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# **Not Knowing the Days**

**A Thesis Presented for the  
Master of Arts  
Degree  
The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga**

**Jennifer G. Davis  
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Dedication:

The stories that appear would not have been possible without:  
Jeremy Davis, Jodie Branum, Kenny & Diana Fleshman, and my siblings.

They have offered themselves willingly (and sometimes unwittingly) as character fodder and/or emotional support.

This collection is dedicated to them.  
Thanks guys.

## Abstract

This thesis consists of a collection of three short stories and the chapter of my first novel, as well as a critical introduction addressing the literary and creative contexts of the work. The pieces encompass a range of themes, but I have paid particular attention to perspective, perception, and a feeling of displacement or incongruity with society. In the introduction, I discuss the Southern Gothic genre in literature and how several of its characteristics have shaped the stories in my collection as well as my writing in general, especially verisimilitude and the grotesque.

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## Introduction

I drew inspiration for this thesis collection from Flannery O'Connor, one of the most prominent Southern Gothic writers. She set her stories in a world that is tirelessly contested, the American South, but which enjoys a history that never seems to fade. As Patricia Yaeger observes in her article, "Ghosts and Shattered Bodies, or What Does It Mean to Still be Haunted by Southern Literature?": "We live in a world that is haunted, knows it is haunted, and denies its own hauntedness" (87). Her point is that Southerners are still plagued by ghosts of antebellum ideals such as narrow views on gender, race, and religion. This idea of a haunted South—partially inspired by O'Connor's famous line, "while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted" (O'Connor 44)—permeates scholarship on the subject. It seems as though the South is perpetually doomed to be the subject of intense metaphysical consideration.

Two important influences on the Southern Gothic genre come from very different sources. The first of these is northern travel writers of the post-Reconstruction era. Rebecca McIntyre's essay, "Promoting the Gothic South," studies the ways in which these travel writers essentially created the image of a Gothic South long before O'Connor or Faulkner even existed. In particular, she talks about the swamp imagery popular among travel magazines:

For the well-to-do northerners, the boggy, overgrown southern wetlands offered the perfect dark adventure. For these Victorians, taking a boat ride down a swampy southern river was a thrilling escape into the unknown, a peep show of the grotesque, a blending of the realistic and the fantastic, which thrilled in a strange and disturbing way. (47)

The second influence is stranger yet. Maria Bloshteyn's article, "Dostoevsky and the Literature of the American South," examines Fyodor Dostoevsky as a key influence on Southern Gothic writers. She attributes such similarities in mentality to the similarities in the Civil War and Crimean War, slavery/serfdom, industrial backwardness and "the way in which both southern states and Russia claimed God as their ultimate champion in their wars" (3-4). She further observes that the "depiction of society in crisis that is found in Dostoevsky's novels thus had the potential to be especially meaningful to southern readers" (6). Bloshteyn's article centers on the idea that shared misery (with the belief in human redemption) provided a basis for Dostoevsky to become highly influential among Southern Gothic writers.

In 1982, Charles P. Roland published an article called "The Ever-Vanishing South," in which he talks about the idea of the South as a separate entity, one which many believed had faded as the borders between North and South grew ever hazier. Nearly thirty years later, many of Roland's observations and assertions still hold true. Right from the start, he notes: "The South has traditionally been regarded as the black sheep of the American community—a willful, delinquent child who has somehow failed to shape up to the national standards" (3). He goes on to say, "Even more ignominious, perhaps, [Southerners] were the only Americans who had known the travail and humiliation of being conquered and subjected to military occupation" (4).

O'Connor's characters subconsciously cling to this feeling of "travail and humiliation," and it's a common feature in many Southern Gothic stories. Nearly a full century after Reconstruction, O'Connor's characters still evince insecurities about being Southern. One such example is Mrs. Shortley in "The Displaced Person." One of Mrs. Shortley's first (and most telling) observations comes when a Polish family moves into the farm where she and her husband work: "If they had come from where that kind of thing was done to them, who was to

say that they were not the kind that would also do it to others?" (196). It's a line that strikes on two levels, hitting both the inherent racism and xenophobia of Mrs. Shortley and the larger question of Southern bigotry.

But O'Connor is uncovering something about Southerners in the mid-twentieth century that goes beyond mere bigotry. If Roland's assessment is valid, then it makes sense that a fear of "Otherness" would be a natural outcome of being Southern—being Others to the rest of the nation, Southerners naturally project this fear onto someone (or thing) they don't understand. What I took from O'Connor's characters is the sense of displacement they feel, something I struggle with as a twenty-first century Southerner. I don't "feel" like a "Southerner"—meaning I don't feel like the stereotypes and exaggerations depicted by Non-Southerners (as outlined in McIntyre's article). But clearly, I live in a part of the nation that, to summarize Roland and Yaeger, still carries with it the subconscious burden of a turbulent past. And this is at the heart of the Southern Gothic.

In "Some Aspects of the Grotesque in Southern Fiction," O'Connor lays out substantial arguments regarding verisimilitude, the grotesque, and how a Southern writer's perspective differs from other writers' perspectives. "Verisimilitude" is a word touted throughout creative writing programs and craft books, and what it means—the likeness or appearance of truth versus the literal truth—is much easier to define than to achieve. A writer can describe the layout of a house in great realistic detail without succeeding in achieving the feeling of the real. O'Connor points out that writers can draw on their sense of place to enhance verisimilitude, but this too has its risks. In "Writing Short Stories," O'Connor argues, "There is nothing worse than the writer who doesn't *use* the gifts of the region, but wallows in them" (104). A writer can toss in a few "y'alls" into her dialogue, but it won't make them Southern. Transcription never makes a story.

Combining concrete details with touches of exaggeration (but not so much that it's garish and unnatural) leads to more convincing fiction.

In *The Art of Fiction*, John Gardner argues, "In any piece of fiction, the writer's first job is to convince the reader that the events he recounts really happened, or to persuade the reader that they might have happened (given small changes in the laws of the universe)" (22). This is essentially the function of verisimilitude. He goes on to observe that even the most literal of writing, straight autobiographical events, will seem false if certain details are left out: "The fact that the story is true of course does not relieve the novelist of the responsibility of making the characters and events convincing" (23). A writer convinces through use of concrete detail, which he says is the "life blood of fiction" (26). Several examples from O'Connor's "The Displaced Person" illuminate the necessity of concrete detail for verisimilitude.

The story opens with a description of Mrs. Shortley observing the welcome ceremony of her landlady's new hired help, a Polish refugee. The man kisses his new employer's hand, much to the surprise and chagrin of Mrs. Shortley:

Mrs. Shortley jerked her own hand up to her mouth and then after a second brought it down and rubbed it vigorously on her seat. If Mr. Shortley had tried to kiss her hand, Mrs. McIntyre would have knocked him into the middle of next week, but then Mr. Shortley wouldn't have kissed her hand anyway. He didn't have time to mess around. (195)

The passage works in two ways. Through Mrs. Shortley's bigoted perception, we understand the immediate culture difference. The Polish refugee, Mr. Guizac, and his family are outsiders, and Mrs. Shortley spends the remainder of the short story convinced that they have brought with them the terror of Nazi-occupied Poland. On another level, O'Connor characterizes

her people so well that we have no trouble believing any of their successive actions. Mrs. Shortley's prejudice, her husband's indifference, Mrs. McIntyre's willingness to accept people as long as they do the work she hires them for, and even Mr. Guizac's humility in his new environment—all of these are characterized in a very short paragraph that allows for the action to follow.

Combining the grotesque with verisimilitude, O'Connor presents the story of an ineffectual youth with too much to prove in "Enoch and the Gorilla." The protagonist, Enoch, "wanted to better his condition. He wanted, some day, to see a line of people waiting to shake his hand" (112). So he steals the gorilla costume from a travelling performer and runs away to the outskirts of his city, ditching his clothes and putting on the bulky suit. The narrator observes: "Burying his clothes was not a symbol to him of burying his former self; he only knew he wouldn't need them any more" (115). The outlandishness of the story is not jarring, and we can believe that someone would act this way because O'Connor has painted Enoch justly. In the opening of the story, we learn that his whole life has been filled with intense disappointment, including being made a fool by his own father at four years old (109). So the outcome of the story, his successful robbery and subsequent transformation into the powerful Gongga, seems appropriate and deserved. Never mind the ridiculousness of the situation; it is compensated for by verisimilitude.

O'Connor begins "Some Aspects of the Grotesque" by noting, "I think that if there is any value in hearing writers talk, it will be in hearing what they can witness to and not what they can theorize about" (36). Her point is that a lot of theory abounds on how to write, what goes into writing, and what writers think about writing. But when it comes down to it, after all has been said about the subject that needs to be said, a writer has to write. It seems an unnecessary

statement, but as O'Connor points out in a different essay, "I hope you realize that your asking me to talk about writing is like asking a fish to talk about swimming" (qtd in "Writing Short Stories" 87). Her use of the word "witness" is particularly interesting because it brings up two different connotations.

On the one hand, writers must "witness" in the sense that they observe what's going on and, rather than transcribing exact reality, transform the experience into something that seems true—hence verisimilitude. On the other hand, to "witness" suggests a religious connotation, which further implies that one of the writer's purposes is to uncover the nature of things through those observations. Of course, this is largely subconscious. No good writer sits down to write great truths; great truths just exist, and if they appear in a story, it is up to the reader to find them.

The writing "process," however that's defined and whatever it may mean, is as mysterious as what ends up on the page. In my experience, I find the more determined I am to capture something—a memory, a conversation, the precise texture of a Panama hat—the less organic it becomes. To properly write with verisimilitude, I have to find whatever it is that drives me as a person; otherwise, it won't ever seem real. O'Connor describes this as a tendency to destroy, that writers have to find a balance between what is real and what is supposition. She notes that "in order not to destroy, [the writer] will have to descend far enough into himself to reach those underground springs that give life to his work" ("Some Aspects" 50). Verisimilitude depends on real life, real experience, transformed into sympathetic content. And this is at the heart of writing.

Writing is an art, but it's not an ethereal one. It's hard work. It's hardest for me when the subject is too close to my own personal life. If I give a character certain qualities that resemble a person I know, I get bored quickly, and the end result is a flat copy of a vibrant personality. The

same is true of plot, story, action, tone, and any other number of terms craft books toss out left and right. O'Connor addressed a similar issue in her essay: "We have become so flooded with sorry fiction based on unearned liberties, or on the notion that fiction must represent the typical, that in the public mind the deeper kinds of realism are less and less understandable" ("Some Aspects" 39). This isn't to say that exciting fiction is dead or that the future of short story writers is hanging by a thread; rather, this is to note that sometimes we might fall victim to writing for audiences instead of writing what needs to be written.

I live in a South that is entirely different from the South that exists in O'Connor's short stories, but it is also possible (and likely) that her South never existed, either. Perception plays a huge role in determining genre, place, and verisimilitude. What's important to me is establishing a sense of place and how I fit into the wider framework. Speaking of the tendency for grotesque characters to be seen as disjointed, she said, "Yet the characters have an inner coherence, if not always a coherence to their social framework" ("Some Aspects" 40).

Conflicted characters are at the heart of good fiction, and given the metaphysical considerations of the Southern Gothic in particular, they are often the crux of the issues. Kevin Wilson's *Tunneling to the Center of the Earth* offers a contemporary evolution of the Southern Gothic mode. He pays particular attention to a growing sense of horror juxtaposed with ever-present hope; almost all of the stories in this collection include an element of the grotesque that both terrifies and amuses. In "The Museum of Whatnot," a young woman works at an oddities museum, both out of place in her social framework and somehow a part of the bizarre collection of spoons and office supplies. At one point she observes: "Usefulness is the key, finding ways to make things fit, but there is only so much that a person needs" (182). The displacement she feels

summarizes the heart of his collection as well as my own. She doesn't seem to fit—in her own time, in her own skin—and she is on a search to find out where she might belong.

Wilson's work also emphasizes the evolutionary aspect of the Southern Gothic. Like every literary genre and form, it changes with time. Unlike other genres, though, it never offered guidelines to follow. Flannery O'Connor did not position her characters into a mold and then shape them accordingly. Likewise, Kevin Wilson's work testifies to the fact that such a genre is not based on accepted standards but is rather a means for viewing (and addressing) specific regional concerns, in this case the South. In the collection that follows, I have also used the Southern Gothic mode as a way to reflect on my position as a Southern writer, but I would not consider myself a Southern Gothic writer. Not all stories set in a city like Charleston can be considered "Southern Gothic," and not all stories written by a Southerner can even be labeled "Southern." I have not necessarily assigned myself to this genre, but the influence of Flannery O'Connor, Lewis Nordan, and Kevin Wilson is evident. Grotesque characters, horrific circumstances, and a surprising humor that envelopes everything are the elements I have appropriated and incorporated into my stories.

It's impossible to go backwards, and this collection of stories does not fit exactly into the Southern Gothic mode but rather reflects the major characteristics. As a twenty-first century Southern writer, my work reflects the influence of the Southern Gothic in its portrayal of the bizarre or otherworldly, its religious overtones, and the grotesque. My collection reflects those who've written before me as well as those who still write. I believe in many of the facets of the Southern Gothic genre; e.g., I believe that humans are inherently flawed but salvageable. "[Anthony Di Renzo] writes, 'like Dostoevsky, O'Connor believes that her characters need to experience suffering firsthand if they are ever to become authentic in an unjust world. The pain

of being mortal and vulnerable is the one thing that teaches them pity and humility' (qtd. in Bloshteyn 15). My characters represent this ideal in their weaknesses and inner turmoil, the result of which is acceptance or rejection of the thing that could save them.

## Mulligan Corn Loses His Finch

It was a wet Sunday in early March. The sun hid behind inconsistent clouds, and Roger liked it. He stood on the corner of Vine and Hamilton, wiping his glasses on the cuff of his jumpsuit. Last night's rain had left the ground soggy. Animals were restless, anticipating another shower. Roger noted with satisfaction how many houses had pets, and which of these were most likely to escape once the spring really got going. So far no one had posted any signs, but he didn't worry. It would pick up soon enough. He set the glasses back on his nose and took off his backpack, readjusting the contents. The first neighborhood had lacked signs, too, but he knew it was only a matter of time before Mrs. Tinkles or Baxter went missing. Today he'd found a gerbil, but he didn't plan on keeping it. Gerbils and the like were worth about twenty bucks to the right owner, but he usually didn't meddle with them. They just weren't worth the effort.

This gerbil was fat. It took up nearly the whole plastic ball he used for small animals. If things got bad—and they had recently; February had seen a significant drop in lost pets—then he'd pull him out. But for now he would stick him in the terrarium at his apartment with the others. He put the backpack on and turned around. A man stood across the street from him, grinning. As Roger turned to face him, the man put up his hand in an awkward wave.

“Hello there,” he called.

Roger looked up and down the street. They were alone. He hadn't seen a car all morning. He nodded to the man and started walking in his direction.

The man had glasses, which was something Roger always noticed first about people. He also wore a long-sleeved T-shirt and a pair of pin-striped pants with red suspenders. There were tiny embroidered Santa hats along the edge of them. He needed a shave, but his long hair had

been pulled back into a clean ponytail. Roger tried to walk past him with another small nod, but the man spoke again.

“Fine day,” he said.

Roger stopped and turned. “Sure is.”

“You got a minute?”

“Actually, I need to be somewhere.”

“It’s a small thing. I just need some help with a bird.”

Roger shifted the weight on his legs. “Don’t see how I could help you there.”

The man smiled wide. “Isn’t that your thing?”

“No, sir.” Roger backed up a few paces. “Listen, I’ve got this thing. Is there someone you could call? Do you need me to call someone?”

“I don’t need to call anyone,” said the man.

Roger looked around again. He wanted a car to pass through, something loud and distracting. Nothing happened. The man continued to grin. Finally, he cleared his throat. “I think I should go.”

“But what about my bird?”

“Don’t know anything about birds,” he said quickly.

The man shook his head. “That’s not what I hear.”

He put his hand in his pocket and extracted a weathered business card. He held it out, and Roger took it. MULLIGAN R. CORN, ATTORNEY. Roger looked at the card for fifteen long seconds, then held it back out to him, shaking his head. “I’m not getting mixed up in anything. I don’t need this.” He shoved it back at the man and half-jogged out of earshot, looking back over his shoulder to see whether he was still there. Then he sprinted all the way back to his apartment.

By the time he made it to the stairs, a heavy storm had started up. Thick splotches of rain pelted him as he climbed the steps, and he collided with Mrs. Hagerton on the second landing. She'd been carrying a plastic bag, and the contents spilled out all over the staircase.

"Dammit," he said. He crouched down, his chest heaving from the impromptu run.

"Sorry, Mrs. Hagerton."

"Where were you running from?" she said. Her voice was cracked but stern. She stood four foot eight with pumps on.

Roger scrambled around, stuffing knickknacks back into the bag for her. "Here you go." He thrust the bag to her, but she didn't take it immediately.

"I asked you a question."

"Just take the bag," he said. He stood up and adjusted his backpack.

"I seen you sometimes, taking them animals inside. I told the super about it but he don't mind other people's business. It's a shame, I say. I say we stick our noses in people's business, maybe there wouldn't be so much of this running around with guns, shooting people up."

Roger looked at her. She had large round eyes, too big for the small face and pointed chin. They were dark and colorless. "I rescue animals, Mrs. Hagerton."

"Hmph," she said. "I don't think so. I seen you carry them in. What are you really doing?"

"Told you. I help people find their pets." He held the bag out to her, but she folded her arms.

"I am seventy-one, Roger Evans. I know when you go to church and when you don't. You can't fool a woman like me."

"Just take your bag, please."

Finally she took it, but she held her pose. “I ought to call the police.”

“For what?” he said.

“Ain’t right, kidnapping animals and holding them for ransom.”

Roger exhaled loudly through his nose. “Mrs. Hagerton, those animals are already lost when I find them. They’d stay lost if it weren’t for me.”

Mrs. Hagerton scrunched up her eyes and glared at him. After several terrifying seconds, she grinned. “One day you’ll get what’s coming,” she said. Then she continued her way down the staircase, her tiny heels clacking against each step with emphasis.

The rain poured on, thundering against the tin roof of the complex. He leaned back against the landing wall and breathed through his nose. He wished he had a paper bag with him. Those always seemed to help in the movies. He’d been in the business for about five years, and no one had paid him any mind before. Now all of a sudden it was a crime to return pets to their owners. He stood up and looked around. He couldn’t shake the feeling that someone was watching him. He needed to talk to someone. Or a glass of milk. He ran his fingers through his thinning hair and made his way back to his apartment.

It was a small place, but comfortable. It had a kitchen that melded into a living room area; sometimes on the weekends, he’d get friends together and use the wrap-around bar to serve bad drink mixes. It made him feel like a swinger, though he never could manage to entice any women into the place. None he really wanted to see anyway. His brother brought some occasionally, but they were the worn-down kind. They wore scuffed platform shoes and drank whiskey straight with cherries in the glasses. He had no use for them.

He’d taken it up after his mom died, right around the time he entered the business of collecting pets for ransom. There was one bedroom and a small office area where he kept

cardboard crates full of past jobs. He could pull in anywhere from three to fifteen hundred dollars a week, but most weeks it was somewhere in the middle. He usually only hit the expensive neighborhoods. Experience taught him that rich people tended to lose things more often—it's hard to keep up with an animal if you've got other luxury items to care about. Naturally, they paid more, too. Little Miss Sprinkles was worth about a hundred bucks to the right family. When he'd first started, the idea was to collect as many animals as possible and return them as quickly as he could. Over the years, he'd perfected the art. Now he could hold an animal for up to a month if he wanted, and the patience usually paid out. After a month, most people either gave up or got desperate; that's when the real money came in. Desperate signs went up, rewards increased, and that's when Roger knew he had them.

He sat down in his office chair and let the silence of the apartment surround him. The outside world was too noisy, too full of clutter. Mulligan R. Corn. What kind of nonsense name was that? He'd lost a bird—Roger didn't do birds. They were too restless. He'd started off with a mission to rescue any animal he came across, but that didn't hold up for long. People didn't miss birds too often anyway. You couldn't cuddle with one, couldn't walk it or expect it to come when you called. The only thing worse than a bird was a fish, but at least fish didn't make any noise.

The sound of keys in the door meant his brother was home from church. Roger put away his backpack—unceremoniously tossing the gerbil into its tank—and went into the living room.

“How was it?” he asked.

Sam smiled as he hung up his jacket. “Just fine. Mary Lynn said to tell you hi.”

“Hm,” said Roger. “Mrs. Hagerton wasn't there.”

“Nope. How'd you know?”

“Ran into her on the stairs. She said something weird, the hag.”

Sam shook his head and headed into the kitchen. “She’s just an old lady. What’d she say?” He grabbed a mug and started making instant coffee.

“She said one day I’d get what was coming to me. Can you believe that? Like I’m some sort of criminal. I ran into a nut job over off Vine this morning. Complete wacko.”

“Sounds like a day,” said Sam. He sipped his coffee. “Dad came today.”

Roger didn’t say anything. He hadn’t spoken to his dad since the funeral for his mom, and that had been a short conversation, barely worth remembering.

Sam continued. “He said he wanted to talk to us soon, something about cleaning out the attic—”

“I don’t want anything to do with him,” said Roger. He sank into the couch and let his head rest on the back of the sofa. “He can die alone in that house for all I care.”

Sam sat down beside him. “He is getting lonelier. I can see it. Maybe he just wants family around now that mom’s gone.”

“He had chance enough before.”

They sat in silence for a while after that, but finally Sam dropped the subject altogether. “What did the man want? The one you met?”

“He wanted me to find his bird. That’s the weirdest part. It’s like he knew who I was.”

“You going to do it?”

“I don’t find birds.”

Sam shrugged. “You said yourself business was slow. Maybe you need to start broadening your horizons.”

Roger grunted and leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “Yeah, maybe I need to start taking jobs from all the loonies I come across. Then I’d be rich.”

“It doesn’t hurt to try. Did you find anything on the poles today?”

Roger didn’t answer. He pulled out the business card and handed it to Sam, who studied it for a few seconds before saying, “If he’s an attorney, he’s probably got some cash at least.”

“What kind of attorney wears red suspenders?”

“The kind who’s willing to get his bird found. There’s an address here. Give him a visit.”

Roger twiddled the card in his hands. Business had been slow, that was sure, but this guy gave him the willies. He reminded him of someone, but he couldn’t peg it exactly. Something about the heavy jaw line and pencil-thin eyebrows. But the image was blurry at best. Roger shoved the card back into his pocket.

He zipped up his jumpsuit and grabbed his backpack. “I need to see about this,” he said. Sam only nodded, and Roger left.

The rain had let up some, but the ground still squelched under his feet as he walked through the park and onto the main road. The town was never busy on Sundays, and today was no exception. A church group was out, huddled in groups under a tent that had been hastily set up once the rain started. He recognized a few of his neighbors but didn’t acknowledge them.

He pulled out the business card and read it again. It was on Ewe Street—almost nothing of any value was on that street. Besides his brother’s salon, there wasn’t much in the whole area worth visiting. The sun was low now, still hiding behind a thick layer of clouds. He felt the hairs on his arm stand up as the afternoon air blew in, chilly after the clammy morning. The rain had stopped. The street was empty. He looked up and down it before setting off. His determined marching echoed off the pavement around him.

Ewe Street held old shops the city had never had the heart to tear down. Roger passed three dress shops still advertising styles from a couple decades back, a fish restaurant with a Health Inspector's seal of disgrace plastered on its boarded-up window, and one liquor store that appeared to be open but in ruins. At the end of the street there was a one-storied brick building with no sign of any kind, and Roger knew he'd found the right place. An old station wagon sat in the wide open lot, which reminded him that he should've driven over here. Night would swoop in suddenly, and this was a place that had never known street lights.

He walked up the stoop and pushed the buzzer. Mulligan Corn answered almost immediately, and Roger backed up a few paces. He was dressed as before with the addition of a plaid scarf.

"Hello there," he said, a smile crawling onto his whiskered face. "Welcome."

He stepped back to allow Roger inside. Once the door was shut, he stood in the hall and looked up at Roger expectantly. "Did you bring your supplies?" he said.

"What do you mean?"

"Your rescue supplies—I thought you would have them with you."

Roger frowned and looked around him. The hall was short and led into a small circular room crowded with cages and old-fashioned trunks. Rolled-up carpets lined the walls, along with ottomans and stools that didn't match anything else in the room. Empty picture frames sat on dusty coffee tables. Roger shook his head. "You called me here. You know my name, you know what I do. What is it you want, Mr. Corn?"

"Nothing mysterious about it, if that's what you're implying. I'm a meat and potatoes kinda guy." He looped his thumbs through his suspenders. Roger felt the weight of his legs more distinctly and couldn't have run if he'd tried.

He shook his head. “Like hell you are. Just tell me what you need and let me go.”

Corn opened his mouth but said nothing. Finally, he cleared his throat and said, “I’ve seen you bring animals back to their owners, sometimes animals that were lost for weeks.”

“So?”

“So I need your help. I lost my pet.”

Roger relaxed some. So this guy was crazy and his house was a wreck; he’d dealt with worse. If all he wanted was a pet found, then it wasn’t as bad as it could be. “Why didn’t you say so this morning then? Why act like some kind of ghost if that’s all you need?”

“I lost him somewhere that—well, maybe it isn’t so easy to find him.”

Roger folded his arms. “And where might that be?”

“A field.”

Corn said nothing else. He merely looked at Roger expectantly, but Roger didn’t know how to respond. In a house like this, with a man like this, he might expect something magical to happen. He didn’t normally believe in such things. He expected the house to turn into the field or for time to shift suddenly, transport him to another realm. But the clock on the wall ticked on resolutely familiar. Fifteen after two. He wondered what his next move should be—name a price? He had never spoken to an owner looking for a pet before he brought it to them.

Corn coughed. “He’s a blue zebra finch. His name is Claude.”

At this Roger uncrossed his arms and shook his head. “I don’t look for birds. I tried it a few times, they never can be caught, and that’s if I find them.”

“I just need him back. He’s the only one in my life I care about. And I’ll pay you five thousand dollars.”

Roger laughed out loud. “You think I’m some kind of idiot? Just ‘cause I catch pets for a living don’t mean I was born yesterday.”

Corn looked at him through those thick round glasses. They were a deep red, almost black but not quite. “I am a hundred percent serious.”

Roger couldn’t laugh again. He felt deep down that Mulligan Corn would pay him a ludicrous amount of money to catch his bird, but he didn’t say anything more about it. Instead, he straightened up and folded his arms again.

“It’ll be an adventure,” said Corn.

Roger wondered how long it would take Corn to recover if he just shoved him and ran, but still he stood in the doorway. At least the door wasn’t closed. “Mr. Corn, you’re a complete wacko.”

“I’ve been called it a few times. But I mean it. Don’t you want life to be more than it is?”

A coldness filled his lungs and expanded, spreading like glue into his veins. He simultaneously thought of his mother’s casket—closed, final—and the smell of his apartment when he first moved in. His father had stood alone the whole time during her funeral, his hands clasped together, face down. When Roger approached him, it took a full minute for his father to acknowledge his presence.

“Time you boys moved out,” he said.

“But Dad—”

“You are twenty-seven years old. ‘Bout time.”

“Sam’s not out of school. And I ain’t had a job in months.”

“Not my problem. A bird don’t shove his chicks out the nest, nothing gets done. You want to live out your while life as useless as dirt? Then get going, and take your brother with you. Figure out something to do and do it.”

“How long do we have?”

“Soon as you find someplace. Don’t care where, just someplace else.” Then he looked up, directly into Roger’s face for the first time in years. “Don’t you want to do something? Get out of this town? All you ever do is cling to things, like those animals you keep. I suppose you got it from your mom—and look where she ended up.”

His mind raced now, blurring images of his former pets with the ones he ransomed now. He hadn’t spoken to his father since, not even on Christmases or birthdays. Sam talked to him occasionally on Sundays, but he never reported those conversations. Eventually Roger stopped bothering with church; the stares from the congregation irked him.

He tapped his foot against the hardwood floor and looked down at his feet. “I don’t want much. Never have.”

Corn put his hand on Roger’s shoulder, and Roger snapped to attention, backing into the foyer wall. “Don’t,” he said.

“All I want is my bird.”

Roger waited for Corn to pull out a knife or threaten him, but it didn’t come. They stood there like this for thirty seconds, Roger counting it out in his head slowly. Time didn’t seem to matter much here. He thought about Sam, about what he needed to tell him before he died. This was ridiculous. It was just a rescue, that’s all. He swallowed audibly. “And where’s the field?”

He expected Corn to lead him through a portal from his shabby little house. Instead, Corn smiled again and clapped his hands. “This means a lot to me, it really does. The field’s about five

miles out, heading toward Deyersville but not so far as the exit, if you know what I mean.

There's a turn off just before—wide dirt one, shouldn't be hard to see. I lost Claude about a week ago.”

Roger shook his head. “Mr. Corn, I ain't promising things.”

“You'll do your best.”

They stood there for several seconds before Roger felt the spell of the low light break; his feet could move again, so he left. He took a few uneasy steps in the direction of his apartment complex, then his nerves released the tension that had built all the time he stood in Corn's hall, and he sprinted the whole way back.

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The field might have been any other field he'd ever driven past without noticing. It was wet this time of year, green and soggy. The grass had been left unattended for years, being a matter of public property and public unconcern. Here and there, little openings in the knee-high grass showed ponds developing as a result of all the rain. But today was a clear day. The sun stood firm, and the few clouds in the sky were lazy little things of no consequence. It was hot. Roger wished he'd left his pack in the car. Patches of sweat formed in the creases of his jumpsuit, and each step through this unyielding field made his toes swell even bigger. After forty minutes of endless meandering, he stopped in one of the clearer sections and took a seat on a fallen trunk.

He rolled up his sleeves, then took a swig from his water bottle. A rustling sound behind him pricked the hairs on his neck, but he didn't turn around. He allowed the voice of reason to assure him that it was just some field mouse or snake doing its business. The stillness of the field reminded him of church. He hadn't been since his mom died, but he doubted they missed him.

He'd delivered a pair of retrievers to a woman from his church in January, but she hadn't recognized him. Doris Blythe.

Her house sat up on a hill overlooking Farris Bluff, but she wasn't a rich woman. She was widowed and made no income of her own these days except for what the government doled out to her. He'd tipped his hat to her that day like any other man would to an elderly lady, but she'd stuck him with an offended look that caught him off guard. "Don't think I don't know what you're up to," she said suddenly. She was like Mrs. Hagerton in that way, he realized. They could be in on something together, the two old bags. But it wasn't a crime what he did so why should they bother? He kicked at a rock across from where he sat. It skidded off into the brush and disrupted a couple of squirrels. He felt ridiculous. He still felt like he was being watched.

He'd seen no sign of bird life of any kind. He had owned a bird when he and Sam were boys. His dad hated it. He could see his dad's flushed face while he yelled for three straight minutes about the responsibility required to take care of a "filthy plague animal"—

"You boys don't know what they can do!" he screamed. The top button on his crisp Sunday shirt had popped open in his effort to gesture emphatically.

"Now, Walter, it's just a parakeet," said his mom. He couldn't remember her as she must have been then—young, wiry but frail. He could only see her white dress, the one she wore every Sunday, with splotchy pink flowers all over it, and a grey cardigan. It was after church. Roger had won the bird at a game they played in Sunday school.

"Dad, I won it," he insisted, as if that solved things. "I won it 'cause I remembered all the verses this week."

"What kind of church are we taking these boys to? This ain't church. Getting prizes for playing games! The Lord would be horrified!" He loosened his tie and marched into the kitchen.

The family followed suit. Roger set the bird cage on the table, but Sam shook his head silently and took it off before their dad turned around. “In my day,” his dad continued, “We sat in the big church with the adults. There was none of this ‘Children’s Ministry’ bullshit—”

“Walter,” said his mother. Her quiet, firm voice echoed back to Roger. “That’s enough.” She turned to her son. “Roger, if you can take care of that bird, you can keep him. But you listen—you take care of him. That means feeding and keeping him quiet in the morning. I don’t want to wake up to squawking every day of my life.” She smiled.

“Yes, ma’am,” he said. He looked at Sam, who was grinning innocently. The battle now over, they were free to enjoy their first pet.

The memory dissolved instantly as Roger stepped on a frog, the force of which sent him sliding a few feet. The loud squelch brought him back to the present, and he looked down to see a mass of brown entrails oozing into the ground. He wiped his boot on some old leaves and continued. The field had woken up during his reverie. Different birds called out to each other across the field. He listened hard for the call of the finch. He was no expert, but Corn had said a zebra finch made a sound like someone rubbing a spoon across an old washboard in staccato beats. No such sound echoed out to him. Just the usual chirping and hooting of the early summer birds.

Sam had told him to take the job. He was always looking out for him, which mostly bothered Roger but he accepted it nonetheless. Someday he’d prove he could stand on his own two feet. But unlike his father, Sam meant his criticism constructively. He came home from church on Sundays and reported the congregational gossip pleasantly and without the condescension his mother had used when they’d lived with her. He never once said, “You should’ve been there,” which Roger appreciated.

Generally, Roger took his brother's advice about life, even if he did it begrudgingly. So when Sam suggested that he take this ludicrous assignment, he agreed, if only to get this creep Corn out of his life. Even if he was lying about the money, Roger thought maybe appeasing his request would count for something.

Something blue caught his eye. He turned sharply and saw a flitter of a wing not ten feet from where he stood. A small bird—a finch, if he had to guess—sat perched on a fallen tree branch. “Claude,” he hissed. Then he cursed. Of course a bird wouldn't respond like a dog or a cat. But he felt for sure this must be Corn's bird. What else could it be? It was the color of the ocean on a cloudy day, with black streaks and miniscule patches of white under its wings. He could make a grab for it, but he didn't want to scare the thing into hopping out of reach.

He set down his pack slowly and reached inside for the net. He raised it over his head and held it there, suspended for a few seconds by the sheer ridiculousness of what he was doing, then swooped it down over the bird in one smooth motion. He'd caught it. “You son-of-a-bitch,” he said. “You're worth a lot of money to me. And a lot of time.”

The trek back across the field didn't seem to take nearly as long, partially owing to the sun's disappearance. He'd be glad when spring really got going and summer finally came. Kids lost more pets in the summer, and anyway he couldn't take much more of this back-and-forth with the weather. He'd put Claude in the small cage he usually reserved for gerbils or hamsters. It didn't make a sound. He had hoped it would call out just so he could hear what a finch sounded like in person, but Claude didn't seem willing to oblige. He was so quiet that Roger stopped a number of times just to make sure he hadn't escaped.

Five thousand dollars would do a lot of things, especially after last month's meager earnings. Sam's salon had really taken off since the new subdivision had been built, and Roger

felt increasingly like a charity case rather than an equal tenant. But something about this bird put him on edge. Its silence unnerved him. He half expected to return to Corn's house and find it empty, no trace of such a person ever existing. Claude didn't look a thing like his bird, but somehow he merged the two into the same idea, and this silent blue finch brought him back to a place he'd repressed a long time ago.

His foot caught on a stump and he tripped. The cage flew out of hands as he landed facedown a few yards from where he'd parked his car. Still, the bird made no noise. But the tilted cage brought back another memory of his own bird—Birdie. He'd named the bird Birdie.

"Stupid name for a stupid animal," his dad said from behind his morning newspaper. "Might as well have named you Boy."

"I think it's a respectable name," said Sam.

"Bout time you grew up, Samuel." He turned a page in the paper. "You'll be twelve next month. Time to stop playacting with your brother. Never in my life heard of a boy carrying on like you. Next I know you'll want to be a cosmetologist like your mother."

Sam looked down at his Corn Pops and twiddled the spoon around in his milk. Roger looked away. Birdie sat on the hutch cabinet in the kitchen. His cage needed cleaning.

Later that afternoon, Roger would come home from school and find that his bird was gone. The cage had been wiped clean, and all traces of its existence removed. He and Sam looked all over the house, thinking that maybe their mom had put him somewhere while she cleaned the cage. They found her sitting on the back porch steps, wiping her eyes with a handkerchief. "I'm sorry, Roger," she said.

"Where's Birdie?"

"I'm so sorry—I didn't mean to—I didn't know—"

“Where’s his bird, Mom?” said Sam. His fists had clenched into little balls. “What’d Dad do with him?”

She looked up then, her watery eyes fierce. “Don’t you say a thing like that. Your father didn’t do anything. He was hungry. That bird hadn’t been fed in a week—we had some popcorn left over from that tin, and I figured maybe corn was the same as seeds—”

“My book specifically says not to feed birds popcorn!” said Roger. He crouched down next to his mother and grabbed her shoulders. “Where is he?”

She looked at him for a few seconds, then reached down and produced a shoe box. Inside, Birdie rested on a bed of tissues. She’d smoothed down his normally-ruffled feathers and attempted to make him look peaceful. Roger was revolted. He threw the box down and stormed into the house. That evening Sam tried to get him to have a funeral service, but he wouldn’t leave his bedroom. He stayed like that for a week straight.

The finch’s tiny squeak brought him back to the present. Roger looked around him. The sky had dimmed, and the air around him felt heavy. The field expected rain. He stood up and dusted himself off, then walked over to the bird cage and looked inside. Claude sat unscathed inside his sideways prison. He might not have even made that squeak. Roger picked up the cage, and in that moment, he saw the rest of that long and terrible week play out in his mind’s eye: his father’s joy at the bird’s departure, the funeral service Sam held despite no one’s interest in having it, and the cold knowledge that crept into his seven-year-old heart that nothing ever went the way it should.

He hurried to his car and made it inside before the downpour engulfed them. Once back on the main road, he hesitated for a full minute, looking over at Claude in the front seat, where he’d strapped a seatbelt across the cage. If he turned left, he would head back into town and

could deliver the bird to Corn before nightfall. Claude offered no opinion. Roger darted out to the right, towards the sign for Deyersville. Seven miles and he'd be clear of this town, just him and the bird. He passed a telephone pole littered with Missing Pet signs but paid it no mind.

## The Honest-to-God Truth

“Well, he’s dead all right, that’s for sure.” The reverend smacked his gum loudly against his cheeks, occasionally spitting into the ditch that lined the highway.

“Dead,” said Stevens. He looked back and forth between his father’s body and the preacher.

“Sure thing, son.”

“How?”

“He was old,” Melrose interjected. He crouched down and peered into the man’s face.

“Old doesn’t kill a man,” Stevens snapped. He removed his Panama hat and scratched the back of his neck where the straw had been cutting in.

“It was enough given the circumstances,” said Melrose.

“Well you sure don’t seem too broken up about Pop’s death.”

“Boys,” said the reverend. They looked at him. “I expect somebody should call the police?”

Stevens looked at his brother and shook his head. “You got a phone?”

“Why would I? We were just going up the road.”

“So you should always have it.”

“Where’s yours then?” he said.

“I had other things to tend to. Like Sara.”

“She ain’t here, I should mention.”

“And?”

“And she was right behind us. Haven’t seen a car since we pulled over.”

He was right. Stevens kicked one of his tires and jammed the hat back onto his head. He turned to the reverend and said, “You?”

“Nope. Don’t carry my phone on the weekends.”

“You’re a pastor.”

“Anyone looking can find me. There’s some phones over there.” He pointed to the gas station across the lane.

Stevens didn’t answer. Instead, he walked resolutely up to the place outside where rusty pay phones stood against a wall. He chose the one that looked least damaged and punched in some numbers.

Melrose watched for a few minutes, then turned back to look at Reverend Frank. “That woman’s going to be the death of him,” he said.

“Looks like she’s just been the death of someone.”

“Reverend?”

Frank shrugged and spat out the rest of his gum. Immediately he pulled out a couple fresh pieces and popped them into his heavy jowls. “What do you think happened, son?” he said between smacks.

Melrose stuck his hands into his pockets and whistled. “One minute Pop’s alive and dandy in the truck bed. Next he’s not. Can’t really say.”

“Mmm,” said Frank.

Stevens returned. “Police are on their way. And Sara’s about three miles back. She got turned around in the Willows.”

“Figures,” said Melrose.

“What?”

“I said it *figures*.”

The three men looked at each other for a minute or two, then turned away to stare at different things. It was just past ten o'clock in the morning, and the heat had already hit its maximum at ninety-two degrees. Reverend Frank's sweat rolled down his back underneath his robe. His stiff collar had become soggy already, and they hadn't even made it to the church. Stevens fumbled the Panama in his hands, occasionally fanning himself with it. Melrose whistled “My Favorite Things” and wished it would rain.

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The day had started like most other Saturdays in Jasper Stevens' life. He woke up to the sound of his girlfriend making breakfast. She wasn't quiet about it, ever. She had moved in three years ago and had made it her constant mission to annoy him into matrimony. So far he had avoided it. Something about today bothered him, though, and it wasn't the clinking of coffee mugs or Sara's jarring, tuneless humming.

“Sara,” he called, still lying on his right side in their bed.

“Yeah?”

“What time is it?”

“Just after seven, why?”

“Why in hell are you up so early?”

“I'm making coffee.”

“Sloud,” he said.

“Well since you're up, come in here. I want to talk to you.”

He slipped into his robe and shuffled into the kitchen. “Coffee smells burnt.”

“Jasper, we need to baptize your father.”

He took a sip of the coffee she had handed him and recoiled. "It is burnt."

"It's fine. Did you hear what I said?"

"It's too damn early to talk about church, and it ain't even Sunday."

She looked at him with a theatrical frown, tailored just for him he felt sure. Her nails clicked against the Formica countertop, rhythmic and purposeful. He could see that there was just no getting out of this. Thankfully, he heard the sound of his father's wheelchair and turned to see the old man wheel into view behind the saloon-style doors.

Harvey Stevens was creeping toward eighty and had the physique to prove it. His bald head sagged a little in the back, and his once-green eyes now had a perpetually milky glaze over them. His wheezy coughs shook his underweight body like mini-earthquakes.

"Good morning, Harvey," said Sara.

He ignored her and rolled to the table. "Morning, son."

"Sara said something."

"I didn't hear her," he said.

Stevens sighed. "You want some coffee?"

The old man nodded. Stevens walked over to the pot and poured out a cup. He caught Sara's look but shook his head. She cleared her throat anyway. "Harvey," she said. "I know you can hear me. I just want you to know that Jesus loves you and that he wants you to be baptized into his name."

Harvey didn't respond for almost a full minute, during which time Jasper noticed how sticky the kitchen felt. He peered into the window thermometer, which read seventy-eight degrees. The red line wasn't finished moving yet, either. He handed his father the cup and sat back down at the table.

Just over forty, Stevens knew his life was about over as far as excitement happened. Each day was more of the same trouble, more of Harvey's ill health and Sara's infantile need to be the center of things. Why he kept her, he couldn't really say. If he thought about it, he supposed it was because she was useful in certain ways. But lately her incessant nagging about baptism and the need for marriage—two rites he never considered important, let alone essential—had pushed him beyond the capacity for tolerance. He woke up in a cold sweat some nights fighting the urge to smother her in her sleep.

It might not have been so bad if it weren't for Harvey, who was taking his sweet time with death. It was as if the old man had struck up some sort of deal with Death himself. The doctor had given him six months two years ago, and despite his increase in coughing fits, Harvey didn't seem to be going anywhere anytime soon. It was draining Stevens, exhausting him to the point of near-constant malaise. He found himself staying out later in the bars. His hair was thinning, he'd lost weight, and there wasn't a damn thing he could do about any of it.

After taking a sip of the coffee, Harvey turned around and looked at Sara. "What in God's name makes you think I care what you have to say?"

"Pop," said Stevens. Gravity pulled at him; he wanted to sink into his chair and close his eyes forever.

But Sara stood up straighter and folded her arms. "It's disrespectful to talk to a lady like that."

"Then it's a good thing I ain't talking to one," he spat.

She turned to the counter and picked up a dish towel, balling it in her hands. "Clever," she muttered.

Stevens took a sip of his coffee. “Can we just can it for right now? We can talk about this later.”

“What’s to talk about?” said Harvey. He chuckled.

“Pop, just—” He didn’t know how he was going to finish, but fortunately the phone rang. He walked over to the counter and picked it up. “Yeah?”

“Hey bro, what’s up?”

“Melrose, what are you doing calling me at eight in the morning?”

“Whoa now, hold on. Called to see if you want to hit the cages. Sam’s got a key and we could get in early.”

“I’m kind of in the middle of something.”

“Want me to come over?”

“That’s about the last thing I want.”

“Is that Melrose?” said Sara suddenly. She tossed the dish towel onto the counter and stood up straighter.

“Oh God, Sara’s up?”

“You know she gets up early.”

“Thought she might sleep in on weekends.”

“No. Can I call you back?”

“Tell Melrose he needs to be part of this discussion,” said Sara. She leaned into him and tried to share the phone.

“Tell your woman to mind her business.”

“This is her business.”

“Like hell it is,” said Harvey. He cleared his throat, which turned into a coughing fit.

“Is that Pop? What’s he doing up?”

“What’s he saying?” said Sara.

“Would you all just shut up a second?” said Stevens. He backed away from Sara and held his hand over the mouthpiece. Harvey’s coughing was usually white noise to him, but this morning it sounded louder, more piercing. His hacking had turned fierce. He sucked at the air, his cheeks wet with tears and sweat. Stevens waited for him to finish, then returned to the phone. “I need to go.”

“I’m coming over. This sounds good.”

“Dammit, Mel—” but his brother had hung up, and Stevens set the phone down in defeat. He walked over to the stove and turned on the burner. “Eggs, Pop?”

Harvey wheezed a “yes” and Stevens pulled out a frying pan.

“Is he coming over?” said Sara.

“Yeah.”

“I need to get ready.”

He looked at her. She was dressed in a pair of jeans and one of his flannel shirts she used for cleaning house. Typical Saturday attire. “You’re dressed.”

“But I need to get ready.” She left the kitchen before he could respond.

Ten minutes later, Stevens let his brother into the apartment. “I told you not to come.”

“Like you meant it. What’s for breakfast?”

“Same as usual.”

“Smells fine.”

They walked into the kitchen, where Melrose immediately pulled up a chair beside his father. “Morning, Pop.”

“Morning, son,” said Harvey. He reached out his shriveled hand and rubbed the boy’s scruffy hair. Melrose needed a shave, Stevens noticed, but this was the least of his troubles. His hair could use a trim. Stevens was balding, a quick receding hairline inherited from Harvey. At thirty-three, Melrose still retained much of his boyish charm. The earring was a bit much though, Stevens thought.

Melrose had always been the favorite, even when their mom was alive. In fact, not much had changed since her death a few years back, except that Harvey, now free from his wife’s disapproving glares, could say what he wanted without fear of serious rebuke. There was the church thing, too. Stevens had found church intolerable and hot, and he knew his brother felt the same. They had gone with their mother until a few years before her death, and Stevens suspected she never forgave them, not even on her deathbed, for abandoning it.

But Melrose remained the favorite with Harvey, who showed affection in his own irritable way. He seemed more at ease with his youngest present, which was mostly why Stevens still allowed him to come over. If Harvey weren’t in the picture, he could avoid his brother more easily. A lot of things could be done more easily.

Harvey continued, “Hell of a Saturday already.”

“That’s what I hear. Whore’s up early?”

“I’ve had about enough of that,” said Stevens. He placed a plate in front of his brother and turned off the stove, then joined them at the table.

“Calm down, son,” said Harvey.

“Yeah, brother, it’s just a thing.” Melrose tapped his thumb on the table as he took a giant bite of eggs and ham. “Speaking of which, where is she? Figured she’d be here waiting to chew my ass about something.”

Sara walked in toweling her hair dry. "I want to get your father baptized, Melrose."

Melrose said nothing.

"You take another shower?" said Stevens with a frown.

She ignored him. "What do you think?" she said to Melrose.

"I think it's a waste of time and it's got nothing to do with you anyway," he said, then turned and looked at Stevens. "You got any coffee made?"

Sara began making a fresh pot. "It's got everything to do with me."

"How you figure?"

"As a Christian, I am responsible for my loved ones' mortal souls. That includes Harvey."

"Does it include me?" said Melrose. Stevens looked at his brother and might have missed the slight grin if he hadn't been looking for it. An uneasy feeling settled into his stomach. The coffee he was drinking tasted worse than before. He stood up.

He left them all in the kitchen and walked into the living room. His head pounded. The noise from their breathing distracted him, but the living room was no better. He leaned his head against the glass doors that led onto the small balcony. He had been baptized when he was eight, but he'd never told Sara. He remembered the cold autumn lake water rushing into his nose because he forgot to plug it before Reverend Frank dunked him under. He remembered the *whoosh!* As the reverend pulled him out just in time, the cheers from the congregation and his mom's genuine tears. But that was a long time ago. His mom was gone now, along with half the congregation and his faith.

His life was spiraling downwards, but he suspected that it had never reached very high to begin with. He remembered the day he met Sara at a bar just off the highway, her first day in

town. After a few weeks, he thought she was the love of his life. But it wasn't long after that her name started appearing on the mail. He knew then that he was stuck, and the feeling brought with it one of panic. He wasn't just stuck in his relationship; he was stuck in what to do about things. And that scared him more than anything else ever could.

Harvey rolled in after a few minutes, right up next to his son. "Fightin' up a storm in there," he called.

"Are they having an affair?" said Stevens.

"I reckon so." Harvey cleared his throat. "But I don't expect it'll amount to much."

Stevens looked down at his father. "How long?"

"Judging by their argument, I'd say about six months."

The other two burst into the living room then. Sara marched up to Stevens and kissed him square on the mouth. He didn't return the favor. She pulled back and frowned. "Don't you want to kiss me?"

"Not right now. What's the matter with you today?"

She folded her arms. "I just think we should be a proper family."

"Damn it, woman, now listen—"

"Sara, what is it that you want?" said Harvey.

She looked down at him, clearly taken aback. She opened her mouth, then closed it.

Harvey chuckled, some spit dribbling down his chin. "That's what I thought," he said. "You been here three years and ain't made our lives any easier, but you sure as hell know how to make a fuss."

"I get you your drugs," she said weakly.

"I could get them anyway."

“Not as easy as a nurse.”

“Nurse in training,” said Melrose from the couch. He had sprawled out across it.

“Lay off her,” said Stevens.

“Now you listen to me,” said Harvey. He rolled himself over to the hallway leading to his bedroom, but paused to deliver his final message. “If I get baptized today, it’s got nothing to do with you. Matter of fact, I don’t want to hear another damn word about it.” Then he left.

Sara took a seat on the couch next to Melrose, and Stevens collapsed into his armchair. The morning had crawled by. His grandfather’s cuckoo clock read just after nine.

“He coughed up blood yesterday,” said Sara.

“He’s always coughing up something,” said Stevens. He closed his eyes and wished someone would bring him a cold wash cloth. “We got any ibuprofen?”

“No. Harvey had the last of it last night.”

For a couple long minutes, no one spoke. Then Stevens said softly, “I just wish he’d die.”

Sara got up and paced. “He’s seventy-nine.”

“If old age and lung cancer can’t kill him, what will?”

“I’ve heard things,” she said slowly. “Stuff in class. People just—die.”

“Pop won’t just die,” said Melrose.

“Are we ever getting married, Jasper?”

“We’ll get married when Pop dies.”

The three of them stayed silent for several minutes. Finally, Harvey wheeled back into the room and announced, “Reverend Frank’s on the way. Looks like you’re getting your wish.” He looked at Sara, and Stevens saw the malice behind the old man’s milky eyes.

He sat up and rubbed his forehead. “Now wait just a minute. Pop, what are you talking about? You’ve never been to church a day in your life.”

“First of all, that ain’t true. Just been a while.”

“What, forty years?”

“Roughly. I talked to Frank. He’s all set and on his way.”

Stevens looked at Melrose, who appeared to be counting the cracks in the ceiling. Sara had stopped pacing and was standing very still, as though she couldn’t believe what Harvey was saying. Stevens didn’t buy it. “Pop, what are you up to?”

“I’m dying, son. Might as well make my peace before I go.”

“Since when do you give a shit about peace with God?”

“Not just him,” he said as he wheeled back into the kitchen. “I’m getting some more coffee.”

Stevens followed him. “What are you doing?” he demanded.

“Son, are you planning to marry that girl?” said Harvey. He took a slow sip of his coffee.

Stevens shook his head. “That’s not what we’re talking about.”

“No, but it needs answering.”

He put his hand out against the counter and flexed his fingers. The bundled up dish towel was still where Sara had tossed it an hour ago. “I don’t know.”

“That’s what I figured. I want to get baptized, but it ain’t got anything to do with Sara.”

“Pretty convenient timing.”

“It’s inconvenient if you ask me. Girl’s got too much time to think about my affairs when she should be dealing with her own. But in any case, it’s something I’ve been meaning to tend to.”

“Why?”

“Because I’m old!” he laughed. “I could go at any time.”

“That’ll be the day,” said Stevens.

Harvey slapped his son on the back. “Comes a point in a man’s life he’s got to make a decision.”

“What’s that got to—”

Melrose burst into the room then, cutting him off. “Reverend’s here. We gotta figure out this ride situation.”

“What ride situation?” said Stevens.

It took fifteen minutes for the five of them to determine who would ride in which car, how many cars were being driven, and how the wheelchair would be transported. Harvey demanded that he remain in the chair, something Stevens and Melrose agreed was ridiculous.

“Pop, you don’t even need the thing,” said Stevens.

“It makes just as much sense for us to load into Sara’s Explorer and put your wheelchair in the back as it does to do it all separately,” said Melrose.

“My car’s almost out of gas,” said Sara. Both brothers glared at her.

“We can stop for gas.”

Reverend Frank laughed and put a few pieces of gum in his mouth.

“No, no, no!” said Harvey. He seemed almost frantic in his desperation to get what he wanted. “I will ride in my wheelchair, in the back of the reverend’s truck.”

Stevens groaned. “Pop, that doesn’t make any sense!”

“It don’t need to make sense!” screamed the old man. Finally, they all agreed just so that they wouldn’t spend more time on the subject.

“I have to go down to the hospital later,” said Sara suddenly. “So I think I should drive separately.”

“Fine,” said Stevens. “Then I’ll drive myself and Melrose can ride with Frank.”

“I got room for both of you,” said the reverend.

“Fine!” Stevens grabbed his hat and headed for the door. “Let’s get this over with.”

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Stevens had been tapping on the window for a few minutes before Melrose realized what the sound was and turned to look. “Pop!” Stevens shouted.

Melrose frowned. “What about him?”

Stevens pointed frantically to the old man, who was slumped at an odd angle in his chair.

Melrose turned to the reverend. “I think something’s wrong.”

Reverend Frank grinned and pulled into a gas station that marked the halfway point to the church. “Something’s always wrong, son.”

Melrose shook his head.

They got out of the truck and unloaded Harvey from the bed. “He stopped responding a mile back,” said Stevens. “I tried to get your attention.”

“Did he pass out?”

Stevens looked at his brother. “I don’t think so.”

Melrose shuddered. “Reverend?”

Reverend Frank leaned in close to the old man, looking as though he were searching for a sign of something more than just the absence of pulse. Stevens thought he whispered something, but he couldn’t be sure. He wondered how Sara had gotten so turned around when she was right

behind them the whole time. Reverend Frank stood up after a minute or two and delivered his verdict.

“Well, he’s dead all right, that’s for sure.”

## Not Knowing the Days

*Back behind the fence there's a creek that never is full even when it rains for days on end. That's where the tadpoles live, you can ask Adrienne 'cause she's there, too. We fill up our Mason jars with tadpoles in the hot sticky nights when everything outside is loud as it can be. Dad said once that an old bull frog lives among the reeds and he stretches his lungs open wide and I can hear him, too, just outside the bay window in the kitchen when we eat dinner. He makes a noise like wooden spoons against the side of the house, in between the grooves where the brick doesn't line up just right. Those are the lazy nights, and Gideon and Maxine still too little to know much but they make enough racket. I would tell you about them but they don't matter much yet, and maybe when they're older they will share my secret but for now I think it's just best to keep it between you and me, if you understand. Adrienne knows, but she doesn't know it all because she left too soon to really know.*

I found these and other observations scribbled in hasty pencil on a dusty notebook at the bottom of a bin full of memories. My memories, as recorded by my ten-year-old self. It goes on, page after page. The letters are large and round, emulating, no doubt, the penmanship required of fourth graders. I don't remember writing them. There are a lot of things in this box I don't remember, like a pair of small green sneakers with autographs of Disney characters on them. When did my family ever go to Disney World? And then it flashes—a memory so strong it bursts out of nowhere lightning fast, and I am standing in the middle of a wide walkway crowded with people all so much taller than me. It's the same year we moved from Charleston, and I've lost my parents in a crowd of sweaty tourists with screaming children and grotesque figures in furry costumes. Then a cool, soft hand reaches down and I grab it—my mother, not sweaty at all

though the summer sun aches above us—and she pulls me back out of the street and onto the sidewalk where the shops beckon us in with cool air and shade.

We moved from Charleston because my mother had an affair with one of our church deacons. It's so cliché I almost never talk about it. I only tell it to some people when we're drunk enough or in one of those moods to talk, and the words just spill forth all over everyone, like vomit. Fortunately none of my friends are really empathetic enough to pay attention to what I say so the cliché dies as soon as it's out in the open. He was a skinny little man, the prick that wooed my mother away. He had a clean-shaven face and smelled like peaches. He wasn't even really a prick, if you want to be honest about it. But he was The Other Man, and the look on my dad's face the day he came home to tell us about it—I swear to God, I never wanted to hit anyone harder than I wanted to hit that guy. I was ten.

Looking through boxes of old stuff doesn't usually affect me; it's more the quiet spaces in between the digging that lets my mind wander. One night in middle school there was a storm, and I couldn't fall asleep. I sat bolt upright in my bed at the crack of one thunder roll because out of nowhere—and owing to the fact that my mind had veered into a tremulous place—I remembered that my mom had had another child after my younger sister. The scary part was that I had never heard her mention this other child before, but I knew in my gut that he (she?) had existed. I never did ask Mom about it, though I got pretty close with Dad once. That was always the way with our family. We kept a lot of secrets under the pretense that we were a tight-knit unit. Even after Mom's affair, we pretended we all got along real well but deep down we all had something to hide.

The morning swims right by me as I sit here dawdling. I have eleven things written down on a To-Do list on my fridge. I've checked off one (Clean Bathroom) but I doubt I'll get to the

others. This reorganization of thoughts and places started as a dare from my sister who lives the good life in Kenosha, WI, with her extreme outdoorsman husband and seven—yes, seven! And only one set of triplets—well-mannered kids. She doesn't have a job outside the home, and she calls me every week to see if I've found a man yet. Today when she called I told her I was gay just to see what she'd say. After a long pause—I mean a full minute probably—she finally got back on the line and used her best impression of a concerned sibling.

“Fiona, that's not funny,” she said.

“What if I were?”

“Don't joke about things like that.”

She's not anti-gay in the traditional sense, but she wants me to have as near a copy of her extraordinarily normal life as I can, and any kink in that ideal just sends her into a fit.

“How's Butch?” I said.

“He got a promotion. Did you find anything lately?”

“I interviewed at the city zoo last Wednesday.”

“Cut it out, Fiona.”

“I'm serious, Max.” I could tell she was trying hard not to say something she'd have to call and apologize later for so I continued, “But they're only hiring full time and I want something lighter.”

“You need something lighter? Because you have such a busy schedule, living off Mom and Dad.”

After that the conversation deteriorated rapidly, as it usually does with us, and she finally said, in such a low voice I could barely hear her, “I bet you couldn't even clean out your attic for a yard sale.” Like we had been talking about a yard sale at all. Sometimes Max loses touch with

what she's saying. I prefer to talk to my brother, but he's almost never available. Like me, he's directionless and emotional. We feed off each other's self-pity. Max just doesn't understand.

I stand up to stretch my legs and notice the day outside has shifted. I woke up to a golden sky and now it's on the verge of snow. But I won't see snow, most likely. It never snows here. Max sent me some pictures of their first snowfall in Kenosha a few weeks ago. That was early October, might have even been September. She and the kids had on matching toboggans that she made herself. I pointed that out and she corrected me. "Up here a toboggan is a sled," she said as if I lived there too and should obey their customs. I walk to the window and see George Dobson outside, my eighty-four-year-old neighbor who cleans his gutters obsessively. He looks up—he must've felt my staring—and waves.

The air is still outside, expectant. The heavy clouds hang low and almost touch the hills a mile to the west. They are only a slighter shade of the constant grey that's covered the whole sky. Except for George's gutter cleaning, there aren't any sounds. A siren usually passes through a few times a day because I live in a neighborhood adjacent to a hospital. But today even the sirens are silent. My slippers scratch against the driveway so loud I think it might wake any lingering sleepers in the neighborhood, but I make it to the mailbox without raising suspicion. George calls me over as I pull out a stack of Pizza Hut coupons and fliers for bathroom remodeling companies.

"Morning, Fiona," he says. He takes his thick white gloves off and shakes my hand.

"Hi, George. How're the gutters?"

"Oh, you know. I could take a look at yours sometime." He's been offering this every week since I moved in three years ago.

"How's Mrs. Dobson?"

“I expect she’ll be dead soon,” he says. There’s no concern there, no twinkling affection you see in a lot of old people, like my deceased grandfather. He always talked about my grandmother in the rudest terms but meant them as terms of endearment. George loves his wife, but he loves his gutters more.

“I’m sorry to hear that,” I say. I’m not. I met June once and it was the first day I moved in. She wears a bathrobe every day.

“It is what it is. Say, you catch Leno last night?”

“I don’t watch much TV. Not a fan of talk shows, either.”

“I understand that. One time my brother took us all to a skating rink. That’s where I met June, you know.”

“Oh.” I miss the connection between this and Leno but I let him continue.

“She’s a beaut, that’s for sure. Fell in love with her legs first and her mouth second, if you catch my drift.” He pauses, and I can see the train of thought as if it were my own. “She never was much for conversation, though.”

I shift the weight to my left side and wonder how long I’ll have to stand here and grin like an idiot before he’ll let me go about my day. I don’t have to wait long. He tips his baseball cap at me and wanders off into his own yard. I keep meaning to go over and see them but it doesn’t happen. I’m sure June puts on normal clothes when company is present; I don’t want to destroy this image I have of June always in her bathrobe. I don’t have any room for a paradigm shift at present.

I watch the neighbors’ shadows across the street and wonder what they might be doing this time of day. The world is still. Then the words of my journal float across the empty space between us, and I can hear my child self babbling:

*Mom says I get in the way. “You think too much,” she says, and she makes me play with Max and Gideon even though they’re just little kids and they can’t do anything. Dad takes my side but he doesn’t ever win so I have to play with them anyway. I used to be allowed to go to the duck pond by myself but now Mom and Dad say it’s too dangerous because some kid wasn’t paying attention and drowned last month. So now when I go I have to go with someone older and that’s usually Kenya but sometimes I go without telling anyone. But Mom usually finds out somehow and she gets so mad she makes me stay inside all day but it’s worth it just to be alone. This house is too crowded, and Gideon cries a lot because he’s two and a lady at church said boys are the worst, and I believe her.*

*But when I go to the duck pond alone, it’s worth the trouble I get in because that’s where everything’s still. And no one ever goes there anymore, not even before that boy drowned, so it’s still. The pond’s bigger than the creek in the backyard, much bigger, but not as big as the ocean. Sometimes we go to the beach when Mom doesn’t have a headache but I prefer the duck pond anyway. There are only a few ducks and they’re tiny, but they keep to their business and I keep to mine so we get along fine. One time I took Adrienne but that was a bad idea because the magic was ruined. You can’t be alone with another person, I learned that the hard way. When I’m alone, the world is softer somehow. It isn’t just ‘cause there’s no noise to make me mad, it’s also ‘cause I can think about anything I want and there’s no one to tell me otherwise.*

*I have great ideas, and they just come to me out of nowhere and I wonder why no one’s ever thought it before. I think about heaven sometimes, and what it must look like, and sometimes—though I fear to admit it ‘cause I think it must be sinful—I am afraid of it. In all the pictures in Sunday School heaven is a great wide place full of pink clouds and angels, and the angels are so serious, and never smile, and I think it would be real boring to stay there forever.*

*And I asked God one time if we had to stay there or if we could leave, and he didn't give me a definite answer. It is one of those things I'll have to wait and see about, I guess.*

*But my other great ideas are about all the things I'm going to do just as soon as I can. I want to explore things, all over the place. But mostly I just want to explore space. In Social Studies we talked about the First Man on the Moon and how no one's ever been to the planets yet and I just think it would be the best thing to go all over the stars looking for things no one's ever seen before. Sometimes I stay at the duck pond so long the stars come out and I can name some of them because Dad keeps a book about them in the living room. But I also make up names because it's more fun, and who's to say it isn't their names anyway? I like to imagine that someday I'll get up in those stars and really see things, even have a look at the Earth while I'm up there, and it will be the—sirens interrupt the memory.*

My neighborhood has woken up at last. A few animal escapees run across my lawn, and I become self-conscious of my own presence. As I cross the path leading up to my house, I see today's newspaper. There's a lot going on in the world and if I have to be honest, I don't really care about any of it. I ignore the paper and go back inside.

There are moments during my day when I literally cannot make a decision about what to do next. It usually follows a conversation with one of my parents. They're equally invested—financially, emotionally—in my life so they feel the need to call me every week or so, sometimes more. Today is Monday, and I expect a call sometime after lunch. My dad's a lawyer so he sets his own schedule; he calls after lunch because he takes off in the afternoons. My mom teaches Pilates to women over 60; it's disgusting. I went to one class just to see it, and if it's any indication of the lot of mankind, I do not want to get old. But today this feeling of indecision follows nothing more than a mail check. I set the mail on the coffee table and stand in the middle

of my living room, surveying what my sister always refers to as “the House of Usher” because she read one Edgar Allan Poe story in her life and has since dropped allusions to it whenever she can. My cat sleeps on top of my bookshelf. I scratch her ears and she looks at me as if to ask why I’m not back in the attic. “Fine,” I say to her. “I’ll get to it. Let me know if something exciting happens down here.”

The boxes still loom. Max is right, but I won’t ever tell her that. There’s no way in hell I’ll sort through these things. If anything, more dust has fallen while I’ve checked the mail. I have been in my attic twice since I moved in; today marks my third visit. The boxes are labeled in the fresh, excited handwriting I used when I put them up here. I remember that feeling now as I sit down next to the box I found my old journal in. I was twenty-four. I had a master’s in Global Studies and was working on an MBA. I have no idea what I planned to do with either. They sound as fake as they are. My dad didn’t even offer to frame either of my diplomas (my BA was in English); my brother’s diploma hangs next to my sister’s in a room dedicated to their impressive achievement. When Dad’s on his deathbed, I’ll tell him that Gideon’s diploma was printed off at Kinko’s the day after he decided to join the Peace Corp. For now I help him lie; according to my parents, he’s a successful entrepreneur in Chicago. “Why don’t you go up there with your siblings?” my mom says to me. “They’ve made a nice life there for themselves. Then you’d all be together and we could all visit more often.” Mom doesn’t like to talk to me unless it’s about money or the Golden Future where we all live within easy driving distance of each other.

I pick up the journal again.

*But before that, before the secret I found there was another thing that made it happen.  
And before that still, even more things and it probably goes on forever but I might not have time*

*enough to relate it to you because the whole history of this thing might go on thousands of years. We learned in Sunday School that the world is six thousand years old and that seems like such a great time to have everything we see around us and this secret might have even begun the day the world began. That was the day God Himself blew a puff of dust into the Nothing and said, “Ok now, start, you all.” And everything just began after that. One minute, nothing, and the next—there we have everything, zebras and penguins and elephants which are my favorite animal, and dogs and even people. But the people came last. There were two of them, Adam and Eve, and they probably never had a secret like this, not even when the snake came and ruined their lives.*

I don't know what this shit is all about. “The secret”—to ten-year-old, the world is fixed, in a strange way. Things happen in a logical progression, one after the other. Then we grow up and it's not like that at all, but we laugh at children for thinking it is. I saw a boy, maybe five or six, the other day at the mall. He was crying loudly about a broken toy. His mother was shushing him over and over. “Be quiet, Daniel, be quiet. Things break sometimes—I'll get you a new one, it'll be okay.” I wanted to go over and tell him that she was lying. Things do break, but that's not what he was crying about. She was addressing the wrong problem. He was upset because the thing he wanted didn't work out. It's cruel for parents to reassure us like that. I'm sure mine did. Max tells me all the time that I have nothing to complain about, and from a socioeconomic vantage point, she's right.

But she's not with me at night in this house, alone. I can't explain it, only to say: time doesn't move like it should. I lie in bed and my mind rushes forward to whatever might be next in life while juxtaposing images from childhood. This whole process takes about an hour, and then I usually fall asleep. But a few nights ago, it was different. It started out like it normally

does. I was in a corporate office surrounded by people who looked exactly like my brother and sister. Not replicas, exactly. They just all clearly belonged to the same family. And one of the Gideon lookalikes was pointing out that sales were down, that they needed to let someone go. Everyone turned to me, and then outside the window (we were on the top floor of a twenty-story building) I saw the field behind my house, the one next to the creek. There was nothing in it except Gary, Kenya's dog, and he was chasing his tail.

Sometimes these visions feel like dreams but aren't, and normally they relate to each other (like the time I saw my mother getting remarried though she and my dad aren't divorced, juxtaposed with the meeting our family had when she'd had the affair). But it was different this night. What's more, the dream was devoid of the usual weirdness; it had been replaced with an eerie weirdness that chilled me when I woke up. It was just me and Gary, walking along a railroad track and talking about sunsets. He walked on his hind legs and held my hand.

What am I supposed to do with this?

*The thing that happened before was when Kenya left her dog for dead. She wasn't a good pet owner for sure because she never walked him or ran with him or gave him those bones you see on TV. If Gary, her dog, had been my dog I would've loved him forever and given him baths and let him sleep with me on my bed next to Maxine, and she would've been so mad 'cause she's allergic to almost everything especially dogs. But Mom and Dad won't let us have pets because of Maxine and because Dad hates dogs especially. If Gary had been my dog I wouldn't have let him die in the backyard on a hot day last month and let the ants crawl all over his body. I found him lying next to her above-ground pool and the ants were all in him and he was sunken down in the middle and the pink parts of his insides were boiling into the grass, running all over it like pudding. I screamed and screamed and Mrs. Watson came out and saw what I saw and said,*

*“Fiona, you get back to your own house this minute,” and I ran all the way home as fast as I could though I wanted to throw up.*

*And now it’s five days later and I sit up at night and stare out the window of my bedroom and think about Gary, not as he was on that day, with the flies all in him, but how he is right now. For the secret I have kept and that I know to be true is this—that Gary is alive. I swear it by all the things I know. Adrienne saw it, too, with her own eyes, but she didn’t know Gary was dead before so she didn’t know what she was seeing. And when we came across him in the creek bed, just rolling around having a good time with the reeds and the tadpoles, he was the same as if he’d never been eaten by the ants last week.*

My phone rings, but it takes me several seconds to realize where the strange clanging sound is coming from. I stumble upwards and over the cartons and boxes, half-tripping my way down the stairs and to my bedroom, the closest room with a phone.

I pick up and yell into the phone—“What is it?”

“Fiona?” My mom, her soft voice cracked with surprise.

“Oh,” I say. I collapse onto the bed and rub my temples.

“What are you doing?”

“Just sweeping up memories.”

“You’re being facetious with me. You know I hate it when you do that. How has the day gone? What are you doing?”

I pause and listen to the sounds of my house. Nothing. Nothing unusual, anyway. The chill of the attic has invaded my chest; I feel like my house is against me somehow. “I’m cleaning out the attic. I talked to Max earlier.”

“Did she sound off to you? I think she sounded off when I spoke to her yesterday.”

“Maybe she’s pregnant again, and this time she’s not exuberant about it. Maybe ol’ Butch just wanted one golden child too many.” I don’t hate my sister. Where is this animosity coming from?

“That’s completely ridiculous. You could learn responsibility from your sister. Even Gideon knows how to spend time wisely, and all you’ve done today is dawdle, no doubt. If you’re serious about cleaning that attic, I’ll come over this weekend and help you.”

I let the tension build after her judgment. The silence mounts, quickens my pulse. I hear the pounding of my heart through the telephone wires and I can see my mother, her small frame perched on the edge of the kitchen barstool while she scribbles onto a notepad. Stars and swirly shapes, the nervous habit of a woman who otherwise knows no fear. She’s waiting for me to tell her I’ll do better. She’s been waiting since I graduated high school.

“Fiona, is something—the matter?” she ventures.

My ear has turned red during the conversation. The phone is hot. “I’m going to get back to the attic. Was there anything else you wanted?”

She’s silent for several long seconds, then she sighs and says, “Just some appreciation would be nice. An attempt—anything, really—to show that you’re making something of yourself. But other than that? Of course not. I’m happy to see my daughter whittle her talents away by cleaning out old junk.”

“I interviewed at the zoo last Wednesday.”

“You’re just like your father. You never know when to be serious.”

She hangs up. I twiddle the phone in my hand for a long time and then set it down. It takes me four tries to adjust the receiver so that it feels right. My bed is soft, unmade. Across the room I’ve got a pile of laundry to do; it’s been building for ten days, and I’m disappointed

because my favorite sweat pants are in the pile. I wear sweat pants almost every day, but I only have so many pairs. My mom would be appalled, as she spent the larger part of my adolescence giving sermons on the virtue of appearance. I once went to an interview for a cell phone company dressed in sweats, and Mom didn't speak to me for a week. (I got the job because the interviewer liked my audacity, but even this didn't sway her.) I was grounded once for refusing to wear a pink paisley blouse.

Once back inside the safety of my attic, I settle in among the boxes and grab the nearest one, ignoring the one in front of me that contains my depressing journal. Such words of wisdom as I hoped to impart to the world when I was ten—I can't even begin to fathom them. Inside this box there are no journals, only remnants of my mediocre school attendance. I was smart but never studied and so never achieved anything worth mentioning. No awards for perfect attendance, no scholarships, no medals. (Although in my defense, there was a time in fifth grade when I placed fifth in the science fair.) I am smart still, smart enough to live off my parents' money and smart enough to avoid the responsibility of the outside world. This box is filled with nothing more than a testament to my perfect plan in life: skim by and hope no one catches me in the act. I find a stuffed frog and frown—it's Max's frog. Max once said she'd rather die than grow up in a world without frogs. She wanted to be a research biologist and follow in Darwin's footsteps. She was ten. As far as I know, Max never wrote about dead dogs; her aspirations flew higher it would seem. The rest of the box has other odd things, none of them mine. I wonder if in some room in Max's mansion she has stacked—meticulously labeled and categorized—some of my old remnants.

I can't avoid the journal anymore. Something about it nags at me, and I can't determine if it's because I believe my child self—do children lie about the mysteries of death and resurrection?—or because I'm afraid I was a pathological liar.

*But I'll tell you the strangest part, the secret that scares me to this night when I'm writing these things down. Because if I didn't write them down no one would ever believe me, not in a million years. One time Pastor Brian said the story of Jesus was written down by honest-to-God witnesses, people who really saw him alive and talking. And if people believe the Bible, then they can believe my story, too. The strangest thing is—Gary is not the Gary from before. He might look like him and act like him and smell like him, but he is not Gary. The eyes are what made me realize it first. Those eyes of his were brown as anything. But now they're a dark green, almost black, and they've got gold around the edges. And when he looks at me I can see the inner parts of the world. I see Uncle Lewis who died of a tumor last year, who always gave me candy canes even when it wasn't winter. Now he sits in a rocking chair on the porch of a large gold house, surrounded by acres and acres of corn. He sometimes tells me things, but I've only seen him three times since I found Gary so I think he's got more to say still.*

*I also see a great blackness, and this is what keeps me up at night. This blackness stretches on for miles and miles, so far that it doesn't even stop at the horizon but just keeps right on going. It isn't the sky or the open fields. It's just an emptiness, but a full kind of emptiness that's waiting for something to fill it in. I asked Uncle Lewis if he knew about the blackness, and he just shook his head and said, "No ma'am, no blackness in my part of the world." The blackness is thick, too, and when I walk through it I can feel hands reaching out from beyond somewhere, like they're just on the verge of coming to this place but can't quite make it. It gives*

*me a cold feeling, and when I'm there the air feels tight. Then Gary blinks, and everything disappears.*

*If I live to be a hundred I won't forget this blackness, how it catches hold of my heart and fills me with such great and terrible thoughts. It isn't sadness, not exactly. It's the feeling of not knowing, the way Mom sometimes gets that look in her eye like she's searching for a way to explain something she can't. Like the time I asked her how long a person should live, and she just sat at the kitchen table for the longest time, and finally, when I'd gone back to coloring and the phone rang so she had to come up with something quick, she said, "It's impossible to tell, Fiona. It's just impossible to know how many days a person's got to deal with." That's the blackness, the end of everything but also the beginning of knowing. And I won't ever forget it.*

But I have forgotten it. I throw the journal across the room and stare at the one open space in the whole of my attic. It's a small spot of shadow, like a freak valley in the middle of gargantuan boxes, forces to be reckoned with. To be an insect on the floor of this valley—truly an awesome fantasy. The world has ceased providing even the smallest of comforting sounds, the hum of the air vents or George's yard work. Light filters in asymmetrical patterns across the slanted ceiling, and the dust that seemed so classic and inviting now hangs as if stilled by some cosmic foreboding. I can't feel my toes; they've fallen asleep.



## Chapter One of *Out of the Valley of Sorek*

On any other day of the week, Lila Donovan would dress carelessly, give no particular thought to how she looked as she grabbed her khakis and laced up her hiking boots. She would pull on her favorite green sweater, the one that smelled like her father's cigar room where she spent most of her mornings reading hurried passages out of banned books. But today, she stood looking into her bedroom mirror for five full minutes assessing the strangeness of her pale figure in the black dress she had never worn. How long since she had been in a dress? The last funeral she could remember was her brother's, and that was nearly twelve years ago. Her makeup felt sticky, though she wasn't wearing much, and her usually wavy brown hair had been forced into a submissive bun at the base of her neck.

The memorial service last week had been quick, efficient, clean. With no body to bury and no visitation to conduct, it had been executed with the elegant precision of a surgeon. Until today, the elaborate tombstone headed an empty plot of ground. But the State had finally released Greg Donovan's body to the family so they could properly bury it. Lila wondered how many of the congregation would return for a service that seemed pointless now. She supposed most of them would.

Her mother called from downstairs. Lila couldn't tell what she was saying, but she knew it would be nearly unintelligible. Sandra Donovan hadn't been sober since the day her husband was killed in front of her. Lila screwed in her gold ball earrings and took one last look before heading downstairs to see what her mother wanted.

"Mom?" she asked as she reached the bottom of the stairs.

"Lila, thank God, I was—anyway, you don't know what happened to them?"

"Happened to what?"

“My earrings. Your father put them in this box and I can’t seem to—”

“Mom, what are you talking about?” The question was out before she saw her mother, sprawled at the base of the couch in the sitting room, an almost-empty glass of scotch in her hand. Sloshes of the drink had found their way onto her tailored funeral suit, and the dribble down her chin suggested this wasn’t her first glass. “The funeral’s in an hour,” said Lila.

“I know, darling, but the earrings, they’re gold—well, they’re probably not feathery, in any case, because I already found the blue brooch, but it wasn’t where I left it.”

“How many drinks have you had?”

“None of your damn business.”

Lila stooped down, took the glass from her mother’s hand, and set it on the glass-topped side table. She noticed a pair of sapphire earrings on the table next to a brochure for NY: Haven 9.

“Where did you get this?” she asked.

“What? Lila, be a dear and pour me another scotch. Your father hated scotch, the bastard.”

“Mother. Tell me where this brochure came from.”

“You’re just like him, you know.” She propped herself up on her elbows and crawled forward, inching her way into a standing position. She teetered but caught her balance with surprising effort. Stray gray hairs flew all over her flushed face, but she didn’t bother to wipe them away. Lila looked at her steadily.

“You can’t stay sober long enough to pretend today? A lot of people will be there, and a lot of them loved him—including me.”

“Ugh, grab my purse. Oh, there are my earrings.” She lunged for the earrings and nearly crashed into the table. She giggled. “If he could see me now.”

“Come on, mother.” Lila stuffed the brochure into her small black purse as best she could and found her mother’s purse draped over an armchair. She checked inside to make sure her mother’s keys and ID were inside, then slipped it over her shoulders. She then led her out the door and into the waiting limo.

The ride to the cemetery took less time than Lila wanted. Yesterday had seen a fine, steady drizzle; today the bipolar Charleston weather had shifted moods. The sun shone through a sparkling blue sky, the effect of which had warmed everything to a manageable autumn crispness.

Most of her thoughts over the past week-and-a-half had wandered to an image of Les Hanover’s guiltless grin as he attempted to walk coolly from the church after pulling the trigger. He must not have thought escape was really possible—so why had he done it? The question hung like lead over her shoulders. Many faces in the crowd at the burial service seemed to be asking the same thing.

The minister was brief, efficient. He had conducted the memorial service in a similar fashion, and Lila disapproved. Though grateful for the ease and quickness, she felt that someone should say something—a eulogy or a poem, something sentimental that Greg would’ve hated but would give her a chance to weep without seeming weak. She looked around as discreetly as possible. No one in the front row, at least, was crying. Had they not all just witnessed her father’s gruesome murder? Several of the men—pallbearers, in fact—had tackled Les to the ground in blind rage. Had that disappeared with the fear mongering of the government officials over the past two weeks? Had their brief and uncomfortable entrapment at the church on the day of the

murder erased ten years' worth of good, solid memories with Greg Donovan? She looked down at her hands and twiddled her fingers. The stiffness in the joints surprised her.

After the service, Lila looked around for the only person she could adequately talk to. She spotted him by a tree whose leaves had stubbornly refused to change even this late in the season. He put his arm around her shoulders. "How are you?"

"I'm just fine. It's Mom I'm worried about. Grief doesn't suit her."

"Sandra's found the bottle again, I take it?"

"I guess with Dad gone she figures she can stop trying to be the perfect pastor's wife."

"Fair enough." He paused and cleared his throat. "If you wanted to stay somewhere—"

"I have a house, Jack," she said quickly. She took a step back, away from his arm.

"Oh, I know. It's just—I know Sandra may need someone, but it's not like she's going to cozy up and be Mother Extraordinaire all of a sudden. A house can get empty real quick without—when someone—you know. I was just offering."

Lila sighed. "Sorry. I just—thanks for the offer. I'll think about it."

"There's something else."

"What?" Her shoulders tensed.

"It's about—Les."

Her heart sped up. "You're going to talk about him here? Now?"

"Lila, he's in trouble—"

"Are you kidding me? Damn right he's in trouble, he just shot my father. I expect a public execution pretty soon."

Jack frowned and stepped back a space. "Is that what you want?"

She looked over at her mother, who was attempting to steady herself on a member of the congregation while loudly explaining her latest nightmare. “He took something irreplaceable. I want him to suffer.” Her eyes met his as she said it.

Jack lowered his voice further and stepped forward again. He pulled her close and whispered, “A public execution is out of the question for this case. Your father was a Keeper—it’s Unpardonable. Les is getting more than he bargained for, and if I know you at all, I know that’s not what you want.” He released her.

“For the record, Lieutenant, I don’t give a shit about Les’s legal troubles.” She started to leave.

“It won’t bring him back.”

She stopped and looked up at him. “What won’t?”

“You’re not just punishing him for Greg—you’re punishing him for John, too. Don’t let your grief dictate how you live your life, Lila.”

She shook her head. “What do you know about grief?”

“Enough.”

“Thanks for the pep talk. Tell your best friend he can go to hell for all I care.”

“Lila—”

“No, you listen to me, Jack. I don’t know what he said to you to keep him in your good graces, but he just destroyed the one good thing in my life. And he needs to answer for that.”

“What if he was willing to do that?”

“What?”

Jack stepped even closer. The wind had picked up, and Lila could only just hear him. “He wants to see you.”

“That’s impossible. He’s in lockdown.”

“It’s not impossible for all of us.”

She folded her arms and looked up at him. “And what does he want, exactly?”

“He didn’t say.”

“Of course he didn’t. This is ridiculous.”

“It’s not. You want answers, and he’s the only one who can give them.”

She watched the limo driver kindly lead her mother back into the car and sighed, letting her shoulders droop dramatically, almost comically. “I’m tired of this, and it’s only just started.”

“I can arrange a meeting.”

She turned back to him. “What good would it do? Like you said, it won’t bring them back.”

“No, but knowing why they’re gone could be useful.”

She shook her head. Not twenty feet from where she stood, her father’s body lay cold and still inside a wooden box. Try as she might, she couldn’t reconcile the image of his corpse with the person he had been, and no amount of talking—to Jack, to Les, to God—would change it. She was as empty as she’d ever been, save the day they buried her brother. And after twelve years of continuous grief, the anger hadn’t abated. She assumed that time would gloss over the pain. Yet here it was again, the same wound in the same place. Nothing, she was sure, would ever mend it, especially talking to Les.

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Back in her own room, she pulled out the pamphlet for NY: Haven 9, a so-called safe colony set up by the government in the aftermath of the Second Civil War. In the interim years—before the three geographic regions split into their own independent territories—there had been a

lot of political talk about reuniting. With the outbreak of diseases and rampant looting, safe havens had been created. But it seemed like a lifetime ago, another world, and Lila had never even been conscious of the horrors of war until her brother's coffin arrived in an airplane hangar. So why her mother would keep this, a useless relic of an absurd past, Lila couldn't fathom. But she knew Sandra would never elaborate. Even if she were sober enough to explain, she would scoff at the pamphlet, which to her would be another reminder of her husband's ignorance.

Lila flipped open the cover, and a small piece of yellow paper fell out. On it, scribbled in a fine hand, were the words: *The last safe place*. She frowned, then almost immediately flipped through the rest of the booklet to see if any other notes had been hidden. Nothing else. Just this small scrap of paper, in a hand she didn't recognize.

She reached for the phone and dialed Jack's number.

"Lila, I didn't expect a call so—"

"Jack, what's the last safe place?"

Silence. She could hear his steadied breathing. Finally, he said, "What do you mean?"

"I'm not stupid. I found a pamphlet—"

"Meet me at the cemetery. "

"Which one? There are a few to choose from."

"You know which one. Thursday."

He hung up. Lila sat with the phone in her hand for a long time, allowing the setting sun to darken her room to an eerie twilight blue.

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*I remember sitting on my front porch for a solid two weeks after John died. It was in the middle of the hottest summer I ever knew, but it might as well have been February. When I think*

*back to how cold it seemed, I can still summon up that empty feeling. My whole body hurt. Two solid weeks—and my mom never once came outside to check on me, ask how I was doing or if I needed anything. Relatives came, old flowery women in grey hats. Few men (most were in the war or had political problems to attend to). They baked and sang and told me stories, swept the hair from my forehead and told me that everything would be all right. John hadn't died in vain, of course.*

*My dad never said a word to me either. I think there must be a point when kids realize their parents have needs and wants and desires like they do. That was my moment. He came out onto the porch. His sharp, hooked nose was silhouetted against the fading July sun, the only feature that anyone ever found off-putting about my dad. The rest of his usually-kind features just drowned in the sunset. That nose stuck out so crisp and determined that it took me a full two minutes to realize that tears were streaming down his cheeks. If my own heart hadn't dried up, it would've broken at the sight of him. I had never seen my dad cry over anything. I wouldn't see him do it again.*

*Two weeks after John died, I went back inside. The next day, my mother asked my dad for a divorce. I remember waking up to the smell of cinnamon rolls and the sound of silence. I crept downstairs hesitantly, expecting a trick. When I walked into the kitchen, she was already sitting, pouring a white glaze with meticulous grace over the fresh rolls and humming a tune she had been revising since probably John was born. My dad was leaning against the counter with his arms crossed. "Morning," I said.*

*When they looked up at me, it was as if they had expected someone entirely different to walk into the room. My mother stopped humming, my dad stood up straight and frowned down at me.*

*“Lila?” my mother said it like I was a ghost.*

*“What’s with the cinnamon rolls?” I asked.*

*They looked at each other and back at me. I could see each of their expressions—dazed, dreamy, like they had been miles away when I walked in. The glaze had begun to run all over the plate.*

*“Watch it,” I said, pointing to the rolls.*

*“We’re getting a divorce,” said my mother suddenly. She put down the glaze and wiped away the excess without looking down at the plate. “Cinnamon roll?”*

*“We are not getting a divorce,” said my dad. He walked to the fridge, opened it with unnecessary force, and rummaged through it for what felt like an hour. Still inside it, he called, “Lila, go check the mail.”*

*I hurried from the room as quickly as I could, the sound of my mother’s announcement ringing in my ears. My dad’s denial hadn’t registered as deeply as the impact of her statement. Her demand had been quiet, forceful. I could imagine with reasonable accuracy what their conversation had been like before I woke up. My mother’s low, piercing voice and his higher, resounding one clashing with intense debate—but not ever loud enough to let the child hear, that would be certain. Whatever happened, whatever was said, I was not to discover it until the results had come in, until the battle was completely over and all the players had cleaned up nicely after themselves. I ran out the front door and down the drive to the mailbox, where the little red flag was still raised. The mail hadn’t come. I sat down next to the box and cried.*

*The mail truck screeched into view. A tall man leaned out and said, “Hey, kid—this stuff’s for your dad. Make sure he gets it.” He handed me a small envelope, nearly unmarked*

*except for a small Confederate Seal in the top left corner and my dad's name, scrawled in elegant cursive, in the center. No stamp. No numbers.*

*I looked up at the man. "Is this real?" I asked. He chuckled.*

*"It's as real as anything," he said.*

*"Is there anything else?"*

*"Just these," he said, and he handed me a stack of bills and some coupon magazines.*

*Then he drove away, and I can still hear his whistling as clear as I heard it then. An unknown tune, soft and low.*

*I ran into the house, convinced that the mailman was God, that he was delivering some piece of advice for my dad, some way for him to win my mom back and make all the divorce talk disappear. When I got back to the kitchen, my mom was cleaning the dishes by hand—she never did this. Dad was still standing exactly where I'd left him. I took it as a promising sign. I handed the letter to him.*

*"Open it!" I said.*

*My mom stopped doing dishes. "Open what?" She walked over to him and glanced down at the envelope.*

*"I'll read this in my office," he said.*

*"You will not," she said.*

*"Dad, just open it."*

*He sighed, and I realized that the envelope had nothing to do with my parents' marriage, that it would solve nothing. I lost all interest. I took a seat at the kitchen table and looked out the bay window facing the front lawn. Our neighbor's dog had gotten loose again. I thought briefly of going to play with him. At least Fletcher was consistent.*

*At fourteen, I had no concept of the governmental structure already consuming the fractured United States. Even if I had, my dad's letter wouldn't have interested me. With a dead brother and parents who didn't care about each other anymore, nothing the government sent could affect my attitude about life.*

*My dad got a letter that day asking for his services as a Keeper. He was at liberty to discuss it with his family and a trusted adviser—but no one else. Any other mention of his role and he would be “seized by the State.” The Southern State (or Sector 3) was well on its way to becoming a tyrannical dictatorship, and this was twelve years ago.*

*A Keeper, for all intents and purposes, was a miniature State Guard, at a much lower but more administrative-intense level. He (in my dad's case) would run state operations under an inconspicuous guise. The State would take care of everything. All he had to do was convince the city of Charleston (capital of the Confederacy) that he had reformed his legendary decadent ways (my father's reputation for high-class debauchery was something my mother was eager to divulge to me whenever she was sure it would cause an uproar) and he was in.*

*I suppose my dad thought the change of lifestyle would show my mother that he was taking her grief seriously. There weren't many respectable positions left for men who had avoided the war in those days. My dad used his wealth to get out of a lot of things, but I guess it got him into a lot, too. The State called him up with a promising offer, and he was wise enough to see a golden opportunity.*

*We moved to Charleston proper; we'd been living in sheltered isolation for the duration of the war. When we arrived, my mother located the nearest bar that served “people of her class” and binged on scotch until my dad sent our driver to fetch her. Then he forbade her to drink in public ever again—but he kept a well-stocked bar in our basement liquor room—and*

*went to church the next Sunday with a smile plastered on his face that he never took off in public. My mother wore her signature hangover sunglasses, and the three of us caused such a stir I was sure we'd never fit into our designated roles.*

\*

The chill of late October rushed in around her as Lila stepped out of the Memory Recording Cell. She collected her ticket and walked in a straight path to the nearest shuttle station. The crunch of her boots on the gravel walk echoed across the high cement walls, mingling with the sounds of thousands like herself, all desperate to record some part of themselves into machines that wouldn't judge them. She nearly collided with three different people, equally hurried, who scuttled past her without so much as a glance of apology. She pulled her overcoat tighter around her as she walked. The day was bleak, and she wanted nothing more than to go home and light a fire. But her mother would no doubt be in a towering rage this early in the morning.

She walked through a stream of people whose faces lacked form or definition. Phantoms jostled past her, shoved her into other ghosts with impassive features. She saw no one, no eye color or expression, and when people got close enough to touch her, she let them run into her just to see if their physical properties were as blank as their faces. They were. A small boy bumped into her shin, and the only reason she stopped was because a cry of surprise brought her back into the present. His mother looked at her, and she could see through her mind's fog that this blob of a woman recognized her, but Lila didn't know her. The woman opened her mouth, then closed it without saying anything. She took her son's hand and continued to stare, even after she'd resumed her trudge through the muddy corridor.

She stood in line at the shuttle station, trying to determine which route to take. She needed to be at the Academy in half an hour, but the thought of teaching today seemed so perversely bizarre that she couldn't will herself to say it.

"Please select your destination." The voice came from a speaker attached to a long pipe that wound itself up towards the top of the dome.

"Worship District," she said.

"All operations to Worship District are temporarily suspended. Please select another destination."

"I don't care," said Lila.

"Please select your destination."

"Lila."

The sound of her name froze the back of her neck. She turned around, but there was no one there, no one she recognized. The throng of people behind her waiting for her to make a decision glared back at her impatiently. She heard their muttering but ignored it. Her name—someone had said it, but none of these people.

"Please select your location."

"Pleasure District," said a loud man to her left. He shoved past her and inserted his ticket. He then turned to Lila and said, "Next time be a little more decisive." The crowd followed his lead, and soon enough she had been consumed by them. Still she looked around for the source, but after a few minutes she determined that it was a futile search. It wasn't her name, it was the voice—her brother's voice. She hadn't heard it since the day he left fifteen years ago, but in the middle of this cement and muddied dome, she'd heard him say her name.

Once outside the station, the crisp air allowed her to breathe, but she still didn't know where she was going. It was another thirty minutes before she realized where her legs were taking her. She came to the crest of a hill and saw the cemetery spread out below, in small, neat rows to allow for maximum efficiency.

When the war ended, the funeral and burial industries had boomed for several years as people died from wounds and diseases. There wasn't even a birth reported officially for three years after the war, and most of the children born after that time had since died from negligence or starvation. So for a while, the death industry exploded. But the cemetery that held her brother's grave had been devoured by weeds. Now that the population was resolutely stagnant, the death industry had fallen into severe decline. John's grave was at the top of a hill, underneath a pine tree, surrounded by a wrought-iron gate that Sandra had insisted on purchasing. Lila pulled out a key to the gate and entered, taking a seat by the tombstone that always baffled and angered her.

"In life, death," she read, shaking her head and smiling. "Mom insisted that's what you wanted."

She smoothed down the corner of a felt blanket draped across the top of the grave. On it stood two flags in metal jars—the reinstated Confederate Flag and the South Carolina State Flag—which had been made ragged by wind since the last time she'd come. She took the State flag and twirled it in her fingers. "Now what?" she demanded. She set the flag back into its jar. "John—the war ended twelve years ago. When is it going to be over?"

She couldn't make herself accept the fact of her father's murder. "Dad is dead," she said to the tombstone. "He's dead." She repeated it over and over until finally the words sounded so foreign she had to stop and reassess what she was saying. The letters, if she'd been writing them,

would have looked like unintelligible squiggles. “Dad is dead.” She enunciated it, tried to make herself feel the impact. But nothing came. The words held no meaning.

The sound of footsteps brought her back to the present.

“We need to find a better meeting spot,” she said.

Jack took a seat beside her. “This is one of the few places that hasn’t been put under constant surveillance. Of course, now that your dad’s gone, that’ll change.”

“Figures. About the pamphlet—”

“Lila, that information is so top secret even I don’t know much about it.”

“It was a handwritten note. I found a pamphlet about NY: Haven 9, and a handwritten note that said ‘The last safe place.’ What does it mean?”

“It means your brother’s alive, for starters.”

She stared at him, her mouth half open. “Are you out of your mind? We’re sitting on his grave as we speak.”

Jack paused before saying slowly, “Did you ever see his body?” He looked down at her.

“They said it was too damaged—too destroyed to—Jack, this is bullshit.”

“It’s not. If you found a note inside a pamphlet, it means he’s alive. It also means a lot of other things, but there’s no time to explain. Where did you find it?”

“It was sitting on a table in my living room.”

“Does Sandra know what’s inside it?”

“She doesn’t know anything right now.”

“Lila, you need to talk to Les. Immediately. I can arrange an interview for tomorrow.”

“What are you talking about? Have you lost your mind? My brother is dead. And now, thanks to Les, so is my dad. So you’ll excuse me if I don’t—”

“There isn’t time for this.” He stood up and reached his hand down to help her up. She looked up at him and shook her head. “Come on, we need to go.”

“I’m staying here. I need to think.”

“Even if you think I’m crazy,” he said slowly, “Even if this sounds like complete bullshit, I need you to trust me. John’s alive. Doesn’t any part of you want to know for sure?”

She looked back at John’s grave. “Every part of me wants him to be alive. But that’s fantasy. This is the real world.”

Jack was already outside the gate. “I have to get back to the station, but I’ll contact you soon. Pack some bags. Pack essentials, get your mom out of town, as soon as you can.”

With that, he left. She spent another hour staring into the ground and running over in her mind the way her father’s body had jerked as it hit the plush church carpet. A week’s distance from the event hadn’t softened that blow yet. Then she stood up and said her final goodbye to the grave. She didn’t bother locking the gate door; protection seemed pointless now.

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Lila sat at the bus station all morning. Her mother sat next to her, staring straight ahead and, surprisingly, truly sober for the first time in days. Sandra Donovan still looked rough, though. Deep red rims surrounded her clear grey eyes, and a week’s worth of half-sleepless nights had ravaged her bleak complexion. Lila noticed for maybe the first time in her life how old her mother seemed. She had been twenty-nine when Lila was born; she could be her grandmother now. Lila reached over and put her hand on her mother’s, instinctively. She immediately regretted it and debated with near-panic the decision to pull it back. But she did, and the space between them sharpened.

The bus whooshed into view; it spewed large gulps of steam into billowy formations that reminded Lila of the time her mother had taken Lila shopping when she was entering high school. These swirling masses brought forth the images of dresses—for cotillions and tea parties, old southern traditions reestablished for a short time during the second Civil War to inspire loyalty in the people. Lila recalled her mother's strong young hands at the time, skimming over hundreds of fabrics and muttering to herself (and sometimes to saleswomen, but never to Lila) about the textures, the appropriateness, or the cost. Not that cost ever truly mattered. In the midst of a civil war, her mother reverted to the finer things of life with the luxury of one who never dreamed of life beyond her private gated community.

This same woman sat next to her now, and Lila almost laughed at the circumstance. The bench was cold and wet from the morning's frost. The bus had only just begun to relinquish its inhabitants—mostly aged women like Sandra, seeking a change from whatever disheveled life they had left behind. Their men had no doubt died long ago, probably at the outset of the war. The country was full of widows now. Only in Sandra's case, the war had been over for more than a decade before her husband was taken.

“Mom,” said Lila suddenly.

Sandra continued to stare but said, “Yes, dear.”

“You must have loved Daddy at some point.”

“Oh, I loved him all along.”

Lila cleared her throat. “Then why'd you want a divorce?”

Her mother opened her mouth and closed it, then turned to face her. Her wrinkles doubled as she frowned, perfectly bemused by the question. “What do you mean?”

“You asked for a divorce, not long after John died.”

Sandra's milky eyes widened. "Darling, what can you mean? John is alive."

The bus sounded its horn. Now emptied, it beckoned the next group of postwar stragglers. Ice ran like fire through Lila's bones. Her fingertips tingled as all the nerves in her body gathered together and plunged to the bottom of her stomach. She gripped her mother's shoulder hard.

"Mother—John is dead. Dad is dead."

"Oh, your father has died, of course, but your brother is perfectly alive. That's where I'm going. To see him."

The bus sounded a second warning bell. Sandra stood up, collected her smaller luggage pieces, and walked with crisp, clacking steps to the bus's undercarriage. Her tiny stilettos scraped elegantly across the pavement as she walked, her shoulders held high. There was no indication that what she had just said was absolutely ludicrous.

Lila grabbed the handle of the large rolling piece and followed, her own boots clomping across the sidewalk in stark contrast to her mother's petite gait. "Mother!" she called.

Sandra handed her luggage to the attendant and turned to face Lila. "We didn't tell you because you were so young and we thought it was best, but John's alive, dear. He's in the north."

"John was a Patriot."

"Of course he was. But after the war it didn't much matter, now did it?"

Lila shoved the large bag into the storage area herself and pulled her mother away from the other passengers. The bus cried a third and final warning.

"I need to know exactly what you're talking about," she said.

"Lila, darling, I've got to go. I will write to you of course. I'll be staying with John in Albany. We'll send word when it's safe to come."

She turned and walked quickly to the bus steps. Lila followed. “Mother, this doesn’t make any sense. He died. You got a phone call—I heard you talking. I was there.”

“Things are not always what they seem,” said Sandra.

She stood on the bottom of the bus steps, her tiny figure consumed by the doorframe. A couple passengers pushed awkwardly onto the bus around her, muttering under their breaths at the nerve of some people. Sandra’s hand reached out and took hold of the rubber seal on the door. It slid up the side, slowly, methodically, and Lila was momentarily mesmerized by the fluidity of it. Her mother’s soft, frail hand, bone white and crumpled with veins, snaked its way up and down the bus’s door, until at last Lila realized with a terrible jolt that the bus was pulling away. Its great billowing smoke had evaporated, turned into a pitiful stream of black smoke issuing from the tailpipes. She couldn’t see her mother through the tinted windows. The ghost of her mother’s bizarre final act remained, planted firmly in Lila’s mind. In the recess of her mind, she saw a young woman with long brown hair crouched low over a cradle. The woman’s purple dressing gown had yellow stars all over it, and the hem was stained with orange juice. The woman’s creamy hand soared above the cradle as she hummed “Pachelbel’s Canon in D” to the baby girl inside. The hand waved and waved, and the little girl inside the cradle felt as though the hand would always be there, that the motion of the wave would carry on through the night as she slept, comfortable and secure in this wonderland of infant imagination.

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## Vita

Jennifer Grace Davis was born on Andrews Air Force Base in Maryland but quickly migrated south with her family to Charleston, South Carolina, where she spent the greater part of her childhood developing memories she would later exploit in her fiction. She comes from a large and quirky family; she's the second of four children, who all share the same initials (Jeremy Gibbs, Jamie Gabrielle, John Gideon). Her family moved again when she was nine, this time to Soddy Daisy, Tennessee, where she's spent the rest of her life to date. Though not an avid reader until later in her teens, she started experimenting with writing in eighth grade, when she and her best friend discovered a mutual love (and knack) for creative writing, especially storytelling. After some dabbling in other fields, she settled on English for her undergraduate program. She earned a Bachelor of Arts degree from Middle Tennessee State University in May 2008 and will obtain a Master of Arts degree from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga in May 2010. From here, she plans to write a series for children.