to move on, which she was doing.

I thought about the Joneses, especially Reverend Jones who had died five years earlier. My not liking him transferred to his grandson. I didn't trust him. If he was any better than his grandfather, he'd done a poor job in showing it by stringing my daughter along. She was an adult, but I didn't have to like the choices she made. If only Bobby had been here to help talk sense into her. If only he hadn't left both of us longing for another male presence in the house to keep us safe, to make life better.

I rested my head against the rough bark of the tree, and I did the only thing I could do. I prayed to God with nature all around me, and hoped Bobby was up there listening too.

A Simple Profession

1984 - Middle School

"Your mother is a harlot," Becky said. Her voice shriveled up to match the ugly face she made.

Sandra could feel the tears welling up, but she didn't dare let the other girls see it.

"No, she's not!" Sandra was sick of Becky. She tried to ignore the nasty things she and the other kids said about her mother. That meant finding an empty part of the playground to avoid everyone. It usually worked. She stayed out of their way and they left her alone, but today Becky chose to go beyond the whispers and laughing.

"Is too," Becky said. "My mom said your mom is nothing but a slut and a home wrecker. That's what you call women who sleep with other people's husbands."

"Stop it!" Sandra took deep breaths. She wanted to run, but she stayed there facing Becky and her clones. Becky was shorter than the other two, but what she lacked in height she compensated for by making others feel like nothing. The two girls never left her side. They did everything she did, including her bullying.

“What are you going to do? Tell mommy?” Becky laughed and her clones laughed with her.

Sandra couldn't help but think of the coyotes she saw on a school trip to the zoo in Washington, D.C. The screeching and heckling noises the animals made caused her ears ache. She imagined Becky's nose growing into a snout and her face pinching up to make her look like a wild animal. The thought made her feel better until Becky spoke again.

“I bet your mother wouldn't do a thing,” Becky said. She moved in front of Sandra and pushed her. “She's too much of a sinner to save her innocent daughter.”

She didn't have time to keep from hitting the pavement, but her hands and butt caught most of the fall. Gravel bit into her palms and made them burn.

“Leave her alone, Becky,” a boy said.

Sandra looked up. She couldn't see his face because he stood with his back to her, but she knew his voice. She hated that he felt like he had to protect her, and she hated that she needed protection. He blocked her view of the girls, so she couldn't see their reaction to him.

“Back off, Deacon.” Becky crossed her arms and walked closer to him.

“Sure,” he said. He pointed over to the school where the teachers in charge of supervising the playground were gossiping and giggling instead of watching kids. “They may be upset about it though.”

“Teachers here don't care what we do.”

“They may care if we interrupt them for a stupid fight.”

Becky clicked her tongue between her teeth and said, “Fine. She isn't worth our time anyway.”

Sandra heard their Mary Janes clacking on the pavement as they walked away. She saw Deacon's face when he turned around and knelt beside her.

“Are you hurt?” he asked.

It took a minute for her to think about what he asked her. Becky had pushed her, and she did nothing. She felt a hand grip hers and remembered that he was beside her.

“You're bleeding,” he said.

She looked down and saw the small scrapes in her palms along with small pieces of dirt and rock. Without thinking, she tried to push herself up, but the gravel dug deeper and made the pain worse.

“Let me help you up,” he said.

Sandra didn't have a chance to reply. She felt him grip her forearms and hoist her off the ground.

Deacon was shorter than her by a couple of inches, but his shaggy brown hair stood up high enough to make them almost the same height. He wore glasses that were too big for his face, so they slid to the edge of his nose.

“There,” he said. He pushed his glasses back on his face with one finger.

“The teachers should see your hand.”

“No!” she realized she raised her voice and said quieter, “I’m fine. Just leave it alone.”

“You won’t be able to hide it in class. Writing will hurt.”

She thought of another excuse but knew he was right. She wouldn’t be able to hide her cut from their teachers.

“They won’t like being bothered,” she said.

“I only said that to get rid of Becky. You know they won’t mind if they know you hurt yourself. They’ll be annoyed, but not angry.” When she didn’t say anything, he kept talking. “Come on. I’ll go with you.”

He started walking without checking back to see if she followed him. He knew she would be right behind him, and she was. She always listened to Deacon. She didn’t remember when she started to do everything he suggested. Maybe it was because she trusted him.

She remembered the first day she met Deacon in Sunday school. They were both six. He looked so scared and lost that day that all she wanted to do was make him feel better. That turned into a friendship that lasted six years. Now, in sixth grade, she couldn’t remember when their friendship turned into him looking after her. She didn’t like it.

She couldn’t blame him for looking after her. She figured it had something to do with him living with his grandma and mother. He was the only man in his family. There were times she could tell he saw it as a burden, like when he took up a newspaper route to help them around the house. He had to get up just

before dawn broke through the east coast. She saw his exhaustion when he came to school after working. Every now and then, she had to kick his chair to wake him up. She was grateful she sat behind him in classes because no one else would've done that for him. Not these kids who were supposed to be children of Christians.

The church Sandra and Deacon first met in grew. They added a private school in their development. Sandra's mother insisted she attend, which Sandra didn't understand because her mother never went to church. Even when she attended Sunday school, one of the church leaders had to pick her up and carry her back and forth to church meetings because her mother refused to go herself.

Sandra told her mother she didn't mind going to public school. In fact, she preferred it. Going to a Christian school Monday through Friday and church on Sunday meant that Saturday was her only escape from the place. Still, her mother was determined and sent her to Pentecostal Church of the Redeemer Christian Academy. She felt bad for Deacon because she knew his family couldn't afford for him to go, but she felt worse for finding out how he was able to go.

Pastor Jones had been friendly with Deacon's mother. Too friendly. They had been seeing each other quietly for four years. Rumors about their relationship came up every few months, but the congregation trusted Pastor Jones so much that the gossip died quickly. Maybe that was another reason why

she tried not to protest whenever he helped her. She knew he had enough to deal with at home without her complaining too.

Sister Murphy and another teacher were laughing when Deacon and Sandra walked up to them from the playground. Sister Murphy quieted the other woman when they stood in front of them.

“What's wrong kids?” she asked. She looked at them both before turning to Deacon.

Deacon glanced back at Sandra, and she knew he wanted her to decide what she told them.

“I fell,” she said as she held her hands up.

“Oh, my goodness,” Sister Murphy said. “Let's get you cleaned up.”

*

After school, Sandra hid at the corner of the school building when she saw Becky come out. Becky hopped in her Dad's new 1984 Cadillac Coupe de Ville. She only knew the name of the car because Becky bragged about her dad being the first in town to get one. She stayed hidden until the back of the car disappeared down the street. She kept the picture of Becky smiling at her father in her mind. She wished, for a moment, that she was Becky. That she had a father who could pick her up from school and ask her how her day was. She would smile back at him and tell him everything he wanted to know. But that

longing was only for a few minutes. Her father was gone, and her mother had to take care of them the best way she could.

Her mother wouldn't be there to pick her up since they only lived about four blocks away. It was a quick walk if she cut through the park across the street and went the back way.

"Wait up," she heard Deacon's voice call.

She turned and saw him jogging to her.

"Are you all right?" he asked.

"I'm fine."

He smiled at her. His cheeks lifted his glasses up with them. "I keep forgetting how much you like saying that when I know you're not okay."

She looked at the small bandages Sister Murphy and the school nurse put on her scrapes. It still stung when she closed her hand, but the burning had stopped.

"I'm better now," she said into her hands. She looked at Deacon and said, "Thanks."

He grinned. "I actually get a thank you this time," he said. "I must have done something right." He scratched his scalp. "Wait. What did I do again?"

She hit him on the arm. "Stop playing. Helping me with Becky, silly."

"Oh that. No problem. You know I can't stand when she says those things to you."

"I know." Sandra chewed on her lip.

Deacon did most of the talking as they walked home. He didn't seem to mind her being quiet. They only lived a few streets away from each other, so Deacon walked her home before heading to his own.

They came to her intersection and stopped at the crossing street signs.

“Are you sure you'll be okay?” he asked.

“Sure. I'll be fine.” He gave her a look and she said, “Sorry. Habit.”

He shook his head. “I know. That's what I'm worried about. See you tomorrow.”

“See you.”

When Sandra got home, Cordy opened the door before she had a chance to reach for it. She knew that meant she and Ma didn't want her wandering the house. She looked back in the driveway and saw that an extra car was parked there.

“Hey, girly.” Cordy said.

“She has company again, doesn't she?”

“Hmm. Go in the kitchen. I'll fix you a snack.”

Sandra was use to Cordy mothering her. She was her mother's closest friend in high school, and she lived there with Sandra and her mother for as long as she could remember. Cordy acted more like a maid than a roommate. She cleaned, cooked, and did odd ends around the house. Still, Sandra saw Cordy mostly as a friend.

“How was school?” Cordy asked when Sandra sat at the table.

Sandra rubbed at one of her hands and felt it jerk away in Cordy's grasp.

"What happened to your hands?"

"Nothing." she tried to take her hand back, but Cordy wouldn't let go.

"The truth."

"I fell at school."

"What did I say, girl?"

Sandra never understood how Cordy knew when she was lying, but she always called her out on it. She wished this wasn't one of those times.

"I was pushed," she said.

"And you lied why?"

"I didn't want to talk about it."

Cordy shook her head. "You kids today, I'll never understand. Who was it? Maybe we need to go and visit their parents."

"No!" she said. "Please don't, Cordy. You'll only make it worse."

Cordy sat down next to Sandra and sighed. "It was about your mom again, wasn't it?"

When she didn't answer, Cordy took that to mean yes.

"I swear this town has it in for your mom," she said. "She goes for life on her own, and they want to condemn her for it. There are many other women in this town doing what she's doing. Just down the street is the red district."

"Red what?"

"Don't listen to me girl. I'm just rambling on."

“Cordy?”

“What is it, child?”

“Is what Ma doing wrong?”

“Maybe your mom should answer that, darling.”

“You're not going to tell me?”

“I wouldn't know where to begin.”

“Please.”

Cordy drummed her fingers on the table before speaking.

“All right,” she said. “You know how you like beef, but you don't like chicken?”

Sandra nodded.

“Well, some people like what she does and some don't.”

Sandra tried to connect Cordy's answer to her question, but she couldn't do it.

“What does my taste in meat have to do with what Mom is doing being right or wrong?” she asked again.

“There's no getting past you, is there?” She pinched Sandra's chin. “Well, I expect the truth from you, so I should give you the same. To some it's right, but others see it as wrong. The way I see it is they can't say anything. Any grown woman can do whatever she pleases with whom she pleases.”

Sandra tried to make sense of what Cordy said. It sounded right to her that her mother could do whatever she wanted, but why did the kids at school have to make her life miserable because of it?

The last rays of sunlight spilled into Sandra's bedroom. Her soft yellow-painted walls made the light from outside bounce around her room. She stretched back on her bed and watched the beams dance around her room with fascination as *Time After Time* played on the old wooden record player her mother gave her.

Heavy shoes thudded through the hallway followed by the sound of the front door closing. She heard the car that was parked outside start and roll out of the gravel-filled driveway. Sandra's mother and Cordy's voices were muffled through the walls as she switched Cyndi Lauper's record with The Beatles. *Hey, Jude* rumbled out from the speakers as Sandra got back on her bed. That's when a small knock came on her door.

"Hi, honey," her mother said as she came in and closed the door behind her. A black silk robe clung to her and hung down to her ankles over her cotton slippers. She walked over to the radio that stood on the dresser. "Mind if I turn this down so we can talk?"

Sandra shook her head and heard the music mellow to a few soft beats here and there. She slid over as her mother lay down beside her. They both stared at the ceiling lined with various cutouts from magazines of musicians and black and white photographs.

“Cordy told me about your hands,” Ma said. “Are you okay?”

“I’m okay.”

“Let me see.”

Sandra held out her hands as they were scrutinized and turned back and forth.

“I’m sorry you had to go through that.”

Sandra tried not to look over at her mother when she asked, “Can’t you just stop?”

Her mother’s gentle laughter rumbled through her arm and into Sandra’s hand that she still held close to her.

“And what would you have me do? I have to earn a living, San.”

“Lots of kids’ moms at school work as secretaries and teachers,” she said. She felt guilty after the words left her mouth. Her teachers at the Christian school always talked about those jobs as being suitable for women, but they sounded so boring to Sandra.

Why couldn’t she be a traveling musician like the people she heard on the radio or even a truck driver like her dad was? She never really knew her father. She remembered images of him from her childhood, but mostly he lived for her through her mother’s stories. Sandra had a picture of him standing next to a truck with a red cap on his head that matched his checkered shirt. He’d died in a truck accident when Sandra was four. She always wondered if it was his longing for

traveling that got him killed. If he'd just stayed home, he'd be alive. Her mom told Sandra that she'd caught the traveling bug from her father.

If Sandra wanted more for herself than being a secretary, then why shouldn't her mom want it too? Sandra was embarrassed that her mom slept with men for money. She was the one who had to go to school and church almost every day and suffer the results of what her mom did for a living, and she couldn't take it anymore.

"I doubt I would like writing down men's ramblings all day," her mother said, "and most parents in this town wouldn't want me to teach their children anything. They'd think I'd corrupt them." She laughed again, and this time it was a laugh that filled the room.

"It's not funny, Ma." She wished her mother took her seriously whenever she brought up her work, but she always joked about it. Was she the only one in the house it bothered?

"Oh, San." Her mother wrapped her arms around her. Her wavy chestnut-brown hair mingled with the soft curls of Sandra's. "My sweet San, I'm sorry. I know you go through a lot. I look forward to you getting out of here. This town is no place for a woman. Not for you."

"You grew up here," Sandra said, her face muffled in her mother's embrace.

"That's why I want you out. You could travel the country. Even go to college somewhere like California. Do all the things I never got to do."

“I don't want to leave you and Cordy,” Sandra said. She snuggled closer to her mother, as if doing so would keep herself from leaving.

“We'd be fine if you left us,” her mother said. Her voice sounded more serious than usual, her tone steady and determined. She brushed Sandra's hair with her hand. “You will be fine too, San. Everyone will be fine.”

*

1990 – High School

Patrick wasn't the most handsome boy in the school, but he was cute and listened whenever Sandra talked. She was surprised by his attentions at first since the only boy in their senior class who talked to her was Deacon. In fact, her only friend in the whole school was Deacon.

They ate lunch together as far away from the other students as possible. That's why they were shocked when Patrick asked if he could eat with them. He didn't join them every day, but when he did, he sat right next to Sandra. He did most of the talking at first, which usually went towards baseball since he was on the high school team as starting pitcher, or he talked about how he didn't like being the son of the town's mayor. He thought people expected too much of him. Sandra nodded and agreed whenever she could.

She could tell Deacon didn't like Patrick. Sometimes she would catch him staring at Patrick so hard it looked like he wanted to hurt him. She wondered what Deacon was thinking about whenever he got like that. There were times when his eyes would go dark and it would scare her. Other times it pissed her off, and she just ignored him as she talked to Patrick.

She liked the attention, and she wasn't going to let Deacon ruin it for her. Patrick asked about the kind of music she listened to and the type of books she read. Whenever she spoke, he looked directly in her eyes. He made her feel like what she thought mattered.

The added bonus was that she and the whole school knew Becky had a crush on him. She would catch glimpses of Becky staring at them whenever Patrick sat with them, and she could tell the looks were fueled with hatred and, she hoped, jealousy.

Becky still ridiculed Sandra and her mother whenever she could, but Sandra learned to ignore it. Becky blamed Sandra's mother for Becky's parents' divorce, but Sandra knew her mother wasn't responsible. Becky's parents had just gotten a divorce within the last year, and Becky's father hadn't been over to Sandra's mother's house in years.

Deacon had a lot to do with Sandra not caring what the other students and teachers thought of her and her mother. Hanging out with him had kept her mind off of the other kids. She was grateful for his protection of her since she'd gotten use to it over the years, but he couldn't protect her all the time. Still, as much as

she was happy for having a friend in Deacon, she was grateful for the new interest Patrick had in her.

“Why does he have to sit with us?” Deacon asked Sandra at lunch one Friday.

She was busy trying to spot Patrick since he hadn't sat with them for a few days. He was nowhere to be seen in the lunchroom.

“He's nice to us,” Sandra said. “That's why.”

“You mean, he's nice to you,” Deacon snapped.

“He's never done anything mean to you, has he?”

“No,” Deacon said. “Not really.”

“What's that supposed to mean?”

“I don't trust him.”

Sandra couldn't help but laugh.

“What?” Deacon asked.

“This from a boy who lied when I met him.”

“I didn't lie.”

“You said you knew all the stories in the Bible, when clearly you didn't. You didn't even know about Adam and Eve, the very first story in there. I'm surprised you were even able to keep up with the Sunday school lessons when you started.”

“I just didn't want to seem stupid,” he said, keeping his head down and focused on his lunch plate.

She placed a hand over his and stopped him from picking up another forkful of food. "I never thought you were stupid," she said. "Never."

Deacon shrugged his hand away from her and moved the food on his plate around with his fork, but she thought she saw a smile creep up on his face.

"Besides, I was happy that your grandma wasn't mad when she finally caught you coming to our house for dinner."

"She likes your mom and Cordy."

"Only because your grandma likes people who don't put up with nonsense," Sandra teased. "Your mom, on the other hand, hates my mom."

Deacon couldn't deny that. It was because his mom suspected Pastor Jones had visited Sandra's mother. She hadn't been wrong, but she couldn't prove it either. Sandra thought his mom was jealous. What did it matter to Deacon's mom what Pastor Jones did when they weren't even married?

"Mom doesn't have to like you," Deacon said. "I don't care. Nana is the only one who matters."

Sandra could sense the bitterness in his voice. Deacon hadn't been close to his Mom in a long time, ever since she started secretly dating Pastor Jones. Sandra could tell it hurt him, despite the way he brushed off their conversations whenever they spoke about her. His mother wasn't a mean woman, but she took religion seriously. Too seriously sometimes, which made it hard to like her. Sandra never understood why she was so religious when she was sneaking around with Pastor Jones. Sandra never told Deacon that Pastor Jones had used

her mother's services. She didn't want to hurt him, but she realized years ago that a part of Deacon already knew Pastor Jones was not fit to be a pastor of the school's church or any church, for that matter.

Patrick arrived before she could say anything else to Deacon about his mom.

"Hey there," Patrick said as he sat down.

"Hi," Sandra said. She glanced at Deacon, but he was busy playing with his food again.

"I'm sorry, but I can't eat lunch with you today."

"Oh." She didn't bother hiding how disappointed she was.

"It's not that I don't want to. Coach wants us in practice early today, so the team has to skip lunch."

"I understand."

"Of course you do," Deacon muttered under his breath.

She gave Deacon a warning glance, which she hoped he understood meant *Shut the Hell Up*. Patrick either didn't hear him or chose to ignore the comment because he continued.

"I wanted to ask you something before I go to practice."

"What's that?"

"Would you like to go out with me Saturday?"

Sandra could see Deacon's head shoot up out of the corner of her eye. She didn't know what to say. She liked Patrick, but she never thought he'd ask

her out on a date. Who would date someone like her when she had the mother she had?

“You mean tomorrow?”

“Yeah. I figured since it's Memorial Day weekend, we could go to Quarterman's Lake,” he said. “We could even grab something to eat after. You up for it?”

“Sure,” she said. “I'd like that.”

Deacon's fork clattered on his plate. He stood up and grabbed his food tray.

“Where are you going, Deacon?”

“To get ready for class.”

“But class isn't for another half an hour.”

“Doesn't matter,” he said. He faced Patrick and said, “Have fun on your date.”

“Thanks, man,” Patrick said.

She could hear the bitterness and anger in Deacon's voice.

“What's wrong with you?” she asked him.

His eyes met hers, but she didn't see anger there. If anything he looked hurt. He turned and stormed out of the cafeteria.

“Deacon, wait,” she called after him.

A few kids at nearby tables gawked and whispered to each other, but she didn't care. She wished everyone else would mind their own business, or, better yet, act like she wasn't there at all.

"Is he okay?" Patrick asked her.

She took a deep breath before saying, "I don't know."

Sandra was glad to see Deacon there in his car waiting for her after school. His grandma gave him the 1971 Chevy Impala after she got a newer truck that was easier for her to drive and gentler on her knees when she got in and out of it. Deacon drove Sandra to and from school every day. It was one of the only fun parts of going to high school.

This was the first time they rode in silence. Sandra tried to think of things to say like "Why don't you like him?" or "I don't get what your problem is," but each thing she thought of only made her think they would have a fight. Besides, shouldn't she know what was wrong with the only best friend she had?

They pulled up to her house sooner than she wanted to. She opened the door and was surprised that he didn't do the same since he stayed over for dinner on Fridays.

"Aren't you coming in?"

"No," he said. His voice was different from what she heard from him before, flat.

"Cordy's making her famous meatloaf."

"I have to get home."

“All right. See you.” She slid out of the car and closed the door. As she walked up the walkway, he called to her from the open window.

“Sandra?”

“Yeah?”

“Be careful around Patrick.” He didn’t give her time to respond because he pulled away and drove out of sight.

In the house, Cordy was the only one she was able to tell about her date since Ma was busy entertaining someone in one of the guest rooms. She never took men to her bedroom cause she said it was tacky and unprofessional.

Sandra didn’t eat much, and Cordy fussed at her for it. She tried calling Deacon after dinner, but he wouldn’t pick up. She didn’t like that there was tension between them, and she was hoping he would clarify the warning he gave her about Patrick. Was something wrong with him that Deacon knew and she didn’t? After the seventh try, she gave up calling him and went to bed.

*

At noon the next day, Patrick picked her up. Memorial Day was a couple of days away, but spring was in full bloom. It was a beautiful day, but the heat made it feel more like summer. No wind was blowing outside, and the sun beat down hard on Sandra as she came out. She shielded her eyes from it as she walked to Patrick’s car. Although it was a new Ford convertible, she missed Deacon’s car.

She had picked out a blue sundress to wear with a matching one-piece bathing suit underneath. Patrick had on a white shirt and blue jeans.

Patrick kept the top of his car down, and Sandra enjoyed the wind blowing through her hair and nipping at her skin. It brought relief to the sweltering heat.

It took about a half an hour to drive to Quarterman's Lake, but the drive was worth it. The lake was the closest one to Hickory Springs, and it became a regular hangout for teenagers and families as the weather got warmer. The scenery along the way was peaceful and almost made Sandra forget about the argument she had with Deacon. Almost, but not completely.

Mountains peaked out behind trees and gave background to the large open space the lake took up. The wind gave the water movement as the sun sparkled on top of rippling layers. A few other kids were swimming and diving off the back of boats, but the area was wide enough for them to avoid interacting with anyone else.

"This is amazing," Sandra said.

"I know," Patrick said. The corners of his mouth tilted up into a wicked grin. "Race you to the water," he said before darting off.

Sandra chased him as she took off her dress just before hitting the water. It was cold, but her skin adjusted as she went completely under water. She couldn't remember the last time she went swimming. She knew she had been a little girl at the time, but she couldn't grasp the full memory.

They swam, floated, and splashed for what felt like hours. It was Patrick who suggested they get out when the wind started to pick up. He handed her a towel when they reached the car with their clothes bunched in their hands.

“Are you hungry?” he asked her.

“Definitely.” The swimming had taken a lot of energy from her, so she felt like she could eat anything.

“Great. I know the perfect place.”

It was after five when they arrived to their destination, which was only a few minutes away from the lake. Patrick parked in the driveway of a mid-sized house.

“It’s a bed and breakfast,” he said. “I got us a room cause I figured you’d want to shower before we ate. They normally just serve food during breakfast time, but I got them to make an exception.”

“Oh.” She looked at the Victorian-style house that had a wrap-around porch on both the first and second floor. “I can’t spend the night here.”

“I know,” he said. “It’s just for us to freshen up.” He got out and opened her passenger door. “You coming?” He held his hand out for her along with a sweet-looking smile.

She got out of the car and took his hand. They walked inside, and a woman, who looked like she was in her sixties, greeted them.

“Hello there,” she said. “How can I help you?”

“I have a room being held,” Patrick said.

The woman looked them over and hesitated before saying, "Very well."

The room gave a small view of the lake in the distance and a closer view of the mountains. It had glass doors that opened to a balcony, and a four-post bed stood in the middle of the room. Sandra couldn't help but wonder how much this place cost, and why he'd chosen here for dinner.

"The bathroom's in there." Patrick pointed to a small white door that stood to one side. "You go get cleaned up. I'll take care of the food."

She smiled and walked into the bathroom. She locked the door, which felt weird since she never had to lock any doors at home. She hung her wet bathing suit over the end of the metal shower rack. The hot water helped calm her down. She lost track of how long she was under the comforting water and turned it off when it got cold.

Two sets of towels were in the bathroom over the toilet. She grabbed one and dried herself off. That's when she realized she forgot to bring a set of underwear.

"Great." She put on her dress and noticed that it didn't cling to her in an obvious way. She wasn't heavy chested, so that worked to her advantage.

A knock came on the door.

Patrick's voice was muffled. "Dinner's here."

"Be right out." She gave herself one last look before leaving the bathroom.

She saw the trays of food next to the bed.

"I think I used all the hot water," she said.

“Don't worry about it. I'm good.” He lifted one of the tray covers. “I hope you don't mind breakfast for dinner.”

The tray was filled with fruit and croissants. Two plates held omelets that sat next to slices of bacon.

“That looks really good.”

“Well, dig in.”

Sandra had to sit on the edge of the bed to eat since there were no chairs in the room. Patrick hopped up beside her and started eating with speed. They ate and talked about school, which teachers they liked and which they didn't, and how they hated going to a Christian school where uniforms were mandatory and the lessons involved being forced to read and memorize Bible verses.

Sandra didn't say what she did like about it. That sometimes going to church made her feel like she had a place to go, even if some of the members looked at her like she was a plague. Her favorite parts were the songs. She'd close her eyes and imagine she was in a place where nobody knew her history or even cared who she was. She didn't have to wonder if what her mother did was a sin against God or if she would turn out to be just like her.

“I'm thinking about staying here and going into politics like Dad. It's what he wants for me. College out of Virginia is another option, but only if I get a baseball scholarship.”

“Ma wants me to go to college too,” she said.

He looked at her closely. “Really? What are you thinking of studying?”

“I'm not sure. Thought about music, or maybe even hospitality if this is the kind of place I'd get to work in.”

“Look at you. Beautiful and smart.”

Sandra glanced down at her plate when she felt her cheeks grow hot.

He put a finger under her chin. “Don't look away, Sandra.”

She peered into his eyes, an odd mixture of blue and green. The bed shifted as he leaned over to her. She held still as she felt his lips brush hers. The kiss was soft and testing. Her eyes stayed open while he closed his. He pulled back and looked at her.

“Is this okay?”

She nodded and saw him lean forward again. This time, she closed her eyes when he kissed her. The kiss started gentle but then increased to something else, something she wasn't used to. She felt the weight of him pushing her back on the bed. His hands wrapped around her back and gave her support. They continued kissing like that for a while until she felt his hand lift her dress and slide up her leg. She broke the kiss.

“What's wrong?” he asked.

“I've never, you know, done this before.”

“You mean have sex?”

She nodded. Her body shook and she felt cold.

“Don't worry. I won't hurt you.” He kissed her and pulled away. “I promise.”

When it happened, she bit her lip to keep from crying out in pain. Some sounds still escaped her. He didn't force her. He waited for her pain to ease up before continuing. She felt his body shake and knew he was finished when he collapsed.

Her mother had told her about sex at an early age. From what she knew, the experience was supposed to be pleasurable for both of them. She had no idea how to describe it, but it wasn't good.

After he got off of her, he went to the bathroom and closed the door.

That's when she cried.

She thought something was wrong with her. Could she have done it wrong? Maybe it was because she didn't do anything at all but just lay there. The hot tears ran down her face and soaked through her pillow. She hoped she wasn't being too loud. She hoped he would stay in the bathroom until the tears didn't run anymore.

She didn't remember falling asleep, but it was dark outside when she woke up. She sat up and felt pain radiating through her, but it didn't hurt like at first.

"Patrick," she called. She thought he would be in the bathroom. She was going to knock on the door so she could go in and clean herself up. She was bleeding on the sheets and she had to pee.

The bathroom door was closed, so she knocked. "Patrick?" When there was no answer, she opened the door to find the bathroom empty. She forgot

about using the bathroom and the pain she felt. She glanced back in the bedroom at the tiny light that lit up the room. The small table lamp had a white sheet of paper under it along with something bunched up.

She went to the table with the sheet wrapped around her. When she picked up the note, the first thing she saw was Patrick's name at the bottom. She didn't read it because she knew what it was. She glanced at the bunched up wad of money on the table held together by the money clip he'd left for her.

Sandra didn't cry. All she could do was stare at the fold of money. When she finally got dressed, she grabbed the money without counting it and went downstairs.

A different woman was at the front desk. She looked at Sandra and asked, "Are you okay, girl?"

"Can I use your phone?" Sandra asked. She hoped her voice came out easy and that she didn't sound desperate. She didn't want to show any sign of weakness. Not now.

The woman handed her a phone without asking anything else.

Sandra dialed Deacon's number and hung up. She didn't want him to see her. Out in the middle of nowhere and abandoned.

She picked up the phone handle again and dialed her home number. She didn't tell Cordy or her mother she would be gone until after dark, so she hoped they weren't worried. She didn't want her mother to answer. She said a silent

prayer to herself. *Please, God, let it be Cordy. Let it be Cordy.* If Sandra heard her mother's voice, she didn't know how she would respond.

“San, is that you?”

That was all it took. Her mother's voice made the tears come again.

“Honey, what's wrong?”

When she finally found her voice she said, “Ma, I need you to come get me.”

Riding

Deacon stopped right between his house and the lining of trees that hid the structure from view. Anger peaked at the surface of his body, but he tried to keep it at bay. He'd gone out for a walk. He needed the distraction to get his mind off of the argument he'd had with Sandra.

Their argument was so clear in his mind that he wished he could get the day back. He longed for a chance to erase everything: what she'd told him, the argument, and all of it. The kiss is what he wanted back most.

She'd been crying before he met her at their spot. It was an open field more than a park, but the town had decided to add a few benches, a small playground, and call it a recreational area. Sandra sat on one of the benches, and, from a distance, it looked like she was shivering. It wasn't cold outside. Rain clouds covered the remaining rays of daylight, but it was still warm enough to feel spring about to enter into full force. When he got closer and saw tears streaking her face, he knew the source of her shaking.

She didn't tell him what was wrong when he sat next to her. It made him uncomfortable not knowing how to help her, so he did the first thing that popped into his mind. He kissed her. Her lips were wet from tears but still soft and covered in that cherry-flavored lip balm she always loved to wear. It was a simple brush of his lips against hers. Nothing passionate or forceful lingered, but he reveled in those few seconds.

She pulled back from him fast. Her eyes stared at him as if she didn't know him, like he was some foreign entity separate from her. He'd thought of many possible reactions from her when he pictured his first time kissing her. The distant glare she gave him wasn't close to how he imagined her reaction. He believed her kneeing him in the groin would've been better than how she looked at him. Painful, yes, but it would have been something he could heal from, a feeling he could control.

"I'm sorry," he said. He got up to leave her, let her be alone like she wanted. Sandra's hand grabbed his arm and kept him from walking away.

"Don't leave me, Deacon," she said. "You just surprised me. That's all. I really don't want you to go. Please?"

He sat back down, but he didn't look at her. There was no way he could stand looking at her if she only stared at him like he was crazy.

"What's wrong?" he asked. He kept his eyes on the stretch of wild field in front of him.

"It's Patrick," she said.

He looked up at her then. His movement was so quick he'd swear he pulled something in his neck. "Did he hurt you?" he asked her. Deacon wanted an excuse to beat up on Patrick. He never liked him. Sandra said she thought he was nice, but he'd heard the rumors, whispers in the school of how he used girls and threw them away like rag dolls. Patrick, being the son of the mayor, thought he was special and that he could get away with anything. If Patrick did something

to Sandra, Deacon couldn't promise anyone he would hold back from killing the guy.

“No,” she said. “I mean, he didn't hit me or anything.”

“What did he do to you?”

“Why did he have to do anything?” Her voice came out bitter and angry.

“Am I that weak to you, Deacon?”

Each word pecked at him and made the hairs prickle on his arm. He didn't understand what he said that made her so upset. “I never thought you were weak, Sandra. Never weak.”

She shook her head so hard it turned into frantic motions. Her arms wrapped around her body. “I don't need you to rescue me from everything, not even from Patrick. It was my choice to have sex with him. My choice.” She clasped her hand to her mouth like she'd said more than she wanted to.

Her anger put Deacon off so much that it took a while for him to process the last part. When it hit him, he had trouble breathing. He tried to gasp for small amounts of air, but it didn't help. “You had sex with Patrick,” he said almost in a whisper. Almost soft enough for it not to be true. But it was real. She'd already confessed it out loud, and it was a confession he never wanted.

“I can't be here right now,” he said. His voice held no anger, which surprised him. Shouldn't he be angry at Patrick? Angry at her for choosing him? He tried to force out anger to match the tone she threw at him earlier, but he

couldn't. His voice was bland. "I have to go." He stood up almost mechanically and didn't care which direction he went.

Sandra tried to tell him something else, but he blocked it out. Her voice came at him in shallow bursts as he walked out of earshot. He couldn't take in anything else.

He'd been walking without direction ever since leaving her. Night had fallen and brought with it an eerie silence except for the random music of crickets scattered in the woods. He wanted to walk so he could feel his feet hitting earth in order to ground him. His feet had him circling his neighborhood twice before taking him back home. He stopped before the house came into view. There was one extra car in the dirt driveway. Pastor Jones' Cadillac was the car closest to him. The idiot had chosen now to visit his mother, and it made his blood burn and tingle.

A large rock sat next to him partially buried in the ground. He dug it out and lifted it above his head to throw through the front passenger's side window. He wanted to smash the damn car and make it nothing but a clump of useless metal.

The glistening object stopped him in mid motion. From the outside, it looked like a set of keys hung from the ignition. That alone kept him from smashing the window. He dropped the heavy rock next to him and walked around to the driver's side. Hickory Springs wasn't a town that had a lot of criminal activity. It was safe and friendly, for the most part, with nothing but a little crime

and petty theft from the local teenagers. Most of the residents felt comfortable leaving their car doors unlocked and sometimes even did the same for their homes.

Deacon pulled on handle of the driver's door, and took a breath as it opened. The alarm confirming the keys were in the car rung loud through the quiet night. He got in and pulled the door shut so the ringing wouldn't draw attention.

The interior was covered in burgundy like something exploded the color inside the car. The leather seats, leather steering wheel, dashboard, and floor mats all had shades of the color.

Deacon started the car with ease. The motor was a small rumble, but not loud enough for anyone in the house to hear. He backed the car out of the driveway and was grateful it wasn't made out of gravel. He rolled all four windows down before switching into drive.

When he was clear from his house and on a main road, he mashed on the gas. 30 mph. He took a deep breath in. 40 mph. Then he forced the air back out. 50 mph. His foot stayed steady on the gas pedal with each depression. 60 mph. Trees loomed above the car and flew past him. 70 mph. Up ahead, he knew there was a sharp turn, but he didn't use the brakes. 80 mph. Wind gushed in and wrapped around him. He had gone up to 90 mph before the turn came up. He took his foot off the gas and waited.

Time suspended for him before he braked hard. He had to turn the wheel to keep the car from going into the ditch. The tires squeaked on the pavement as the car spun around in a circle.

When the car came to a stop inches from the edge of the road, he let out a breath he hadn't known he'd been holding in. He realized then that no one was on the road but him. Stopping the car could have gone differently. He laughed when it hit him. The laughter came out so hard that he had to unlock the seatbelt to move and keep it from digging into him. It was laughter aimed at nothing and everything. He was thankful for it because it was less exhausting than getting angry or sad.

He left the car in the driveway the same way he found it, with the keys still in the ignition and the doors unlocked. The night around him seemed less quiet than before. It hummed and vibrated through him. The sound helped him relax and think better. He knew he had to get away from Hickory Springs. Only a few more weeks were left until graduation, and he couldn't wait to leave everyone behind him.

Answers

“Concentrate on my voice,” Dr. Edwards said.

“Okay,” Deacon answered, trying hard to keep his eyes closed.

“No talking. Not yet. Just concentrate on your breathing like we practiced.”

Deacon took a deep breath to let out his tension. He thought the exercise was pointless, but Dr. Edwards insisted he try it before dismissing it. Deacon’s hands rested on his legs. He wore rugged khaki pants covered with pockets he never used. The week old t-shirt he had on still smelled clean to his standards. He figured it could go through one more use before it was time to call it laundry. He sat in a small chair that was uncomfortable, even with its fancy cushions, and waited for further instructions.

Dr. Edwards was a decent psychologist, but he was a little too cocky for someone who worked on a college campus with such a limited salary. Deacon’s chances of a raise as a student advisor were also cut due to the funding freeze. He knew that was the price of working for a public university.

“Keep your eyes closed,” Dr. Edwards said. “Now, I want you to think back to the last time you remember you and your mother being happy together. Find a specific moment and hold on to it.”

Deacon tried to think. He knew there were moments when he felt happy with his mother, but he was too distracted by Dr. Edwards’ note taking to think of

any. The man's pen scratched the paper as the sound pulsed in Deacon's ears. If he wanted Deacon to do this, he was going to have to stop writing.

"Do you have it?" Dr. Edwards asked.

"No." Deacon felt tension coming back through his muscles as they jerked without command. This was pointless, he thought. None of this would bring her back.

"Are you using the three techniques we talked about?"

"Concentrate. Relax. Breathe. I know the techniques. It's just not working."

"Deacon, you need to try."

"I am." He really wasn't. He kept thinking of other things he could be doing. Writing that essay that was due tomorrow for English class, checking his email, anything. Anything but this. Still, he knew Dr. Edwards wouldn't let him go until he thought of something.

One memory finally came to him. He wasn't happy, but his mom was. It would be enough to discuss so he could get out of the small office. The room felt like it was getting smaller, even with his eyes closed.

"I see it," Deacon said. "I have a memory."

"Good. Describe it to me."

"I'd just receive my acceptance letter for the Baltimore State University. Nana was happy, but Mom was thrilled. She couldn't stop smiling. It was like she had struck gold. It'd been a long time since I'd seen her that happy. She was happy for me. Just me."

Dr. Edwards scribbled something on his notepad. "Wasn't it a special time for you too?"

"I was just happy because they were happy."

"Of course they were happy. You said you were the first in your family to go to college. I'm sure they were proud of you."

"Yeah, I guess." Deacon shifted in his seat with his eyes still closed. He didn't want to go to college. He thought it was a waste of time and money to be taught something he would never use in the real world. Deacon would have been happy discovering his own philosophy of life without a degree that was worth as much as the paper it was printed on.

His decision was made because of Sandra. Even he had to admit that to himself. Ever since he met her in Sunday School when they were little, he knew he liked her. It wasn't until they got older that he realized it was more than that.

Deacon remembered when Sandra finally told him she'd had sex with Patrick. It tore at him. After that, he made a promise to himself that he'd get the hell out of Hickory Springs, even if he died in the process. He had no strong ties to the place. Yeah, he'd miss Nana, and even Sandra. But Sandra had proven that she didn't feel the same way for him as he did for her.

Sandra was one of the only reasons he would have stayed. He realized that she didn't get it. She didn't get that he would have done anything for her. Part of him still would do anything for her. And that hurt him even more. Because of her, he would play along and act like he cared about his future.

It was strange. He thought about Nana and Sandra often, but he never seemed to think about the person he was there getting counseling for, his mother.

“Deacon? Deacon!?”

“What?” Deacon opened his eyes. He couldn’t avoid the immediate eye strain from the room’s bright fluorescent lights.

“You were in a daze for a while there,” Dr. Edwards said. He continued writing as he spoke.

“Sorry,” Deacon said, his eyes still adjusting.

“What were you thinking about just now?” Dr. Edwards asked.

“Just the people back home.”

“Anyone in particular?”

Deacon started to talk but stopped. He didn’t want to talk about them. Not now. If he did, he felt like he could ramble on about nothing and everything all at once.

“It’s time for my next appointment,” Dr. Edwards said, looking at the wall clock. “Listen, you’ve been coming in here for a couple months now, even before the tragedy happened. Maybe you should try something new. Something less personal, like group counseling. You may get more out of it than what we’ve been doing here.”

“More counseling?” Deacon sighed. He was anxious for this visit to be over.

“Don’t write it off so soon. It may help you get a fresh perspective.”

Deacon couldn't imagine doing this with Dr. Edwards for two more months. It was too draining. Maybe something new would help. “What would I have to do?” His palm felt sweaty as he rubbed them on his legs and waited.

*

Deacon walked up the steps that led to the open church doors with apprehension. It should have been hilarious to him that group counseling took place inside a church since it was the last place he wanted to be, but he wasn't laughing. He couldn't help but feel like he did when he was a child going to his first day of Sunday school. Nana always encouraged him when he felt nervous. His mom never did though. He always felt like she was forcing him to fit in with everyone else, especially church people. Now, he was twenty-one years old and going inside a church without being forced.

He took a deep breath before he opened one of the thick-paneled doors. The church's sanctuary walls towered over him. Cherry wood panels stretched across the length of the floor, shining with a high glossy finish. All of the pews had been pushed to the side to make space for a circle of metal folding chairs in the center of the room. Stained glass windows with eye-straining shades of blue, red, green, orange, and yellow separated everything from the outside world. Each fragile structure reminded him of the church back home. The images

portrayed the commonly told Biblical stories like Adam and Eve savoring the Garden of Eden or Moses parting the Red Sea. Most were images of Jesus during various points of his life: birth, ministry, and death. Deacon lingered in front of the one with David slaying the giant Goliath. He tried to imagine using that sling in David's hand to kill his own problems. He wished it was that simple.

People were scattered around in small groups, laughing and sharing events about their unsympathetic husbands, inattentive wives, hellish kids, and life-draining 9-5 jobs. Deacon passed two women talking about nonexistent sex lives. He noticed that one of the women had salt and pepper colored hair. She wore a blue dress with white stockings. The woman talking looked like she was in her mid-thirties. She wore a mini skirt with black high heels.

"He hasn't been in the mood since Cooper died," the younger woman said. "I understand he's grieving. I am too, but that doesn't mean we can't have sex. I mean, it's been eight months. You know?"

"Hmm." The older woman nodded sympathetically. Deacon thought he heard sarcasm in her agreement as he passed them.

He made his way over to the refreshment table. Coffee, orange juice and a variety of doughnuts were offered on a white vinyl tablecloth that defined the meaning of cheap. He craved a fresh cup of coffee with nothing but sugar in it. As he poured the fragrant black liquid into his Styrofoam cup, a woman, who appeared to be in her early thirties, approached him. Her hair was pinned back

into a French roll. She wore a silk red blouse with black slacks, and a silver locket dangled from her neck.

“Hello,” she said. She readjusted her silver framed glasses. “You’re new here, aren’t you?”

“Yes,” he replied. He didn’t feel like volunteering more information.

“I’m Dr. Mary Alice.” She shot her right hand out towards him with a little too much enthusiasm. “That’s what everyone calls me around here.”

Deacon reluctantly shook it. Her outgoing demeanor at such an event scared him a little, but she had trusting eyes. It took him a moment to realize her eyes reminded him of his mother. His mother always looked at him like that when she wanted Deacon to go along with something crazy, like helping her go minister to people door-to- door. Agreeing with her always made him feel like he’d lost a sense of control over his life and handed it to her.

“Hi,” Deacon said. “So I guess doctors need help sometimes too. That’s good to know.”

“Oh, no,” she said. “I’m not –”

“It’s okay,” he said. “You don’t have to explain. I’m sure we’ll be talking a lot for counseling. Something I’ll have to get used to I guess.”

She looked at him like she was analyzing something, but it was a soft look, almost endearing. Nothing critical lingered in her gaze.

“So, what’s yours?” Mary Alice asked.

“What’s my what?” Deacon said.

“Your name, silly.” Mary Alice laughed in a pitch that could annoy anyone.

“Oh, my name. Will.” Oh great, he thought. Now he was lying in church. God wouldn’t strike him down for that, would He? Why did he lie? It wasn’t like he was attending a Sex Addicts Anonymous meeting. It was only grief counseling.

“Actually,” he continued, “my name is Deacon. Sorry. I’m just a little nervous.”

“That’s okay.” She smiled. He was thankful it wasn’t followed by laughter. “We were all nervous at our first group session. It’s awkward at first, but you learn to adjust.”

“I’m not used to talking in front of a large group of people.” He drained his hot beverage rapidly, without coming up for air. After tossing the cup in the nearby trash bin, he grabbed a powdered dough concoction that looked like a jelly one. He took a bite. Yep. Jelly doughnut. The smooth filling gave him a feeling of comfort.

“You’re just having stage fright.” Mary Alice watched him as he wolfed down the doughnut in a matter of seconds without choking. “Don’t worry. You don’t have to put on an act here. Eventually, you forget everyone else. You may even come to see us as your friends.”

“Who’s the person leading the session? Is he a pastor here or something?”

“No. She is the sister of the pastor here. He lets her use the church every Tuesday and Thursday night for group counseling.”

“Oh. So the counselor is a woman?”

“You don’t have a problem with that, do you?”

“No.” He tugged on the collar of his clean button-down shirt. By the squinted look on her face, he thought she was offended. “The website said the name was M. A. Sheldon, so I guess I just assumed it would be a guy.”

“Most of the people who come in here think that.”

“So, does she not earn enough money for her own office? Is that why we’re in a church?” He wanted to shut up, but he couldn’t. Talking too much became a habit whenever he was nervous.

“You’ll have to ask her that after the meeting.” A smirk crossed her face. She studied him. “I think we should head to our seats. It’s about to start. Nice meeting you, Deacon.”

He nodded and watched as she made her way over to the circle, taking a seat. Others followed her and sat in their cold metal chairs. The group consisted of thirteen people, including Deacon. He was the last one to sit, completing the circle.

After he sat down, he was able to study the group. He spotted the two women who were talking earlier, but they weren’t sitting next to each other. There were only two other people who looked around his age: a guy with a flamboyant Hawaiian shirt and a girl with torn jeans that had words written all over them. Four others looked like they were in their thirties. One man had a bald head and wore a tank top, while the other carried himself in a clean business suit. The

other two thirty-year olds appeared to be a couple. Deacon studied the woman's hand, which rested in the man's lap. He calmly stroked her hand as if trying to calm her. Another woman tried to conceal her forty-year old appearance with heavy make-up and bright orange lipstick. A man in jean overalls and a woman in a plain black dress rounded up the group.

The woman he had talked to stood up to address the group. "Hello, everyone! My name is Dr. Mary Alice Sheldon, and I will be your group therapist for this evening." She looked directly at Deacon and smiled warmly.

He slunk down farther into his chair, trying to hide himself from her eyes. He had managed to call his counselor a man and cheap all in one conversation. Words formed in his mind for an apology as she continued her speech.

"Everyone calls me Dr. Mary Alice for short. Besides, Dr. Sheldon was my father, and that sounds too formal for here, don't you think?"

Deacon saw a few people nod while a couple others smiled. Most kept their eyes on her, but one or two stared at the floor or the ceiling, avoiding all contact. He appreciated the way she acknowledged each one of them, whether they met her stare or not. He respected her for it. She didn't talk down to them like they were crazy either. Deacon thought about Dr. Edwards, who had a habit of adding a condescending tone to his voice even when he wasn't paying attention to it. It annoyed the hell out of Deacon, but at least the man was free.

"Let's begin," Mary Alice said. "For those of you who are new here, let me tell you a little about my background. I specialize in marriage and family therapy

in which I received my Master's at the University of Virginia and my doctorate from the University of Maryland. I also enjoy helping others cope through grief counseling, as you can see. I also have personal experience with loss."

Deacon sat back up in his chair and listened to the even tone of Mary Alice's voice. It soothed his nerves and made him actually listen to what she had to say.

She took a deep breath and squeezed the locket that hung from her neck before speaking again. "My husband died four years ago, and it took me a while to get over it. Then again, I'm not sure it's something you can ever get over. I guess you could say I cope by helping others deal with death. While you're here, many of you will experience the grief cycle: denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and acceptance. Not all of you will go through each stage or even experience it in the same order. I am just here to help you sort out your feelings about your loss. We're all here to support each other. So, let's start by introducing ourselves."

Everyone said their names and the people they were struggling to let go. Parents, children, spouses, friends, and grandparents were just a few of the people mentioned. It eventually became Deacon's turn to introduce himself. He was glad to be sitting down because his legs were too weak to stand.

"Hi. My name is Deacon." He spoke quietly but the echo in the room made his voice reachable. He was glad that this wasn't a session where people would respond in unison, "Hi, Deacon." Hearing his name said out loud from strangers would make him feel more uncomfortable. "Three days ago I learned that my

mother died.” He took a deep breath, remembering the last conversation he had with her, arguing about his mother's infatuation with Pastor Jones. “I think,” he continued, “what bothers me the most is the idea of knowing that last thing I did was tell her that I wished my grandmother had been my mother instead of her.” He felt the tension drain out of his limbs, the pressure releasing. That was the first time he had said it out loud. Dr. Edwards never even heard him express his true feelings. He cupped his head in his hands, holding back the tears that clung to his lids. *My men don't cry*, his mother would say to him if she had been alive to see him now. Her words stayed with him growing up. Now, they rang in his ears. She could never stand weak men.

“Thank you for sharing, Deacon,” Mary Alice said. “I know it wasn't easy, but thank you.” After the introductions were over, she continued. “Thank you everyone for opening up. It can be hard to talk openly about such a private matter. That's why we are going to be performing a trust exercise tonight. This way we won't feel as uncomfortable with each other in the future.”

Great, thought Deacon. *She's going to do one of those exercises where each person jumps into everyone else's arms.* He looked at the others around him. *I don't trust half of these people to catch me.*

“We are going to be doing a verbal trust exercise. This is how it works. Each person must tell the group a secret that no one else knows, not even family members or friends. It doesn't have to be big, just something that you may have done that others would have no clue about. Keep in mind that if you confess a crime I

may have to report you to the closest authorities.” A few people smiled uncomfortably. “That was a joke,” she reassured. Some people nodded with understanding, but others looked annoyed.

“Now, I will start first, and then we will go around the room.”

Mary Alice talked about how she placed a 50 percent-off tag on a book so she would have enough to pay for it. Deacon shared the time he took Pastor Jones' Cadillac for a ride one spring break when the man came to visit his mother and no one caught him. They all shared secrets they felt comfortable telling. After the secret sharing was complete, she dismissed the session. Deacon approached her when everyone else had left the church,

“I want to apologize for what I said earlier,” he said

“It’s all forgotten,” she smiled as if the insult never took place. “I should be the one apologizing to you. I would have said who I was earlier, but you seemed so nervous. I didn’t want to make you more uncomfortable.

“It’s fine,” he said, returning her smile. “I’ll get over it.”

“Glad to hear it,” she said. “So does that mean I’ll see you at the next meeting Thursday?”

He nodded and said, “I think I need this.” He placed his hands in his jean pant pockets. “I need to find answers to the questions I’m constantly asking myself, you know? I have to figure that out before I can think of facing the people back home or going to the funeral.”

“We all have questions,” she said, “even if we never find the answers we’re looking for.”

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When Deacon got back to his apartment, he took out the old black and white checkered shoe box Nana had given him before he'd left for school. He'd peeked in it when she first handed it to him. He tried to protest and give it back to her, but when Nana was set on something, it happened.

“Keep it,” she said to him. “You never know when you'll get a longing for home.”

He wanted to say he'd never long for his hometown or most of the people in it. Instead he said, “Okay, Nana,” and shoved the box in the back seat of his car without a second thought.

Now, he picked up the box carefully as if it were a glass figurine that would break with one slip of his fingers. He wiped off the thin layer of dust that had accumulated on top and sat the box down on the bed beside him. He held his breath as he lifted the lid.

The pictures inside were disorganized and shuffled with no order to them. All it took was the one on top to make Deacon breathe again. It was Sandra and him as kids. They were at a church picnic and Nana had made them stand on the front steps of the church for a picture. Nana rarely made an appearance to

church events, let alone the services themselves, so she brought a camera to the picnic to mark the occasion.

Deacon wore the suit Mama had bought him the year before when he'd started going to church with her. Sandra wore a yellow dress with a white ribbon wrapped around her waist. She smiled at the camera with one of her front teeth missing. Deacon smiled, but he wasn't looking at the camera. His eyes were fixed on Sandra.

He couldn't help but laugh. Even then he was a sap for her. The kind way she took him in as a friend when he knew no one, the way she laughed when he pretended to recite a Bible verse he didn't really know, how her hair always smelled like a mixture of summer blossoms and the warm scent that came before a rainstorm, the sweet glint in her eyes whenever he said that he didn't care what her mother did for work, Sandra would always be Sandra to him. He'd promised himself that he'd be there for her, no matter what hell the town or the church put her through. But that was a lie, wasn't it? As soon as he heard about Sandra and Patrick, he raced out of Hickory Springs. He couldn't get out of there fast enough. His hands gripped the photo tight. He'd only been back once in three years. He didn't even get the chance to see Sandra.

It was winter break and he came home and spotted Pastor Jones' car in the driveway. It shouldn't have surprised him. The man had strung his mother along for years with promises he couldn't keep, but his mother stayed fixated on him. He'd even gone to the lengths of remodeling their house to keep her hopes

up that'd he would eventually marry her. He always did extremes like that when he thought he was losing her or she was thinking about moving on. It pissed Deacon off, seeing his mother run to him whenever he called. The spineless idiot had even called his mother when he'd had a flat one time. Made her help change it because he said his hands were holy and touched by God and that he couldn't work before he laid hands on his congregation for that night's service.

Deacon shouldn't have gone in when he saw the man's car, but he wanted to see Nana. Part of him even wanted to see his mother. Pastor Jones and his mother were in the kitchen kissing, and Deacon felt the rage run over him. He couldn't control it. He wasn't even sure that he wanted to.

“Get your hands off of her!” he screamed.

“Deacon,” Pastor Jones said with the crooked smile that always made Deacon's skin curl up. “Welcome home, son.”

“I'm not your son,” he said through closed teeth. “And you are not my damn father.”

“Watch your mouth, Deacon,” his mama said. “Pastor Jones doesn't deserve to be spoken to like that.”

“Doesn't he? I come home to be with my family, and I find you in the kitchen making out like teenagers in a place where anyone can see you.”

“It's my house,” she said. “I'll do whatever I want in my own house.”

“Apparently it's his house too,” Deacon said. “Since his holier-than-thou church money paid for most of it.”

“That's enough, young man,” Pastor Jones said. “You know very well that money was donated by the church because of all the help your mama did at the church.”

“Is that all she did?”

“Excuse me?”

Deacon paced the room. “Sandra didn't think I knew, but I knew. I saw you coming out of her mother's house.”

“What nonsense is coming out of you?” his mama asked.

Her voice didn't bother him. He walked up to Pastor Jones and said, “My mother is not a whore, you sick, religious bastard!” The words barely had time to leave Deacon's mouth before Pastor Jones' hand came at him. It was so fast that it took a moment for the pain to hit him and for the taste of metallic blood to well up in his mouth.

The room stopped spinning and he looked up. His mother went to Pastor Jones and held an ice pack on his hand.

She gave him a sharp look that did more than scold him. It made his stomach and chest ache at the same time.

“You shouldn't have provoked him like that, Deacon,” she said.

Deacon didn't expect a laugh to come out of him. It was bitter and harsh and made his head throb even more. “Go on then,” he said. “Let him use you. I wish you were never my mother. I wish to God Nana had me instead of you.”

He ran all the way back to his car and drove back to Maryland without stopping. Even though the motion of the car made him sick to his stomach, he kept going. When he got back to his place, he jumped out of the car and puked in a nearby bush as tears streamed down his face. He couldn't tell if he was retching or dry coughing from the crying.

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He made excuses after that. He couldn't come home for school breaks because he had too much work to catch up on, or he couldn't take off for the summer because he found an internship that took all his time. Whenever he gave these excuses to Nana, he could hear the disappointment in her voice. He ignored it. He couldn't see his mother with that religious idiot. Not anymore.

Deacon still held the picture of Sandra and him in his hand as he thought of home. A hint of a smirk crossed his lips as he put the picture back, but another picture in the box stopped him from making a full smile.

He didn't remember this one. He guessed he was too young since he was a baby. It didn't look like him or his mother. But there it was, written in Nana's careful penmanship, "Sarah and Deacon, 1972." It was the year he was born, and it looked like a time when his mother looked happy to be near him, to hold him, to love him. He wished he could remember it.

*

Deacon returned to group counseling on Thursday like he promised. It was the same crowd but smaller, with four or five people absent. He stayed quiet during the session as other people confessed their struggles.

Mary Alice approached him after the meeting.

“Didn't hear much from you tonight,” she said with a smile.

“Sorry,” he said. Even he could tell it wasn't a believable response. He didn't have the energy for lying full-heartedly tonight.

“Don't apologize. Some people have on and off nights. There's no talking requirement here. Whatever works for you is what helps you.”

“Thanks.” He didn't know what else to say, but he felt her eyes examining him, looking for something.

“You still have some stuff eating at you,” she said.

He knew it wasn't a question, so he didn't bother answering.

She continued on. “Why don't we go get some coffee?”

He looked at the refreshment table. “Don't we have that here?”

She laughed, and he thought he could feel the sound leaving her and filling him up with something, anything, more than the empty feeling he had ever since thinking of home and his mother.

“That's not the good stuff,” she said. “Although I appreciate my brother donating everything for our meetings, the coffee is nothing to sneeze at.” She

glanced around and then whispered, "I imagine it's what dog piss would taste like on a good day."

He laughed then with her. "And you serve this stuff to the people you're trying to help?"

"Well, you know that saying about beggars and choosers. So are you up for good coffee?"

Her smile was refreshing, like taking a gulp of ice cold water in summer heat. For a moment, it made him feel content.

"Sure," he said.

The café was around the corner from the church and up a block. It was eleven at night, so only one or two patrons lingered inside. The walls were painted beige and brown. Retro art with bright colors hung from each side, making each work of art look like a Picasso imitation. Smells of burning sandalwood and berry incense filled the air, leaving faint streaks of smoke around them.

"I know it looks like it's too artistic to be a good coffee place," she said, "but they have amazing coffee and chai." She ordered a tall caramel latte with fat-free milk.

Deacon wasn't used to fancy coffee orders. He liked his coffee black and added sugar to mask the taste if it was really bad. He ordered the same thing this time.

Mary Alice chose a table in the corner near the large picture window. It was secluded but still offered a link to the outside world. They drank their coffee in silence until she broke it.

“I used to come here once a week,” she said. “Now, I come once a day. Guess I'm a coffee addict.” She looked at his cup and her eyes lingered on it. “Henry used to order the same thing.”

“Henry?” he asked. Deacon was relieved they hadn't started talking about him. He didn't know what he was feeling or even how to explain it.

“My husband,” she said, “or late husband.” Her hand went to her neck and played with her locket.

“Do you have a picture of him in there?”

“No. I keep it on me because it was the last thing he gave me. We were supposed to get our picture taken together. Put it in later, you know? Then the car accident.” Her hands shook as she tried to steady her coffee.

Deacon didn't think as his hand reached out to touch hers. His fingers cupped over her hand and separated it from her cup. He felt the cold long lengths of each digit and the stretched flesh on top.

She looked up at him. Her eyes were light brown with darker shades of the same speckled around the irises. Hints of crow's feet lingered on the outside edges, but they disappeared as she smiled at him. It wasn't a happy smile, nor was it forced. If he had to name it he would have called it relief, like she couldn't breathe in fresh air until now even though it was all around her.

When they finished their coffee and walked outside, she spoke first. "Would you mind walking me to my apartment? I just live four blocks over from here."

"Sure," he said. He stuffed his hands in the pockets of his brown jacket even though the March air wasn't that nippy.

When they got to her building, she went right up the stairs to put her key in the door while he stood at the bottom. She turned to him and said, "Want a cup of tea?"

He stood there, unsure of what to say. It felt inappropriate to go into her apartment.

"Some bad memories came back tonight," she said. Her shoulders twitched and made her look like she was shivering. "Made me feel sad all over again." She smiled, but this one wasn't a happy one. It didn't make the full stretch of her face. Instead, it looked like she tried hard to keep herself from crying. "I could use the company. If only for a little longer."

He felt like he wanted to protect her, but he didn't know why or what from. All he could do was nod and follow her inside.

Everything in her place looked like it was aligned to perfection. The living room had a green leather couch and a matching recliner that stood next to each other. In front of the sofa and recliner was an oval coffee table that had a glossy shine over its wooden surface. Two lamps sat on each end table and had a consistent structure with slight turns toward the leather couch. Angel figurines

were on the shelf above the fireplace in two rows. All had porcelain faces and limbs, but each one had colored gowns in various shades of blues, pinks, yellows, and purples. They all formed a straight line as if waiting to fight a strategized battle for their owner.

“I hope you like chamomile tea,” she said as she came into the room. She sat a silver tray down on the coffee table. “I ran out of the regular stuff, so it's all I have.”

“I don't mind,” he said. “I practically grew up on it.”

She glanced up at him in between pouring cups. “You actually like it?”

“My mother did,” he said. He remembered all the times she would force him to drink chamomile tea when he was young. Hot or cold, it didn't matter to her. He thought it tasted like medicine and would gulp it down to get the taste over with. “She had a cup every day. Thought it cured everything from colds to skin rashes. You get used to it when you have to drink it all he time.”

“I bet your mom never made it like this,” she said. “It has an adult kick to it.” A small grin lifted to the side of her mouth. It made her seem lovely and made him think of the time Sandra got whip cream on her nose when she had a root beer float.

He took a quick sip of the tea. He didn't want to think of Sandra. Not ever if he could help it. Although he could taste the alcohol, it was smooth and warm going down. The first sip was good, but the second one made him feel even

better. It relaxed him as the aroma and taste expanded out through his body.

He'd emptied the cup before he knew it.

“That was good,” he said, sitting the glass back on the tray.

“Glad you liked it. It's mixed with amaretto and Irish cream liquors. It helps to jump start the calming effect.”

She poured him a second cup and continued pouring for both of them. By the time he got halfway through the third, Mary Alice was beautiful. He wasn't drunk. There wasn't enough alcohol for that. Every time he drank too much, it brought on a migraine that lasted for two days straight. No medicine or cold pack could make it go away. This was different. His body relaxed and his mind cleared, or maybe it was too foggy for him to care. Still, she became something more. Something he could touch. Someone he could have, if only for a moment.

He wanted to savor everything about her. His hand reached up and rested on her cheek. She had been laughing, but his touch silenced her. He leaned in to kiss her. She was so close that he smelled her. It was a familiar scent, the smell of woods and burning spices. It was similar to the one his mother wore, the one he smelled on her whenever she got ready for church. This smell was more exotic and less stifling. The thought almost brought him back to everything he wanted to go away. It was Mary Alice closing the distance that made him forget about his mother and push the memories of home back down in his gut and far away from his head.

Her kiss was soft, but nothing gentle lived there. It took him a minute, but he found her pace. He closed his eyes and tried to retrieve the relaxing effects of the drink. Traces remained, but he gripped for pieces of calm as hard as he could and tried to forget.

It was hard to remember moving from the couch or her leading him to her bedroom, but he didn't care. The tempo of her movements never changed, when he tried to remove her clothes with steady fingers, hers rushed and she missed a button on his shirt here or a latch on his pants there. He had to finish undressing himself, which made their movements together awkward but progressive.

After he entered her, he paused. Reality came back with a force. All the women he left back home. The ones who cared, the ones who didn't, and the others he wasn't sure about. He didn't want those thoughts. Not yet. Not now. That wasn't fair to her for letting him be this close to her, this intimate.

Mary Alice's hands rested on either side of his face until he opened his eyes and looked down into hers. This time when she smiled it was as if she did so because she knew what he was thinking. Her eyes had a glint of something that looked like peace and stillness. When she leaned up and kissed him, he could still feel the upturned curve of her lips, and he couldn't help but smile with her through their kiss as he continued moving.

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When Deacon woke up, he saw that Mary Alice was already awake. Her eyes were turned towards the ceiling. She didn't blink. She didn't move. He couldn't even hear her breathing. There was something about the way she stared at the stucco ceiling that confirmed she wasn't dead. He turned and faced the ceiling too to see what had her so entranced.

Stars were scattered on the white stucco. They were the ones that glowed in the dark. He remembered because his roommate from freshman year had the same thing in their dorm room. The stars had a florescent green glow about them since the black out shades prevented most of the outside light from coming into the bedroom.

“I'm sorry,” she said.

He didn't know what to say to that. I'm not sorry? That felt so unrealistic to him, so expected. Ask her why? No, he didn't want to know what she thought because it would only mean that something they did was wrong. It may have been unethical for her, but not wrong to him. Then she said another thing that surprised him.

“Thank you,” she said. “Thank you for reminding me of something I missed.”

He didn't get a chance to respond because she got out of the bed and went into the bathroom, closing the door behind her.

Deacon knew as he walked out of Mary Alice's apartment that he couldn't go to group therapy with her anymore. It would be too strange, and he didn't want either one of them to be uncomfortable.

He had made another decision. Sometime between the coffee shop and waking up that morning beside Mary Alice, he knew he was going home. Mary Alice's last words to him hovered along as he walked. *Thank you for reminding me of something I missed*, she said. As he reached his place, he realized he forgot to thank her for doing the same for him.

Remembering

Deacon sat in his 1971 Chevy Impala with the “Welcome to Hickory Springs” sign looming over him. He'd stopped there before crossing into the town's territory because he felt a panic attack coming on. He'd been getting them ever since hearing about his mother's death. He never thought they were severe. He just had problems sitting still and would break out in cold sweats. Sometimes he even had trouble breathing. It usually happened when he was asleep and woke up with his shirt soaked in sweat.

Dr. Edwards tried to prescribe something for his anxiety, but he didn't want it. He barely had control of his life now. Drugs would only make him feel worse. Maybe it would have knocked him out in a deep sleep every now and then, but the problems would still be there when he woke up.

He'd rolled down the windows. It was chilly outside, and the clouds merged into each other with a promise of rain soon. The slight cold made him think and kept him outside of his mind at the same time. He counted to himself to try to slow down the beating of his pulse and the throb that came out of his neck and ran to his chest. He felt the purring of the motor through the steering wheel as he started the car. The rumbling helped him as it traveled up into his hands and expanded to the rest of his body. He finally crossed over into the town's boundary, but he kept a tight grip on the wheel as he did it.

Nana had told him that the wake was at Harold and Sons' Funeral Home. Although he said he knew where to find it, she insisted on giving him directions. He could tell she needed something to control. She'd made all the arrangements for the wake, the funeral, and the reception. He offered to help, but she kept turning him down. He figured if she needed help, she'd ask him for it in her own time.

Only a few cars sat in the parking lot of the funeral home. One belonged to Nana. He arrived early, hoping he had time to view his mother's body before everyone else did. He wasn't close to his mother's friends, but he tried to be polite. Pastor Jones was the only exception to that niceness. He hadn't thought about how he'd react if he saw him. Instead, he avoided thinking about the man at all.

The place made him uncomfortable as soon as he walked in. He knew funeral homes weren't meant to be places with the most welcoming atmospheres. They were the holding places for the dead. It was realistic that it scared the living to be in such a confined space and that close to death, but it made him upset that he felt so unnerved by it. His uneasiness was something he couldn't control. While he was in the funeral home, he desperately longed for control over something.

Just standing in the entryway bothered him. He couldn't tell if it was the artificial flowers hovering in every corner or the candles that made the place seem like an ancient vigil. A tall, thin man greeted him. He'd seen the man in

passing years ago. It was hard to go unnoticed in a town that had under a thousand residents. The man looked younger up close. From afar, his stature made him look like he was in his forties. Now, the man looked no older than thirty. He had to have been one of the funeral director's sons.

“May I help you, sir?” the man asked.

“I'm here to see my mother.”

The man gave him a questioning gaze, which made him realize he hadn't said his mother's name. “I'm here for Sarah Taylor's viewing.”

“Oh, yes, Mr. Taylor,” the man said. “We've been expecting you. Please, follow me.”

He followed the man until they reached a narrow entryway down the hall. The room appeared small at first glance, but the width of it made it look bigger. Chairs were placed on each side of the room. Two big picture windows up front allowed daylight to seep in through the white sheer curtains. Heavy burgundy drapes were pulled back to allow the natural lighting through. He noticed the coffin last because the windows sat on each end of it, allowing the casket to rest in front of the bare white wall. Short flowers sat around the base while tall wreaths of petals and flower heads were propped at both the head and foot. The top of the casket was open as Nana had warned him. He was grateful to her for the heads up. It still didn't prepare him though.

Nana was in the front row with another woman he couldn't recognize from behind. He could tell it was his grandmother by the slope of her shoulders and

the hair bun she wore for formal occasions. Nana sat still as the other woman cried. It came out as a hysterical cry. The woman tried to talk, but her voice came out as babbling between her wet sobs and nose blowing.

Deacon felt like hard pavement filled his shoes and kept him immobile. He couldn't go into the room. His feet stayed planted even as he willed them to move.

"I'll leave you to it," a voice said. Deacon realized the man hadn't moved from his side. The man, this stranger, saw him hesitate to see his own mother's wake, and it made him feel like a coward.

Nana must have heard the man because she'd turned and got up from her seat. As she walked towards Deacon, her body stayed stiff and her face showed a blank look he wasn't use to seeing on her. He usually knew when she was mad or happy, but the lack of emotion from her scared him.

"There's my grandson," she said as she hugged him.

Deacon towered over his grandmother by a foot, so she had to wrap her arms around his waist to embrace him. He leaned over to return the hug and felt the stiffness in her shoulders.

"Hi, Nana," he said. "I'm sorry I couldn't come before now."

She pulled away from him and rested a hand against his cheek. "You're here now, my boy. That's all that matters." The woman up front made a noise that sounded like dry heaving, which made Nana look back at her. When she faced Deacon again she looked annoyed. "Not a moment too soon either."

“Who is that?” he asked. He kept his voice low so the woman wouldn't hear him.

“One of your mother's church friends,” she said. Church came out of her mouth with bitterness, like it made her uneasy saying it. “It's that Gooding woman.”

“Sister Gooding?” he asked. When Nana nodded, he looked back over at the woman. It had been almost four years since he'd seen the woman who was his first Sunday school teacher. She'd also been one of the teachers in the church school. It didn't surprise him that she was the one who taught Bible Study class for the school when it became a part of the church. His mother enrolled him in 6th grade when it opened and kept him in it until he graduated. Deacon would have protested, but Sandra went to the church's school with him. That made it tolerable.

Deacon examined Sister Gooding in her slouched position as her back shook with each sob. “I didn't know she was that close to Ma,” he said. He saw Sister Gooding at school and sometimes at church, when he made the occasional appearance, but he rarely saw the woman with his mother.

“She wasn't,” Nana said. “Which is why I wish she'd cut the theatrics and let us grieve in peace. The woman has been here the whole time, and she's about to get on my last nerve.”

“Maybe she really misses her.”

Nana looked at him with an eyebrow raised. "Why don't you go up there and say hello. Then you tell me it's not an act." She patted him on the shoulder and walked around him.

"Where are you going, Nana?"

"To get some fresh air. The wake hasn't even started yet, but I need a break if that," she pointed to Sister Gooding, "is what I have to deal with when everyone else arrives. I'll be back soon." Nana left and disappeared around the corner.

Deacon hadn't known what kind of reaction he'd get from Nana by coming to his mother's wake, but that wasn't it. Maybe he thought she'd be breaking down like Sister Gooding, but part of him knew how strong his grandmother was. If she cried, she did it in private.

He remembered hearing her cry from his bedroom a few times when he was younger. She cried for his grandpa when she thought no one was listening. Maybe that's what she needed now: time alone to cry for her daughter. Deacon thought about his mother's disdain for crying and how she saw it as a weakness. He grew up knowing his mother was wrong because Nana was anything but weak. He felt more connected to Nana when he listened to her from his bedroom than any connection he ever had with his mother. It helped knowing that he wasn't the only one who cried.

Deacon took a deep breath and walked to the front of the room and greeted the woman. "Thank you for coming, Sister Gooding," he said.

She looked up at him, and that's when he realized what Nana meant. The woman had no tears although tissues were bunched up in her hands. No red or puffy eyes, running nose, or any other signs of crying marked her face. With all the loud noises and jerky movements she made, he could have sworn there should have been evidence of the emotional turmoil she was supposedly going through. There was nothing.

“Oh, Deacon,” she said. “Praise Jesus, you're home.”

She charged at him and grabbed him in a violent hold, which seemed to be her version of a hug. His arms were trapped at his sides and he couldn't breathe.

“It's so sad, dear boy. For her to be taken so soon.” She pulled back enough for Deacon to move out of her grip.

“Thank you,” he said. He didn't come out with his full voice because he had to recover from getting the wind squeezed out of him.

“But God always has a plan. We have to remember that.” She huffed and sniffed like tears hung nearby. “Excuse me.” She patted at her dry eyes with the wad of tissues. “I need to get myself together before we start.” She ran out of the room so fast it looked like she was on the brink of an outburst.

He didn't blame Nana for taking a break. He'd never thought of Sister Gooding as crazy. A little uptight and strict as a teacher, but craziness wouldn't have been something that came to mind. He thought of Dr. Edwards and Mary

Alice, the psychologists he'd been seeing. Maybe he wasn't as mentally off as he thought.

He closed his eyes and laughed. It was a rough laugh that made him bend over and clutch his stomach. It felt better than his anxiousness, and it probably even came out because he was nervous. He had to grip something for balance. The smooth surface under his palm brought an end to the funny moment he needed.

His eyes traveled to his hand and to the coffin he rested it on. It was harder for him to take in air than when Sister Gooding held him in a death hold.

Deacon's mother rested in the coffin with her hands wrapped over her chest. A small picture sat under her crossed hands. It was a photo of the three of them: his mother, Nana, and him. They stood in front of their house, but he didn't remember the picture being taken or even who took it. He looked no older than three or four. Her hands were too loose to hold the frame, so it rested against her. A small silver heart-shaped locket hung over the picture. Deacon opened it and saw a tiny headshot of his grandfather. He only knew what his grandfather looked like from the pictures Nana showed him.

His mother wore a cotton navy dress that was so dark it was almost black. Lace attached to the shoulders of the fabric and covered her arms with interwoven flower designs. Her hair was curled and shaped the sides of her oval face. A nude colored lipstick sat on her lips and her make-up made it look like she didn't have on any at all.

He didn't understand why people said that the dead looked as though they were sleeping. He'd seen his mother sleep before, and it wasn't the same. Her chest didn't rise with air, and her face didn't vibrate with life. The body was too still to be asleep. He knew this was her body because it had her appearance, but it wasn't her. She was gone from it. Completely gone.

Deacon gripped the side of the open casket, and his fingers brushed the white satin lining inside. He wanted to cry, longed for tears to come out and show that he was in mourning. But nothing came out.

He wiped at the sides of his face anyway. He felt heaviness in his gut. It pulled and jerked at him from the inside, and he was glad he hadn't eaten anything. He sat down in the chair closest to him and wondered if he was any different from Sister Gooding and her display with no real tears. Maybe something was wrong with him because he couldn't shed tears for his mother.

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Deacon couldn't go back home after the wake, so he headed towards the center of town. After greeting people and thanking them for coming, he had to go somewhere that didn't require anything from him. He had no destination in mind until he saw the sign for Betty's Diner flashing. A small smile crossed his face as he remembered the times spent there as a kid. It was there that he discovered

coffee. He would go sometimes after school and just watch people shuffle in and examine the cooks as they moved orders out of the kitchen.

Betty, the owner, had gone to college with Nana, and sometimes you'd see her darting through to straighten out the place's operation. She wasn't always there, but she made sure the place ran with ease whether she was present or not. She'd make sure the food was coming out on time, examine the appearance of the place, and even sit down and talk with her customers once in a while.

Deacon took off the tie and got rid of the jacket before going inside. Losing both made him feel lighter and less constrained. He walked in and sat in one of the corner booths away from the other people. He needed space, and he didn't want the chance to hear people give their condolences.

He picked up a menu that sat up against the window and glanced at the choices without reading. He heard a small humming noise coming from behind him. The noise vibrated in his ears and made him turn around.

In the booth next to him, a boy knelt underneath the table. The boy had a race car in his hand and rolled it along the leather red seat. He imitated car noises as he moved the car back and forth. He had to be about three or four. When the boy rolled the car up the back of the seat, his eyes stopped on Deacon.

"Hi, kid," Deacon said with a half-smile.

The boy's eyes grew big, and he snatched the car up and huddled in the corner of the seat.

“What's wrong?” Deacon asked him. “I didn't mean to scare you.”

The boy looked up and then glanced back down. “Mommy said not to talk to strangers,” he said.

“You have a smart mom,” he said back. He looked at the toy car the boy held in his hands. “Nice Mustang you got there.” He allowed a smile to cross his face before he turned back around to his menu.

A woman came by and asked what he wanted to drink. He ordered water since he could barely think of drinking anything, let alone eating food.

“Your waitress will be back to take your order,” she said. She smiled at the boy before leaving.

After a moment, Deacon felt movement to his side and a small gush of air on his neck. He glanced over to see the boy leaning over the seat and looking at him.

“Hi, again,” Deacon said.

“Hi,” the boy said back.

“Aren't you supposed to not talk to me?” he asked.

“Alice talked to you,” the boy said.

“Alice?”

“Mommy's work friend.”

It took a moment for Deacon to realize who he meant. “You mean the lady who just left?”

The boy nodded. "She talked to you. You're not a stranger." He smiled at Deacon.

Deacon wanted to question the boy's reasoning, but instead he introduced himself. "I'm Deacon. What's your name?"

"Nathan."

"Nice to meet you, Nathan," he said. "Now we're not strangers anymore, but you should listen to your mom. She's right about not talking to strangers even if someone you know talks to them."

The boy looked away like he was thinking about what Deacon said.

"Nate!" a woman said behind Deacon. "What did we talk about bothering people while Mommy's working?"

The woman's voice made Deacon freeze. It had been a while since he heard that voice.

"Sorry, Mommy," Nathan said before turning around in his seat.

"I'm sorry, sir," she said. "I hope he wasn't any trouble."

Deacon closed his eyes and focused on the voice, the light tone and how it seemed to float off her as she talked. He didn't realize he'd missed it. He didn't want to turn around for a fear that he couldn't savor it as much.

"Sir," she said. "Are you okay?"

He opened his eyes and turned around slow. His eyes saw her the same way he remembered her, but her clothing was different. She stood dressed in a

waitress outfit. Her hair was pulled back in a ponytail and had a few loose strands hanging free from it, which only made her prettier.

“Deacon?” she said under her breath. She clutched her pad and pen to her chest like they were her lifeline.

“Hello, Sandra,” he said, trying to keep his voice steady, neutral.

*

Sandra asked her manager to let her off half an hour early. Deacon waited outside and watched the woman look at him and then nod. The woman didn't seem happy, so Deacon smiled when she glanced over at him again. He wasn't sure if it helped, but he tried. He found out later that Sandra told the woman his Mom had died and that he needed a friend, which explained the weird glance the woman gave him when he waved.

He tried to tell Sandra he didn't mind waiting until she got off, but she insisted she wanted to get out of there anyway. He glanced at the little boy who shifted beside Sandra. He couldn't believe she was a mother. The more he played with the word in his head or out loud, it didn't make sense

He knew why Sandra hadn't told him. He hadn't spoken to her since that day in the park. Why hadn't Nana said anything? He figured what she'd say as an excuse if he'd asked her, and he could hear her voice talking to him. *It wasn't my business to give away*, she'd tell him.

Strangely enough, the three of them went to a park to talk. Deacon wondered if that was God's little joke on him. The sky still looked like it would rain later, but it stayed at bay. It wasn't anything similar to the park they'd talked in as teenagers with only open space and a few benches. This one was a real recreational area with a playground and sidewalks for people to stroll on.

Nate played on the jungle gym as they watched on.

"How are you a mom?" Deacon asked. His eyes stayed on Nate as he came down the slide.

Sandra laughed. "You want the logistics of baby making?"

"What? No." He laughed too. "That came out wrong. I meant to ask when you had him."

She stayed quiet so long that Deacon had to look over at her.

"I'm sorry," he said. "We don't have to talk about it."

"It's not that," she said. "You have all that stuff with your mom to deal with."

He was grateful she hadn't apologized about it like most people did earlier at the wake. There was nothing to apologize for. They hadn't killed her.

"Now you have to tell me," he said with a grin. "Anything to take my mind off of today."

"I wanted to come to the wake," she said. "I had to work, and then I couldn't find a sitter for Nate."

“Don't worry about it, Sandra. I know you would've been there if you could.” He looked down at his feet. “Please. Let's talk about something else. Anything else.”

“Nate's going to be three this year.” She waited after saying it, like she wanted him to understand something on his own.

“That means he was born not long after I went to college.” Deacon looked at Nate as he played with another boy, and he realized who Sandra's son resembled. “Patrick's his father.” It wasn't a question because he knew it was true.

“Yes,” she said. “I tried to tell you.”

“When?”

“The last day in the park. You ran away before I could tell you.”

“I didn't run.” His voice was solemn. He didn't even believe the words he said.

“Yeah, you did. But I don't blame you, Deacon. I shouldn't have told you like that.”

“That's why you were crying that night, why you were so upset. You realized you were pregnant.” She nodded, and he said, “I shouldn't have left you. That's why you called me and told me to meet you.”

“I needed someone to talk to who wasn't my mother or Cordy.” She kept her eyes on Nate as she talked. “You were the only friend I had.” She sounded sad as she said it.

The whole day involved people apologizing for things that weren't their fault. This was something that he could've helped if he hadn't been so blind and caught up in his own stupidity. He thought about that night and brought the scene back in his mind. The signs were there when she cried and shook so hard it made her appear fragile. All the times he tried to save her and he walked away when she actually needed him, wanted him to comfort her and tell her not to worry.

He turned all the way around so he faced her. "I'm sorry, Sandra. I was an idiot then. Probably still one now."

Her voice softened. "I'm not angry at you, Deacon. I was hurt at first, but never angry. So I forgive you."

"Thank you." He laughed when he said, "You didn't deny me being an idiot."

"Still thinking about that one," she said.

He shook his head at her, but he was grateful that they bantered back and forth like old times. "Where's Patrick now?" He hated that a trace of arrogance lingered in the question.

"Still jealous of him?" she teased.

He wanted to deny it, but what good would that do? "Maybe," he said. He wanted to smile through it, but he didn't.

“No need to be,” she said. “Patrick made it clear he wants nothing to do with his son. His father has been kind enough to send us money, but I think it's because he thinks we'll start something that'll ruin Patrick's political future.”

“Then Patrick is an ass,” Deacon said. “And so is his father.”

“That's one thing you were right about,” she said with laughter in her words.

“Good. Because you deserve better. You both do.”

“I appreciate that,” she said.

Her hand reached for his. It surprised him, but he relaxed as she held his hand between both of hers. When he looked at how her face shifted into a cheerful grin, it was like they hadn't been separated at all. The few years they were apart could have been days.

“I missed you, Deacon,” she said. “I really did.”

Sandra's hands were soft and so small that the two of them together could have been covered by one of his.

“I missed you too,” he said. “You have no idea.” He was tranquil at that moment when he saw their hands together. In that one move, Sandra turned their roles around. He needed saving this time, and she was there to help him.

*

The funeral was simple and sweet. Nana finally cried when they stayed after the ceremony and watched the men lower his mother into the ground. Deacon held on to Nana and tried to give her as much physical support as she needed from him.

He was surprised that Pastor Jones didn't come to the wake or the funeral, and it made him angry. It was no surprise that Nana didn't like him, so Deacon understood why he didn't preside over the funeral. The least the man could have done was shown his face. Deacon would've hated it, but at least he would've known that his mother's constant affection for the man hadn't been for nothing.

Nana had tables and chairs in their backyard for the reception. It made sense to Deacon because when he asked Nana why she never went to church, she used to tell him that her church existed outside. She felt at peace surrounded by the dogwood trees in the backyard, and maybe that was where she found her spirituality.

They were about to pray over the food when Pastor Jones arrived.

"God bless you, Mother Taylor," Pastor Jones said to Nana as he walked up.

Nana's mouth stood in a thin line, and Deacon knew that meant she was mad as hell.

"You're not welcome here," Nana said. She was tolerant of all of her daughter's church friends, except for him.

“Nonsense,” he said. “It’s a pleasure.” It was like he didn’t hear her or only heard what he wanted to hear.

Deacon stood up and walked over to him. It had been a few years since he’d seen him, and Deacon had grown taller since then. He outgrew the man he hated. “She said she doesn’t want you here, Jones,” Deacon said. He could sense anger flaring up in him.

“That’s Pastor Jones to you, son.” The man puffed his chest up as if daring Deacon to do something.

Deacon wanted so badly to punch him. It was nothing less than the man deserved for hitting Deacon before, for hurting his mother, and for being a damn hypocrite, but the fool wasn’t worth it. “I’ve told you before. I’m not your son. Please leave as my grandmother said, or you’ll only be dishonoring my mother and making a fool of yourself.”

“I’ve come to pay my respects like everyone else,” he said. He said it like he knew he belonged there.

“Then you would’ve been at her wake yesterday or even at her funeral today. Where were you then?”

“I was doing God’s work,” he said. “I’m here to continue His work.”

“If that’s true, then great. But today you need to go do it somewhere else.” Deacon’s voice sounded more confident than he felt, but he didn’t waver from the confrontation. He stared back at the pastor and tried not to blink.

Pastor Jones looked like he wanted to say something, but Nana stood up and stared at him too. Deacon saw Pastor Jones shrink back even though he was taller than her. She didn't have to say anything to him, but he still turned and walked away.

As Pastor Jones left, Deacon heard him say, "I cared for her too." The words sounded as if a whining child had spoken rather than a man who loved his mother.

Deacon was sure the church and the neighborhood would gossip about what happened between them and the pastor, but it didn't matter.

When everyone left, Nana went to her bedroom for a nap. Deacon thought about going out for a ride or a walk, but he traveled into his mother's bedroom instead. He realized he never really went in there when she was alive.

He sat on her bed in silence as the setting sun's light came through the blinds. His mother died in this room with her heart giving out on her. It was unexpected because she was only thirty-nine, only eighteen years older than him. They were going to have to go through her things soon, but he didn't have it in him to do it now or even the next day. He couldn't see how they could throw her things away or give them out as donations like she never existed. Wasn't that wrong?

A Bible sat on the nightstand. It was brown leather with gold-lined pages. It was one of the last things he would have picked up outside of a church, but

something hung out of the end that got his attention. He picked it up and opened the pages that held the placeholder.

The picture of his mother and him as a baby was frayed around the edges and worn down from being handled too often. He realized it was the similar to the picture he had in the box of photos Nana gave him. Instead of looking at the camera like in his photo, his mother held him in his arms and looked right at him. She held him close to her with a blanket wrapped around his small body. His picture was preserved with white borders that looked like it was close to being recently taken. This one had a yellowed border and showed its age.

As Deacon held the picture in his hands, he felt something inside him break loose. It was like something had been cut with a sharp pair of scissors, but it wasn't painful. It came to him as relief. It wasn't as simple as learning that his mother loved him. A part of him knew that she did love him in her own way. Instead, it was relief that her blind love of Pastor Jones hadn't made her forget Deacon. The picture was proof of that. She hadn't forgotten that he was her son. For the first time since her death, he cried. He cried for them both so he wouldn't forget.

APPENDIX A: CHARACTER/STORY TIMELINE

- 1945** – Bobby and Maybelle Taylor (Deacon’s grandparents) marry.
- Bobby age 27
 - Maybelle age 22
- 1954** – Sarah Taylor (Deacon’s mother) is born.
- Bobby age 36
 - Maybelle age 31
- 1955** – N/A
- Bobby age 37
 - Maybelle age 32
 - Sarah age 1
 - “Apple Orchards” story takes place.
- 1958** – Bobby dies at age 40.
- Maybelle age 35
 - Sarah age 4
 - Portions of “Fruitful Moments” story take place.
- 1972** – Deacon and Sandra (Deacon’s friend) are born.
- Maybelle age 49
 - Sarah age 18
 - Portions of “Fruitful Moments” story take place.
- 1978** – Deacon is introduced to church culture.
- Maybelle age 55
 - Sarah age 24
 - Deacon age 6
 - “Finding Sundays” and portions of “Fruitful Moments” stories take place.
- 1990** – Deacon and Sandra graduate high school.
- Maybelle age 67
 - Sarah age 36
 - Deacon age 18
 - Sandra age 18
 - “A Simple Profession” and “Riding” stories take place.
- 1994** – Sarah dies at 39.
- Maybelle age 70
 - Deacon age 21
 - Sandra age 21
 - “Answers” and “Remembering” stories take place.

APPENDIX B: WRITING LIFE ESSAY

I. From Reading to Writing

Words have always existed as powerful entities for me. One of my earliest memories as a child was watching the television show *Reading Rainbow*, which promoted literacy and the joy of reading in children. I'd tune in to each episode and sing along with the theme song: "Take a look, it's in a book, a reading rainbow." Every time it came on, I'd get a pen and paper to write down all the books I liked. Later that week, Ma would take me to the library to collect the books on my list. I'd come out with an armful of books, a smile on my face, and a set determination to dive into each one of them. It was thrilling.

My love of reading led me to write. Could I possibly create works that drew me in or come up with characters that stayed with my readers long after the last page ended? It wasn't until my undergraduate years that I took my first creative writing workshops. As a homeschool student, there were never any opportunities for me to try workshop or even attend a high school creative writing course.

My Intro to Creative Writing college course made me question whether or not I wanted to be a writer since I felt so out of my element. It wasn't until I read the work of my peers that I got more comfortable with the idea of writing poetry, fiction, and nonfiction. I grew up reading primarily genre books and classics. College was the first time I heard the word "literary." It confused me and made me question whether I could write character-based stories without thinking about genre plots or events. Looking for a true definition on the Internet only brought

about more confusion. No one could put a concrete meaning to the word. I found broad versions of what “literary” meant and felt that I was starting to grasp the idea of it within college creative writing. With each intermediate and advanced workshop course I took, I learned how literary writing worked. I focused on making my characters real and human enough so readers could relate to them.

I found out by taking my undergraduate courses that my writing strength came from the dialogue among my characters. I enjoyed watching people interact with one another. Some of my strongest writing came from my observation of others through their speech and nonverbal cues. I started listening to how people talked and the word choices they made. After taking script writing, I listened even closer to the dialogue in movies. Scripts force you to be meticulous in each word. Every syllable has to count, or it could drag the entire piece down. I don't feel like I have perfected the art of dialogue, but I pay more attention to this aspect of my writing above others.

When it comes to my weakest point of writing, I tend to hold back in composing detailed scenes and places. I learned this from the critiques I received from my peers and teachers over the last five years of workshops. I have grown in tackling this weakness, but sometimes I go so far inside my head to come up with the story that I forget that my readers can't see what I see unless I show them visually. I have to create the world for them before they can join in it. Compared to my first works of creative writing as an undergraduate and the work I produce now as a graduate student, I can see my growth. Detailed scenes and

settings may still stand as an issue for me in my future writing, but I learn as I go. Workshops have helped me to pay more attention to the reader's perspective so that I'm more aware of what they're getting or what they're missing.

It wasn't until I signed up for Honors-in-the-Major to complete an undergraduate thesis that my whole idea of writing was challenged. I found out that this was an opportunity for undergrads to experience graduate-level work to see if they could handle it before pursuing an expensive and intense advanced degree. Since part of my education came from being home-schooled, I had time to explore books that weren't on my reading list. I was fifteen when I chose to read Homer's *Iliad*. I was already fascinated with Greek mythology, so the story of the Trojan War pulled me in. The vivid portrayals of blood and gore among the battlefield shocked me, which was hard to do since I grew up with access to cable television. It was hard to believe that a classic, a name that sounds so dry and boring to a teenager, had so much graphic portrayals of war and its aftermath. The book stuck with me, and I didn't think about it again until I chose to pursue my undergraduate thesis.

I read *Helen of Troy* by Margaret George while in college and realized that most historical fiction accounts depicted Helen as a character, but few other women were given voices. I researched the classic plays of Euripides and Aeschylus and became intrigued by the mythological characters Clytemnestra, Helen's biological sister, and Cassandra, Helen's sister-in-law through marriage to Paris. These women were followed by stigmas and names that followed their

appearances in literature. Clytemnestra was known for committing adultery against Agamemnon while he was at war in Troy. She's also known for brutally killing him after his return home to Mycenae. Cassandra was portrayed as a hysterical madwoman. These two women became my central focus in my thesis. I had to find out through my own fictional account what could lead them to such names that stayed with them through literary history.

My research into their lives took more time than actual writing, but that allowed me to get inside their heads and feel what they could have felt had they existed. I discovered how overwhelming research for creative writing can be when you spend all your time delving up background info and not sitting down to actually write the story. I also learned that putting limits on extensive research helps and that the time spent looking into characters' backgrounds can help to make the story real to you as a writer and more realistic for your readers.

II. Literary Influences

My graduate reading in preparation for my thesis contained an eclectic collection of short stories, novels, essays, memoirs, poetry, classics, and writing guides. Each one contributed in my development of style, creativity, and craft. Although my focus during my graduate degree was directed towards fiction writing, genres outside my field also benefited my learning and writing.

Sherman Alexie's stories impacted me the most when it came to style and characterization. I was first introduced to Alexie in my undergraduate Native American literature class when I read his novel *Reservation Blues*, a story about Spokane Native Americans from a Washington Reservation and their journey after forming a blues band. Out of all of the other writers, I related to Alexie's writing style the most. He created human characters that had believable flaws, and I found a connection to them as a reader. One of the things that really stood out to me from *Reservation Blues* was his integration of song lyrics between the prose passages, which added a poetical rhythm to the novel. His writing was the first contemporary and literary author I read who broke the norm of fiction writing by integrating outside styles and genres.

Although my first introduction to Alexie was through his novel, his integrated short story collection, *The Lone Ranger and Tonto Fistfight in Heaven*, was the most influential in creating my own interlinked stories. Alexie blended tragedy and humor together well through his two main characters, Thomas Builds-the-Fire and Victor Joseph. Small moments in each character's life turn into memorable events in the stories told. These had strong themes of individuality and community, which I saw developing in my own collection as well. I also adopted some of Alexie's stylistic traits. He alternated between first and third person for his characters, especially for his main character Victor Joseph, but this switch didn't disrupt the development of his characters or the strength of the storytelling. For my main character Deacon, I wrote one story in first-person

perspective with all the rest of his stories in third-person narrative in order to have a stronger connection to the people around him, outside forces or events, and descriptions for Deacon's life. I also wrote both of Nana's, Deacon's grandmother, stories in first person. Out of all the characters in this collection, Deacon and Nana became my favorite to create and experiment with. I grew close to their characters as I wrote their stories, which made me want to explore their personalities in different narrative forms. Alexie's writing allowed me to view a structure my stories could take on for their integration to work well together and still stand strong on their own as individual stories.

I included works of nonfiction in my reading because they introduced a narrative focus for me to learn how to craft realistic settings and narrators. *The Glass Castle* by Jeanette Walls and *The Boys of My Youth* by Jo Ann Beard impacted me the most from nonfiction writing. Walls created vivid images of the settings she and her family traveled through with clear narration that read like fiction. From Beard's collection of essays, "The Fourth State of Matter" stayed with me the longest. Although she explored the events leading to a tragic college shooting, the story was about more than that. It explored the human condition in relation to how we respond to the events, and even the tragedies, in our lives. Beard and Walls provided a strong example of how events can shape characters by the decisions they make. In nonfiction, the stakes for capturing your reader are different since the truth is important. Still, the narrator needs to create a voice that readers can believe and follow throughout. Walls and Beard both created

strong narratives in their nonfiction, which I found to be important in telling any kind of story, whether it be fiction or nonfiction. Their narratives helped me to pay closer attention to my own characters voices and how I could best portray their stories.

From poetry, I discovered the importance of word choice and getting the most out of the sensory details created. Joseph Mills' *Angels, Thieves, and Winemakers* and Joy Harjo's *In Mad Love and War* were two of the collections of poetry I read as a graduate student that contributed to the way I learned to see my own writing. As an undergraduate, I was afraid to experiment with unconventional narration. One example of this came in the use of fragments to show character expression. I didn't want to write anything that wasn't a complete sentence. Harjo's poetry plays with lines, rhythms, and structure. Because poetry is shorter than fiction and nonfiction, each word counts. Harjo's poetry allowed me to see how language can be played with and restructured in order to create a stronger piece of work, while Mills explored the same through themed poems. Both artists created imagery that leaves memorable impressions with the reader. I found that their attention to sensory details helped in three of my own stories: "The Apple Orchard," "Fruitful Moments," and "A Simple Profession." These three stories focus strongly on sensory details for setting and story construction. They also utilize words with poetical influences like Harjo and Mills' works, which allowed me to learn from their language styles in order to transfer similar traits into my fiction writing.

III. Church Life Inspiration

The completion of my undergraduate thesis helped in preparing me for my graduate thesis, but it also made choosing a topic to explore difficult. I originally planned to continue the Trojan War by writing Clytemnestra's prequel story. There was so much I'd left out that I wanted to explore. For my first graduate workshop, I wrote "Finding Sundays." This story introduced Deacon as a character and explored a sample of the church life I was exposed to growing up. I chose Deacon to narrate this in first person because it comes out as unique experience when narrated from a child's perspective. As a child, church was scary for me. People would speak in words I didn't understand and others would fall to the ground after being prayed for. I learned as I grew up in the church what these actions meant, but that didn't make them any less scary to me. I wanted to show the fear and mystery of church from a child's point of view, which brought me to create the story. This story is the only one that has his voice in first person because I found it crucial to the story. His following appearances come through third-person narration so I could explore the characters around him even more.

After creating Deacon, I played with the idea of creating other church-related short stories. I wasn't sure how I wanted to go about it, but some inspirations came from "A Good Man is Hard to Find" by Flannery O'Connor.

Religion doesn't make an appearance until the end when the grandmother pleads for her life, but it still impacted me. Although there's not a strong religious theme, I wondered how Jesus or God could make an appearance in a story that has such a dark ending. It brought back the universal question: Why does God let bad things happen? This question could have expanded to why does God let bad things happen to good people, but none of the characters in the story are necessarily good. My characters and stories didn't take a dark turn like O'Connor's, but it allowed me to explore challenges that could happen to my own characters and discover how being human means that characters have flaws.

I saw how some of my stories overlapped after I created Deacon's first story. Darlin' Neal, my committee chair, recommended that I create integrated stories. This challenged me since I'd never written stories with intentional connections before. I knew that I wanted my characters to be connected through church, but I didn't want the stories to be mainly about church or religion. Instead, church culture played in the background and stood as something that existed around them as the characters lived out their lives. My goal in writing this collection of short stories was to explore how the lives of the members of a church and small Southern town were challenged inside and outside of the religious setting through their search for personal identities and belonging. Identity stood out as the first theme because it related to individual characters. Through their link to the church, each character decides whether to accept that connection, deny it, or show indifference to it.

Some of the hardest things I faced were continuity and voice. I didn't have issues with continuity until I allowed myself to let go in my writing. I played with characters and the world that surrounded them by creating my own town, Hickory Springs, Virginia. It wasn't until I had my characters grow with the time changes of each story that I paid close attention to continuity of the years and their ages throughout the collection's progression. Small details, like suitable cars for the time period and how they matched each driver's personality, became important. Although the history of this collection is not that far into the past compared to the Trojan War, each story impacted the collection's structure.

I didn't have issues with voice until I gave Nana life beyond Deacon's first story. I loved her as a character, and readers in workshop agreed that she was a woman who stood out to them. I had to actively think more when writing her stories than I did for the others because Nana is the only character who exists from the beginning of the collection's timespan up to the end. Overthinking Nana's role placed a distance between me and her true voice. It wasn't until I gave her two separate stories, "The Apple Orchard" and "Fruitful Moments," that I felt her true narrative voice reveal itself.

Composing this selection of short stories showed me how important characterization is to storytelling. I became close to my characters, and I got to learn their strengths and weaknesses, the things that made them human. As I came to the end of my thesis, I was brought back to my initial love of literature as a child. I don't think my urge to write would have existed without a passion for

reading. The two go together equally. In order to be a strong writer, you have to read what's out there to know how to tell a good story. This process allowed me to see how close I can get to my characters as a writer and make them more realistic within their stories. I'm not sure where I will be in my writing in the future, but I have learned how to advance my writing style so I can be prepared and ready for whatever literary avenue I connect to from here on.

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