

THE PATH OF LUCIUS PARK AND OTHER STORIES OF JOHN VALLEY

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A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of the University  
of Tennessee at Chattanooga in Partial  
Fulfillment of the Requirements of the  
Degree of Master's of English

The University of Tennessee at Chattanooga  
Chattanooga, Tennessee

May 2013

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis comprises a writer's craft introduction and nine short stories which form a short story cycle. The introduction addresses the issue of perspective in realist and magical realist fiction, with special emphasis on magical realism and belief. The stories are a mix of realism and magical realism, and are unified by characters and the fictional setting of John Valley, FL.

## DEDICATION

These stories are dedicated to my wife Jeana, my parents Keith and Debra, and my brother Wesley, without whom I would not have been able to write this work, and to the towns that served as my home in childhood and young adulthood, without which I would not have been inspired to write this work.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my Fiction professors, Sybil Baker and Tom Balázs, for their hard work and patience with me during the past two years. They have offered me engaging criticism and encouragement for which I am grateful. I would also like to thank Rebecca Jones for filling out my committee, offering feedback, and asking the questions I never thought to ask of my own work, as well as Joyce Smith, who has been a gracious advisor and program director. Without these people and their help, I would not have finished this thesis.

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## INTRODUCTION

The type of perspective or point of view employed is particularly important in magical realist fiction because the reader's belief or lack thereof can place a heavy strain on a magical realist narrative. I have found the craft writings of David Jauss, Douglas Glover, and John Gardner to be most helpful when considering perspective, especially in relation to magical realism. In addition, masters of the genre like Salman Rushdie, Gabriel Garcia Márquez, Kelly Link, and Aimee Bender are strong models of magical realist writers using perspective to create authenticity in their work. Because the stories in this thesis draw from magical realism and fabulism, I tried to apply the techniques used by these writers in my own work in order to make the most use of each story's perspective. In this thesis introduction, I will begin by examining the arguments of Jauss, Glover, and Gardner regarding perspective. Then I will examine stories from Link and Bender alongside aspects of Rushdie's and Marquez's magical realist novels to demonstrate how magical realist writers make use of perspective. I will finish the introduction by examining how I have used as models several of these authors' uses of perspective in the stories included in this thesis.

While many books on the craft of writing make special note of the importance of perspective or point of view in fiction writing, each expert has his or her own approach to the subject. In his essay "From Long Shots to X-Rays: Distance and Point of View in Fiction," David Jauss says, "Point of view is arguably the most important element of fiction writing, for it is inextricably linked to characterization, style and theme" (25). Jauss goes on to explain that

point of view encompasses three aspects of perspective: person (first, second, or third), narrative techniques (omniscience, stream of consciousness, etc.), and locus of perception (whose eyes we are seeing through, regardless of person) (25). In his essay “How to Write a Novel,” Douglas Glover describes point of view’s facets a bit differently. He says that point of view involves concrete “desire, significant history and language overlay” and defines the second and third terms as follows: significant history is background that brings the main character to the point of his concrete desire, and language overlay is the diction and syntax that a given character would be expected to use (3). For example, a mechanic and a painter will most likely describe their experiences in different ways with different vocabularies; the mechanic will talk of people and objects in a manner that he can understand (such as comparing them to the parts of a machine) and a painter will do the same (talking of colors and shapes).

In magical realist fiction, point of view plays an important role in establishing the credibility of the magical realist world. In her book *Magic(al) Realism*, Maggie Ann Bowers defines magical realism as “all narrative fiction that includes magical happenings in a realist matter-of-fact narrative, whereby ‘the supernatural is not a simple or obvious matter, but it *is* an ordinary matter, and everyday occurrence – admitted, accepted and integrated into the rationality and materiality of literary realism”” (2). In this definition, the emphasis falls on the manner of narration, on how the narrator presents the magical in context with the mundane. If the point of view of the story allows the magical elements to be doubted, then the story has failed to be magical realism. This conflation of magic and realism relies entirely upon narrative techniques, upon diction and voice. The reader accepts the events of Salman Rushdie’s *Midnight’s Children* or Gabriel Garcia Márquez’s *One Hundred Years of Solitude* because the narrator – Saleem in *Children* and an unknown omniscient being in *Solitude* – accepts them. For example, when José

Arcadio Buendia is haunted by the ghost of a man he killed, the narrator does not question the possibility of the existence of ghosts, but narrates the sequence as though any reader would have experienced such a haunting or known someone who had. In these instances, the person of the narrator (first, second, or third) does not affect the reader's belief directly, but how the reader's belief interacts with the story. The reader will accept related events differently from Saleem's first person perspective than he will from *Solitude's* omniscient, third person narrator, but the important thing to note about these two narrators is that they both present their stories as factual and normal. This is part of the narrators' technique.

What Jauss calls "narrative technique" is closely connected with what Jauss and John Gardner refer to as psychic distance, or how close the reader is to the character's mind and thoughts. As Gardner says in *The Art of Fiction*, the biggest issue that a writer faces in regard to point of view and psychic distance is control. If the author is not consistent with point of view and careful of when the narrative shifts closer to or further from the character's mind, the result is poor writing. Gardner also says that "one may do anything one pleases with point of view, as long as it works," so while there may be time-honored methods for telling stories of a certain kind through a certain point of view, there is no prescribed point of view for telling any given story (155).

The careful use of perspective is even more important in magical realist stories and novels, such as Kelly Link's story "The Faery Handbag," because magical realism relies on the reader accepting fantastic events as mundane. In this story, Genevieve tells the reader about her grandmother Zofia and the magical handbag that brings them together, and Link uses past and present tenses as an integral part of the point of view, controlling the reader's perception of events and their relation to each other. This story uses past tense throughout most of the

narration, but when Genevieve addresses the audience directly, she uses the present tense. This limited use of the present tense gives the narrator more control over how her audience perceives time and how fast she moves through the action of the story. However, Genevieve is still struggling to control the elements of her story as she tells it, as shown when she says, “you have to be patient. It’s hard work telling everything in the right order” (8). Genevieve’s comment reflects on the three elements Jauss says are important to perspective or point of view: characterization, style, and theme. First, the comment lets the reader see that Genevieve has taken on some harshness that her grandmother shows in their Scrabble games when Zofia tells her about the handbag. Second, it is one of the first uses of direct address in the story, allowing the reader to see that this is a world where stories are told and listened to just as much as they are written and read. Third, the comment reminds the reader that he is entirely dependent on Genevieve’s narration to hear the story, and it is Genevieve who uses the story’s theme phrase (“Don’t believe a word”) three times in her narration; the only other time it appears is when Zofia is telling stories to Genevieve.

The story’s theme phrase, “don’t believe a word,” raises the issue of belief, an important one in magical realism. In magical realist stories, the reader must accept the supernatural events as part of the physical universe in which they are set – ours. Link has said that her stories take place in a world “where the fantastic is mundane and the mundane fantastic,” which is similar to Alejo Carpentier’s definition of magical realism: “here the strange is commonplace, and always was commonplace” (McLaughlin; Carpentier 104). In “The Faery Handbag,” Link achieves this effect by making the fantastic object something mundane and commonplace: Zofia’s handbag, which also contains an entire village of people. For the magical realist writer, the greatest challenge is to create this mundane or commonplace appearance for every strange or fantastic

occurrence. Flannery O'Connor says in her essay "The Grotesque in Southern Fiction" that writers "are fundamentally seekers and describers of the real, but the realism of each novelist [or short story writer] will depend on his view of the ultimate reaches of reality" (815). While O'Connor's definition of "realism" seems to free magical realist writers from having to defend or explain their texts, that does not keep doubt and unbelief away from magical realism or out of its major texts.

In two of the most well-known magical realist texts, Gabriel Garcia Márquez's novel *One Hundred Years of Solitude* and Salman Rushdie's novel *Midnight's Children*, the reader is confronted with the narrator's belief in what is being narrated and the disbelief of characters who are either witnessing or hearing the story. In *Solitude*, the doubting character is sometimes Ursula, who disbelieves José Arcadio Buendía's alchemy (which is shown to be faulty and unsuccessful) and Melquiades' magic (which is proved potent in the novel's final pages, if not in the character's resurrection and haunting). More often, however, the doubting character in Marquez's novel is Fernanda, who believes that the strange happenings of Macondo can be chalked up to its being a rural village without real culture, an opinion shared by many other "outsider" characters in the book. In *Midnight's Children*, the doubting character is Padma, and the narrator Saleem's ambivalent response to her doubt could also be addressed to the reader: "believe, don't believe" (381). Saleem is narrating events as they actually happened, and for him, our belief is inconsequential because his own belief is firm. *Midnight's Children* also makes use of unreliability that builds belief. Several times, Saleem acknowledges mistakes he has made in keeping the time or events of his autobiography in the proper order. He claims that this breakdown in authority cannot be repaired and that despite his inaccuracies the way he told the story was the way it happened. This passage works similarly to the repeated admonition to not

“believe a word” in “The Faery Handbag”; instead of making the reader disbelieve the story, the plea to not believe increases belief. Genevieve’s story only seems more plausible because she asks us not to accept it, and Saleem’s attempts to be honest about his mistakes make us accept his story more than we did before, especially those parts that he has not said are inaccurate in some details. Likewise, Ursula’s and Fernanda’s claims that the magical events in *Solitude* could not have happened or have some natural explanation do not convince the reader, partially because the narrator never doubts the magic. It could be said that the doubt of characters like Padma and Ursula creates belief in the reader rather than destroying it, acting as a vaccine against future doubt.

Another method of instilling belief through perspective that is used frequently in magical realism is the one that Aimee Bender uses to open her story “The Healer.” The first line of the story is “There were two mutant girls in the town: one had a hand made of fire and the other had a hand made of ice” and the story proceeds as though this deviation from reality were anything but (121). This sort of blunt, matter-of-fact storytelling is part of what allows magical realism to present the mundane and the fantastic simultaneously and effectively. If Bender were to try to explain why the girls were mutants, or theorize at length about how their powers worked, her story would slip into fantasy or science fiction. As it is, the story gives no thought to why the girls are mutants, and what little time is spent on how their powers work is done with such a realistic narrative voice that it does not risk sounding like a scene from *X-Men*. Part of what gives this story its realistic tone is its narrator, a girl from the town who is an acquaintance of both mutant girls and who is essentially telling their story, not hers. Her simultaneous proximity to and distance from these girls and their situation (being different from the rest of the town)

gives her narrative an added level of authority. It is also notable that no one in the town questions the possibility of the girls' existence or their powers.

Another of Bender's stories employs similar tactics; in "Loser" there are characters who doubt the titular character's ability to find lost things. They accuse him of stealing the lost items and hiding them so that he can find them again. The story opens with fairy tale diction ("Once there was an orphan who had a knack for finding lost things") but the story is so vested in literary realism that it is never a question for the reader whether the boy can find these things; similarly, Rushdie opens *Midnight's Children* with "Once upon a time" and he makes other references to fairy tales and mythology throughout the novel. Although Bender uses fairy tale diction to open her story, the initial proposition of the story is not much different from that of "The Healer"; both stories begin with a slightly unusual or outright impossible situation, but treat that situation as if it were a natural and everyday occurrence.

In writing and preparing my own collection, I have studied the stories and novels discussed above to apply their techniques to my own work. The three shorter flash fiction pieces originally were one story told by a limited omniscient narrator close to the mind of the character Red. They are now told from three separate perspectives, none of which is close to Red's mind (except where Jo narrates Red's thoughts). The effect this has on these stories as individual moments and as a larger narrative of Red's life is to help the readers see Red as the mystery that he is to himself and those around him. Telling the story from his perspective in either first or third person would not achieve that effect because although he is the main subject of each story, none of these stories is Red's story. These stories also follow the narrative structure of "The Healer" by using other characters to narrate the stories that are focused on Red, whose candy apple-colored skin makes him the central supernatural figure in those stories. I have also imitated

Bender's use of perspective and narration in "The Healer" by having Anna Jenkins tell the story "A Young Man with Grassy Arms" as if it were her own and not Ellis Watson's, the story's central supernatural figure as the mutant girls are in "The Healer." In "Red I: Haunting," I have imitated Saunders' shift in perspective by having the story appear to be narrating in third person the thoughts of Red Lucius, when in fact the narration is given in the first person by another character, Jo Josephs. However, the realization that Jo is narrating does not come until close to the end of the story.

Because these stories are set in the fictional town of John Valley, where the impossible and improbable seem to occur with such frequency that the residents hardly take note of it any more, the proper perspective is essential to telling these stories. Most of the characters have never left the county they live in, and some have never left John Valley. This insular nature opens the stories to the question of reality and whether the events described are in fact happening or whether they are hallucinatory or metaphorical in nature. Of the stories in this collection, "Many are Called" contains the closest to an outsider's perspective: that of Tyler Mitchum, who is returning after an absence of seven years. His story is told in third person, with the narrator's voice limited to his thoughts and perceptions, and Tyler's perspective is the one that most closely reflects Glover's aspects of point of view. Tyler's concrete desire is to see Sheila again, and perhaps rekindle their old romance. His significant history is that he has been gone from John Valley for a long time, during which he has finished his college degree and begun a career away from his hometown. His language overlay is complex because he is coming to this wedding as both an outsider and a townspeople. He is familiar with John Valley and its constituent weirdness, but he has been gone so long that the events that coincide with his return disorient and confuse him. "Many are Called" is perhaps the story furthest from magical realism in that its

strangeness (the wedding guests being dressed alike at the request of the bride and groom) is less of an impossibility and more of an unheard of possibility.

These stories also continue the tradition of including disbelieving or doubting characters in magical realist texts that Márquez, Rushdie, Link and Bender have exemplified. One set of characters in particular represent an interesting take on this tradition: Ellis' parents in "A Young Man with Grassy Arms," Alton and Georgia. Georgia is the traditional doubting figure. Like Padma in *Midnight's Children* she questions the reality of what is being narrated to her by her loved one, in this case when Ellis tells her about the grass growing from his arms. She even goes so far as to pluck some of the grass from Ellis' arm in an attempt to prove to him that the grass is not growing out of him. Like most doubting characters, she is eventually convinced by the proof, at least enough to no longer be so vocal with her doubts. By contrast, Alton accepts the reality of his son's grassy arms on one level – there are mysterious changes occurring in Ellis' body – but never seems to grasp the fullness of the situation – that Ellis is being turned into something like a walking lawn. Alton's simultaneous belief and disbelief in his son's transformation is very telling of his view of the world. He tells Georgia not to bother Ellis about the changes he is experiencing because they are natural, so we understand that Alton's world is not affected by change; Alton's failure to grasp the entire truth of the changes Ellis is experiencing also tell us that Alton does not see the world completely, but in fragments. Alton and Georgia also have their doubt filtered before it reaches the reader, first through Ellis when he relates it to the My Friends group and then through Anna as she relates Ellis' story to the reader, just as Padma's own doubts are filtered through Saleem.

While the person and locus of perception in magical realist stories are adaptable to the individual story, the narrative techniques employed are basic: straightforward narration that

includes the magical in an everyday sense. Though a magical realist story can be told from many perspectives, they will all have that one aspect in common. No magical realist narrator can doubt the truth of his story (though at times Rushdie's narrator Saleem pushes that prescription to its limits), but other characters may introduce doubt into the narrative in order to strengthen the reader's own belief in the narrative.

## THE PATH OF LUCIUS PARK

*Joshua Benjamin Josephs, 2021*

The beginning of his second day in the Park, Jo reaches his goal: the heart of Lucius Park – the place where it all began. The stench of rot chokes the air and the source of the smell seems to lay in the grove of trees in the middle of the bog on whose edge Jo stands. He begins walking through the slime and the mud, always keeping his arms above his head so that if he stumbles, he will be able to grab something and not sink. Before he knows it, Jo is in above his waist, but the grove is close. He reaches for the roots of the trees. From a hidden nest in the tangle, a cottonmouth strikes his arm. Jo watches, almost dismissive, as the snake’s fangs puncture his skin and muscle. He seizes the snake and tosses it aside, its venom already flowing in his blood. His elbow stiffens as the venom attacks his muscles, but he grasps one of the sturdier roots and hauls himself over the tangle and into the grove. A skeleton lies close to the trees, guided by the current of the Blackwater River that empties into this part of the Park. A thin sack that looks like it holds more bones swishes against the skeleton in the thin ripples of Jo’s wake.

“Three days, in and out,” he reminds himself as he recovers his breath. He told Samuel Wind it would take him three days to get to the heart of Lucius Park and back with the town’s oldest secret. Not that most people in John Valley would actually call this place a park if they saw it. This wilderness that makes up half of Santa Lucia County is the perfect place to hide the truth. Jo wonders whether he will confront Red Lucius or the Debt-keeper first when he returns to town with that truth.

The ground inside the grove, drier and firmer than he expected in this bog, is covered with dry, rotting leaves. A large open patch clear of leaves looks as though someone might have buried something there almost two hundred years ago when John Valley was hardly a community and the county lines had not been drawn. The branches above intertwine so that almost no sunlight comes in between them. The bare ground holds no trace of Jo's entrance except for the dusty mud that appears in the tiny craters formed by the water falling from his clothes to the earth.

Jo shuffles to the open patch and begins to dig. The folding shovel he kept in his pocket is still dry and clean because of the plastic bag in which he kept it. The camouflage green metal quickly grimes with mud and dirt. Blood enters the mixture when Jo's hand slips on the dirty handle. His sweat fills the wound in the earth long after his clothes have stopped dripping water. At last Jo hears the ringing *thunk* of metal striking long-buried metal. His right arm is all but useless by now, the snake's venom having broken down his already weakened muscles as he worked to find the secrets underground. He intensifies his efforts at this first reward. He has already wasted enough time.

After another half hour of digging, Jo unearths the brass-bound strongbox, lifting it gently so it does not crumble under the strain. Inside it he finds a thick glass vial filled with dried blood and a sheaf of papers bound in oilskin. The first sheet of paper reads, "12 August 1839. The account of John Lucius, in his own words, of the founding of John Valley and the sequestering of Lucius Park..."

Jo reads each page, wondering what Red will make of his ancestor's words, before wrapping the papers back in their oilskin along with the vial of blood. He takes the skeleton and sack from their place in the grove's roots and places them in the dilapidated strongbox. With a

silent prayer he sinks them in the bog before gathering the oilskin bundle and heading back to town. The cottonmouth he tossed aside earlier lies dead in the branches of the tree that caught it, as though it had fled from a world that could contain bargains like the one Jo had read about in the manuscript of John Lucius.

The rain begins before he is ready to stop for the night. He feels the strain of the last two days – the lack of food, the venom gnawing at his weary muscles – but he cannot stop. If he stops too soon, he won't be back in town before his three days are up, and then Samuel Wind will come looking for him. No one else should come into the Park until Jo has confronted the Debt-keeper with the truth. He walks into the night and only stops when he falls and nearly rolls off the side of the red clay cliff that he is walking along. He lets the darkness hold his consciousness for one last night.

In the morning, Jo's time runs away faster than he expected, like sand from a suddenly cracked hourglass. The venom should not have worked this quickly, should not slow him this much. Perhaps he shouldn't have buried the bones. They had been there for fifteen years. He could have gone back later and buried them, after he had confronted the Debt-keeper. He feels time slip blood-like over his fingers and forces himself to walk. His task must be complete before there's no blood left.

The world begins to blur and fade as Jo reaches the edge of the Park. Jo asks himself again whether he should first confront the Debt-keeper in his office on Maple Street or deliver Red's inheritance of long-buried sins. He chooses Red because the house is closer than the office. He gives thanks for the storm because it will cover his return long enough to catch the Debt-keeper unaware. When he finds Red's house, he leans heavily against the rusty mailbox so he can catch his breath before leaving the oilskin package inside like a special delivery.

Life is no longer guaranteed for Jo from one breath to the next. He feels the terror of death approaching, senses it sneaking up like a mosquito, unseen but determined. The terror almost soothes him because it tells him he is still alive. The dead do not fear.

Jo stumbles occasionally on the way to the Debt-keeper's office, but despite his failing vision and strength, he does not wander or stop until he reaches the porch of the old house that serves as the place of death for the town. The storm dulls the sign by the door, normally gleaming in the afternoon sun, so that Jo can hardly make out the letters, much less form them into words. He knows the familiar warning by heart. *Morton Swinburne, Debt-Keeper: By appointment only.*

He raises his hand to knock, but falls to the floor. He gasps a few times, and the wind picks up as though a hurricane is coming in off the Gulf. Jo's eyes close, blocking out the pale grey vision of the Debt-keeper's office. A few tears trail through the dirt and blood on his face. As his body ceases to move, the storm that has been building over the town, teasing the surrounding countryside with rainfall and clouds, breaks with the sound of the gates of hell being wrenched from their hinges.

## RED I: HAUNTING

*Joshua Benjamin Josephs, 1998*

“You go first,” said Liam Newman.

“No you,” said Red Lucius. Neither dared suggest that Min Coulter go first because she was a girl.

The three kids crouched in the bushes outside the old Broxson house. The moon wasn't shining even though it ought to have been full. Red stood out from the night less than the other two. Their white-but-tanned skin still shone like phosphor in the starlight, but Red had been born with skin the color of candied apples and this ruddy complexion made him harder to differentiate from the near-black shrubbery. His close-cropped hair hid his scalp from the starlight. He was as non-present as a ghost, but Jo saw him.

Inside the Broxson house, Joshua Josephs sat in the thick dust as though he had never been anywhere else, listening to the quiet voices outside. Low and dark with years of emptiness, the house lurked on the edge of John Valley just past the Hamilton Bridge, just as the three kids crouched in the bushes outside. Jo knew that they had told themselves that they were coming to the Broxson house because it was supposed to be haunted, but the only thing haunting the Broxson house that night was Jo. The kids about to dash up to the warped old porch carried more haunting things with them than they would find in the house.

Red reached the door first. As his fist slammed against the ancient wood of the door Min and Liam ran into him and the three of them tumbled half-frightened into the front hall where Jo sat like a ghost in the dust.

“Well that just ruins it then,” said Liam as he coughed out the dust they had stirred up when they fell. “How are we supposed to find ghosts in a haunted house that’s got somebody in it?”

“You never know,” Jo said. “Ghosts aren’t always attached to places. Sometimes they’re attached to people.” He bent down and started to write something in the dust, piling up thick ridges of grime in the wake of his fingertip. “Everybody has their ghosts,” he added looking up at Red, who was dusting himself off. “Some more than others.” Red thought that Jo’s eyes carried a hundred thousand ghosts in that moment.

A whippoorwill called from its nest somewhere in Lucius Park. The house was located near the Park, but then so was almost all of John Valley. Proximity to the Park could hardly be avoided when it took up half the county and surrounded John Valley like the ocean surrounds a peninsula.

“Let’s go. We didn’t come here to listen to this crap,” said Liam, but Min said, “We came all this way, we might as well look around.” Red’s eyes were locked with Jo’s. Even though Red was a year older, he felt that Jo was almost a grownup from the way he talked, and that frightened Red for reasons he couldn’t explain. Red stayed in that half crouch while Min took her flashlight and started walking through the house, each footstep accompanied by a squeaking floorboard and a rising cloud of dust. Liam followed her as far as the living room.

Red wondered if Jo’s comment about ghosts had anything to do with the story about Red’s great-grandfather John Lucius that Red’s dad had told him just before he left. He wasn’t

about to ask. No one was supposed to know about that, according to Red's dad. It was a family story told only to the Lucius family. Even Red's Aunt Rebecca had denied knowing about it when Red asked her during a church luncheon. Then Red's dad left.

"Why do they leave?" Jo asked him. Jo saw the fear and confusion in Red's face. He knew that Red guessed that he knew what Red had been thinking. Jo smiled to say, yes, he knew.

Red heard Min walking around upstairs but his eyes never left Jo's face. "Why does who leave?" Red thought of the deal his ancestor had made to keep Death satisfied, wondered how many ghosts would follow him in his lifetime.

"Where do they all go, Jefferson Lucius? The people who die or disappear now that your grandfather's curse has settled? What happens to them?"

Jo was the first person to say Red's given name in years. He had been called Red all of his life because of his skin. Even the teachers at school called him Red and never wrote "Jefferson" on anything official unless they were required by law. And he sat on the floor looking like a ghost or an owl or a whippoorwill that wanted to know why Red was in its house. Jo wondered why Red would use those words to describe him. Images, really, the ideas of ghost and owl and whippoorwill, things unseen or unheard, haunting.

"That burden will be yours to carry, when we are gone," Jo said.

Red turned and felt the dust gathering around his feet. "Not if I throw it away," he said, taking off into the night. The truth was, none of them ever left. No one in more than one hundred years of John Valley's history had left, even after death. No one outside the Lucius family had known, but now someone else was in on the secret.

Jo knew.

## A YOUNG MAN WITH GRASSY ARMS

*Anna Jenkins, 2001*

Just a few months ago, I was recruited as a sponsor for the My Friends Club after Ellis Watson started growing grass all over his body. We were a grade apart, but for some reason I don't think we had ever interacted before the Thursday of our first My Friends meeting. The principal and Mr. Simmons, the club's director/therapist, chose me as Ellis' sponsor because they wanted another girl in the group. As we joined the circle in the school auditorium, we introduced ourselves to the group.

"Hi, my name is Anna, and this is my friend Ellis. He has grass growing all over his body."

Ellis stared up at first, counting ceiling tiles and trying to figure out how to make the best of having ended up in our local freaks club. I wished I could tell him how we would both get through this together, but I didn't know how I was going to get through it myself. None of us wanted to be stuck with the label of "My Friend."

"Ellis, why don't you tell us how your condition first presented itself," said Mr. Simmons.

Ellis brought his eyes down from the ceiling and looked around the circle. The other members of the My Friends Club were Jo Josephs and Red Lucius, both eighth graders like Ellis; and Karla Sayers and Susie Lewis, both seventh graders like me. Susie might as well have been normal; she was only missing her toes. Jo and Karla spent most of the meeting having

conversations in their minds across the circle of chairs. Other than the sponsors, who included kids from across the social spectrum, Ellis was the only one who hadn't had his condition longer than memory. Listen to me, I sound like Mr. Simmons. Ellis hadn't always grown grass on his skin like a walking lawn. Unlike the others, he had a beginning to his story.

It started late one afternoon in the first weeks of school, the shadows not yet gathering like waves in a rising tide around the farmhouse and the pavilion, both crouched low in the afternoon sun like farm cats or corn snakes in the grass. Ellis had been lying in the sweet, late summer grass, and when he stood and brushed himself off, he noticed that the grass still clung to his arms. He brushed harder, thinking the grass was stuck because of his sweat, but he discovered that the minute blades were attached at the roots. There were at least thirty or forty per arm at his first count, sprouting like fine green hairs and pointing in several directions with the same erratic order as the white-blond hairs that covered the rest of his forearms. He pulled slightly on one of the blades to be sure they were attached, and when he saw his skin rise like a molehill at the base of the shoot, he was convinced.

His parents took more convincing.

"You can remember to wipe your feet but not your arms?" his mother said. When Ellis explained that the grass was attached, she scoffed and tugged a few of the blades. They came off in her hand, dangling pale roots which held clumps of soil. There were small holes in Ellis' skin where the grass had been rooted. "Just— just wash up," she said, throwing the grass in the trash can.

When Ellis ran the holes in his arm under the water to wash away the dirt, it seeped into his arm as though the holes were much deeper than they looked. They were much bigger than the

clumps that had been pulled up through them. He expected more dirt to come washing out, but none came.

“And what about your dad?” Mr. Simmons asked. “What did he have to say about the grass?”

Ellis shrugged. “He didn’t say anything until my mom pointed it out, and then he told her to stop being ridiculous and pass the greens.”

“So he doesn’t acknowledge your condition?”

Why should he? I wanted to ask. Who would want to admit their son is sprouting grass from his skin? But as I looked around the room, I realized that having your parents ignore or deny any single part of you, even a part you weren’t sure you wanted to have, is almost as bad as having it called out.

The grass had grown in thicker where he had washed the night before, and the holes had scabbed over with something that looked like bark. Ellis tried to cover up the grass by wearing a long-sleeved shirt to school. He didn’t say, but I knew he thought, “Better to die of heat stroke than be stigmatized with the Friends.”

“But hiding it didn’t work?” Mr. Simmons suggested. I wondered how he got this job if all he could do was ask questions and state the obvious.

Ellis looked at his feet and then at me. “No. It didn’t work.”

“And why was that?”

“Because Red Lucius is a scumbag.”

“Says the guy with an organic tramp stamp,” Red retorted.

Mr. Simmons stood and raised his hands. “Ellis, you’re new to the group, so I’ll explain how we work. We want you to express how you feel and what you think so that you can cope with your condition, but cutting down the other members of the group doesn’t serve anyone any good, okay? Red, remember, stop the fight, don’t finish it. We want to avoid negative confrontation.”

“Good luck on that with Red around,” said Susie. “The guy’s a walking confrontation.”

Mr. Simmons didn’t look like he could keep things controlled much longer, and Red had a look on his face that reminded me of my older brother when he had to go out in the woods and fire a few rounds to calm down. I glanced at the other sponsors to see whether we were supposed to defuse the situation, but they seemed content to let the Friends tear each other to shreds.

“Why can’t you just keep your nose out of other people’s business?” Ellis asked Red. They were both standing with clenched fists.

“Oh, you’re barking up the wrong freak for that,” Red answered. “Talk to Josephs if you want to call out nose people.”

Red took a step toward us, and I reached out for Ellis’ arm, trying to think of a way to keep this from blowing up in all our faces. If this was what they were like in therapy, I didn’t want to see them all in detention. I didn’t catch his arm, but my fingers raked through the grass, and the sensation drew his attention away from Red long enough for their tempers to return. Jo seemed unperturbed by the whole scene.

“Why don’t we call it short today?” asked Mr. Simmons. “Don’t worry,” he added to Ellis, clapping him on the shoulder, “It’s always rough at the start. This will get easier once you accept what’s happened to you.”

The next day, I saw Ellis in the hallway. I don't know how I hadn't noticed him before. I waved to him and called out, though I couldn't say why. He stopped and stared for a moment, as though he couldn't decide whether it was safe to acknowledge our relationship outside of the My Friends meetings, despite the fact that everyone knew exactly who the My Friends sponsors were. He must have decided it was okay to talk, because he walked over and shook my hand like we were two businessmen meeting for the first time.

"So, yesterday," he said. "That was really something, huh?"

I started to say something equally unimportant when I noticed more little bark-scabbed holes on his arms. "You pulled out more of your grass." I must have sounded like a disappointed younger sister when her older brother doesn't display her finger-painting because he immediately blushed and turned his eyes down guiltily.

He was quiet, so I said, "I'm not an expert, and I don't know how this whole sponsor thing is supposed to work, but this doesn't seem like the kind of thing you can just weed out. You're going to have to accept it."

"She's right," said Jo as he walked past. I wondered if he hadn't just said it to make us think he had heard the whole conversation.

Red didn't make it easy for Ellis to accept himself. He started mocking Ellis during the club meetings, despite constant reprimands from Mr. Simmons. For almost a month, my Thursday afternoons were taken up making sure Ellis stayed on his side of the circle instead of punching Red Lucius in the face like he deserved. Red spent most of his time outside the club impressing everyone with the fact that Ellis' condition was much worse than Red's own. "Oh, I'll be fine," he would say. "My skin's just a different color, but poor Watson. He has to call in landscapers just to go out in public."

I kept Ellis calm by running my fingers through the grass on his arms, which had all but choked out his hair. At first Ellis seemed to resent my touching him, but he couldn't deny it distracted him from Red's taunts. Once, he shivered as I ran my fingers down his arm, and I wondered what it felt like to have roots intermingling with your nerves, shifting every time the wind blew or your clothes rustled and sending all kinds of mixed signals to your brain. Once, after a meeting, he confessed to me that he didn't know which was worse: his parents' denial of the herbaceous invasion or our unquestioning acceptance of it. "I can't even leave the light on when I change clothes at night, I'm so scared that I'll see more grass. I can just imagine the centipede grass creeping along my back. I don't want to see it."

I wasn't surprised when Red pushed Ellis too far.

After gym one day, Ellis refused to shower. Most of the school knew about his grass by then, but Coach Willis had had enough of Ellis' attempts to avoid being seen. "You change in the stalls like a fifth-grader, you won't shower, and all because of a little bodily change," he said to Ellis. "Enough's enough, Watson. Shower. Now."

Ellis told me he wanted to shout something profane, but he couldn't think of anything, so he tore off his shirt. The cotton caught more blades of grass, ripping them out of Ellis' skin and leaving a dozen or more holes, pits opening into his soul. He didn't look at his body as he undressed, not wanting to know the full extent of the grass' dominance. Grains of sand and dirt fell to the tiled floor as his muscles flexed beneath the layers of soil and skin. He had made it to the first open shower stall and turned on the water when someone shouted, "Watson's taken root!" Even though they knew already, the whole room laughed and made small talk that filled the spectrum from I told you so to marijuana jokes to the effects of being raised on a farm.

Ellis felt the clumps of dirt wash down his body and kept his face toward the tile wall.

Red's words broke his concentration.

"Hey, Watson, you shouldn't cover that stuff up. Don't you know grass needs sunlight?"

Ellis didn't respond.

"Anyway, you planning on giving birth in here? Cause if you do, I want to skip out."

Ellis turned around. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"The alien growing out of your back."

Ellis reached around and, as his fingers brushed the vine-like stolons, he realized that his fear about the centipede grass hadn't been unfounded. The finger-roots of the stolons had spread over most of his back, radiating out from the base of his spine. Red closed his eyes and laughed when Ellis' face revealed that he hadn't known about the newest wave of grass conquering his skin. Ellis used the opportunity to launch himself across the aisle and into Red's stomach, the two of them slipping as they collided. Ellis' actions must have surprised him as much as Red because they stared at each other for a minute after Ellis bowled him over. Ellis recovered first and punched Red so hard some of the other guys thought Red's skin had broken off and attached itself to Ellis' fist. Red twisted and threw Ellis off, scrabbling to his knees and attempting a few punches of his own. Coach Willis pulled them apart before they could do any real damage, but Ellis stared Red down as they stood up, bloody, muddy, and naked. Ellis wiped his lip, conveying with silent rage that he would not be treated as a freak by someone whose skin was candy apple red. At that moment, you would have thought Ellis was the one who had anger management issues, not Red.

Ellis didn't realize until later that he had wiped mud from his lip, but he relaxed about the grass after that. He stopped wearing long pants and sleeves and traded them for shorts and T-

shirts. The Bermuda grass on his legs was thick like goat hair and he had to be careful about picking up stray grasshoppers when he walked outside. When I told him I thought his leg grass looked like goat hair he laughed and said, “Yeah, I’m like a dryadic faun – the product of a one-night stand between wood spirits.” He said it like a joke, smiling to fool the world but when Susie’s parents invited the club over for a swimming party, I saw how close to the truth his statement was. His torso was crisscrossed with centipede grass like a tribal tattoo. The scars where he had tried to uproot the grass on his arms and chest stood out like campfire circles in a meadow. Tender blades sprouted from the oldest scars, but they were paler than the rest of his grass. When he saw Ellis at the party, Jo stared at him as though he were looking into Ellis’ future and didn’t like what he saw. Red made a crack about water being good for the grass and pulled Ellis into the pool, but that was good-natured fun. No one can blame Red for what Ellis did last night.

Once, Ellis had asked Jo if he could explain the grass, but Jo shrugged and said, “If you know why one seed grows and another dies before it is born, then you can answer why,” which was as much as saying, “How on God’s green Earth should I know? What am I, a fortune cookie?”

Ellis’ parents dealt with his newfound confidence in his grassy state by reversing their former attitudes. His mother, who had embraced the grass at first, now ignored its existence. Even when Susie’s mom asked her if she wanted the number of a friend who specialized in teenage disorders. “What disorder?” she asked.

His father, on the other hand, seemed to have caught the same confidence Ellis had when he stood up to Red in the showers. Ellis said he even went so far as to say, “Listen, son, it’s your

body. Don't give a scratch who says what about it. If they don't like it, they can look somewhere else."

Despite his mother's reversal, I think Ellis had come to terms with his new body. He and I had settled into the club like the kids in *The Twinkie Squad*, taking our outcast status and twisting it into a new conformation. The night of the pool party, I wanted to kiss him, despite or maybe because of the grass. I couldn't separate the idea of Ellis from the grass anymore, and I didn't think he could either. That's why I can't imagine him lying in a hospital, his body crisscrossed with scars and scabs. I only just made myself come in the room after spending hours outside trying to make sense of it. When I walked in, Ellis said he should probably tell someone what happened so it doesn't adversely affect him. He's become altogether My Friend.

Last night, after his parents were asleep, Ellis sneaked out of the house. The grass and pine needles under his feet felt like carpet, even if it was a bit prickly. He had left his pajama pants in the house – two months was not long enough to get used to the feeling of rough cloth tugging at the Bermuda grass on his legs – and the cool night wind rustled his leg grass as he made his way to the crossroads a mile from his house. He wasn't worried about ticks because they couldn't find enough blood beneath the grassy skin to stick around. He wanted to watch the family cat OJ play chicken with the trains.

When Ellis had walked the silent mile to the crossroads, the cat was waiting on the tracks a few yards away from the warning lights. Its fur looked like tarnished silver in the moonlight, and as Ellis emerged from the woods, the cat only gave him a glance before returning to its vigilance against the train's arrival. Ellis watched from a spot between the trees and the base of

the hill that held the tracks' iron roots, his fingers searching the surrounding grass and removing the leaves and twigs they found.

OJ's tail twitched like a string of black dandelion seeds, but he remained hunkered on the cold steel rail. Ellis combed through the grass on his body, clearing it of insects as he had cleared the ground nearby. "Why do you come out here?" he asked the cat. "It can't be for the excitement." He wasn't careful and instead of combing the grass, he plucked it. Dirt filled the empty space beneath his skin where the grass had been. What if there was nothing left of him inside except the dirt and roots?

The first stolon zipped out like the drawstring on an old hoodie. Ellis looked guiltily at OJ, as though the cat were planning to run straight to Mr. Simmons and the rest of the club and tell them that he was rejecting himself like he had in the first days of the semester. But the cat cleaned its paws to remove the smell of steel and resumed its watch for the train.

Some of the blades were harder to uproot than others, as though their roots had reached down into his bones, but they all gave way to Ellis' furor. By the time his legs were cleared, he didn't have much skin left that wasn't pocked with holes that should have held roots and soil. It was strange to see muscle and bone beneath a layer of dirt, but somehow it drove him to start pulling at all the grass he could reach. The fine, fuzzy grass on his chest came up almost too easily, and he worried that he wasn't getting all of the roots. He scratched the remaining skin with his fingernails until they came away shining with blood. Then he was certain he had gone deep enough. He wormed his fingers beneath one of the finger-like stolon of centipede grass and yanked his fist away from his body as hard as he could. The stolon pulled at his insides as it came, and his skin ripped in long, straight lines as he zipped stolon after stolon from his body, winding the mass into a dirty, bloody ball in his left hand.

He threw the tangle of grass onto the tracks, and OJ jumped to its feet, tensing as if to pounce or run.

“There,” said Ellis. “Now I’m just me again.” And as he ran his filthy hands of the broken remnants of his skin, spilling dirt mixed with blood onto the ground, he didn’t care if it was true or not.

## MY FRIEND THE FISH

*Liam Newman, 2002*

When James Del Mar tells me he is the product of a fairytale marriage, I figure he's being metaphoric. When he says his parents experienced love at first sight, I think he's being dramatic. When he shows me the birth defect that nearly killed him as a baby, and tells me that he's planning on running away despite having no legs, I realize he's serious.

For the week before James started at John Valley Middle School, Mrs. Williams, our homeroom teacher, prepared the class for his arrival. In a serious way that kept her hair and earrings still where normally they never stopped moving the entire day, she explained to us James' disability and the fact that he would have to use a wheelchair to get around. She expected us to do our best to accommodate James in his new environment and "extend to him the proper JV Middle welcoming spirit." I hoped she didn't expect us to show him our best imitation of her smile, too. The way she went on, I think we were all expecting him to have three heads and bat wings in addition to no legs. Then again, if he had wings, he wouldn't need the wheelchair, would he?

When James wheeled into the classroom on his first day, I was disappointed. He was just a normal eighth grader, a little on the small side like Benji Simmons, and the weirdest thing about him wasn't his lack of legs. That oddity was covered by a pair of shorts sewn together so he looked like he was wearing a denim pillowcase. The strangest thing about him was his hair – long and stringy, not greasy like the high school Goths, stiff yet amorphous, like river grass –

and the fact that he wore a turtleneck in the middle of September. If you've never experienced fall in lower Alabama and the panhandle of Florida, you won't know that September is really just late August, which is when the part of you that didn't melt in June and July finally meets its end.

The teacher's aide that pushed his wheelchair into the room positioned James at a special desk for people in wheelchairs and left, but when Mrs. Williams started her "Welcome to the Class" routine that we'd all heard less than a month before, none of us could pay attention because we were all speculating about James. Mutant, we all thought. This kid's a mutant. He'll sprout tentacles or something and kill us all if we look at him wrong. Somehow the possibility wasn't enough to keep us from looking. If anything, the threat of death by suction cup drew our eyes the way red and white KEEP OUT signs drew trespassers. His hair made me think of Ellis and the scars that gave him the appearance of a circus Tattooed Man. I wondered why Red didn't say anything to James about his oddness. Maybe he thought the guy would sprout legs and kick him through the window.

When the bell rang, I grabbed my binder and made for the door like everyone else, but Mrs. Williams stopped me.

"Liam," she said in her 'I expected better of you' voice that rivaled my Grams', "aren't you going to help James to his next class?"

"Why?"

"Because I asked you to," she explained patiently. "Weren't you listening?"

James waited for me like he was a pharaoh about to be taken to his next conquest on his treasure barge. I grabbed the handles of his wheelchair and swung it around in a fast one-eighty, half-tossing him out of his seat despite the straps holding him in. What did it matter? He didn't have any legs to bang against the walls. The side of the wheelchair hit one of the desks and

knocked it askew. James shook one of his hands as though it had been caught in the squeeze between wheelchair and desk, but I didn't think it had.

I could feel Mrs. Williams' glare on the back of my head, so I said, "Sorry about that."

"Don't worry," said James, giving his hand one last shake. His voice was a restrained roar, like the echo you hear in a seashell. "Sorry you got stuck with this job."

I checked my watch and resisted the urge to bowl over everyone in my way. "Can't you use your arms?" I asked.

"Sure, but for some reason nobody believes me when I tell them. I mean, look at these guns. I work out," he added with a dramatic flex of his biceps. They rippled slightly under the skin-tight turtleneck.

I learned quickly that when James was around, regular people tended to go a little crazy. Not in the mentally unstable kind of way, but in the lowered inhibitions, last day of high school kind of way. Only it wasn't just on the last day and none of us were in high school yet. While I wheeled James around between classes that day, Aaron Ross came up and said that he bet he could wheel his cousin down the administrative corridor faster than I could wheel James. Normally I wouldn't think about a challenge like that until I was being reprimanded for accepting it and whatever destruction had followed, but since I didn't think James would be up for it – he was the new mutant in town, after all – I hesitated. In that moment, while I envisioned my reputation as a daredevil flushing away like so many turds, James said, "No way," but not to say we weren't up for the race. This "no way" was one of acceptance, and it was enough to make the race official in the eyes of our peers.

So after the next period James and I were lined up with Aaron and his cousin, who wasn't in control of nearly as many of his faculties as James was. I felt sick that they were going to

crush us, because Aaron was on the track team and had legs that would have made me jealous if I had been James. James was far more optimistic than I was. He kept whistling some tune that sounded familiar, but I couldn't place it. It got into my head and bounced around like ripples in a rainstorm.

Red agreed to be the official referee, and his raised arms stood out like stripes on a candy cane against the white walls of the hallway. He shouted, "On your mark, get set, go!" dropping his arms as soon as he started saying *go*. We took a few seconds to get our momentum going, but so did the other team. About halfway down the hall, I my legs started to burn. I should have stretched, but I'd forgotten in the excitement and it didn't help that James had been whistling that song that sloshed around in my head. He was still whistling it, in fact, as if it were our John Valley Middle School Wheelchair Racing Team Official Theme Song. Apparently, the song got into Aaron's head as much as it did mine because around the three-quarter mark Aaron swerved, and he and his cousin ended up in a pile outside the principal's office, with the cousin shouting that he didn't want to play anymore and Aaron staring blankly at the mural some art class had painted three or four years back as their final project, all the while muttering something about music. The jaguar in the mural stared back as though confused by the pile of humanity that had desecrated its solitude and pondering how to get the pitiful things to shut up.

Principal Smith thundered into the hallway, almost falling over Aaron and his cousin. "Explain," he said, catching James and I with inexorable grips on collar and wheelchair handle. As we mumbled an explanation, I hoped James' inhibition-lowering skills might shift the principal in our favor. The music in my head swelled, and Aaron stumbled, gripping his head and trying to put his cousin back in his wheelchair, but the swishing tune seemed to affect Principal

Smith contrary to our hopes. He eyed the three of us (Aaron's cousin being exempt), said, "Suspension and My Friends till Christmas," and left the secretary to sort us.

I spent the next half hour dreading the months of meetings ahead of us. James leaned over and asked me what "My Friends" was, his hair swirling on his shoulders like river weeds.

"It's the therapy sessions set up for the special kids in the school," I said, leaning my head back to look at the ceiling. There was another mural on the office wall, and I could just see the jungle colors blurring at the top of my vision. "Most people call it the My Friends club."

"When you say 'special,' do you mean...?"

"Not slow or gifted or anything," I said. "Just ... different, I guess. Red, the guy who refereed the race, he's the reason they started the whole thing. He was born with his skin that blood red color and when he got to middle school he started having all these problems." I tapped my temple. "They took him to Dr. Green for a while, but then someone at the school board decided that, since Red wasn't alone in being different, they should have group sessions at the school for people who didn't seem to fit into the normal pattern of humanity."

"So they treat people for being what they are as if there's something wrong?"

"Red's really the only one who needs it, though. He still sees Dr. Green sometimes, but most of the kids are just there to make the rest of us feel safer."

Aaron's dad picked him up almost before the office could notify Grams and James' parents. When I heard Aaron's dad telling him how disappointed he was that Aaron could even have thought of using his cousin in such a way, I was glad to know I wasn't the only one getting blessed out. When they were gone, James said, "Why is the principal putting us in the My Friends club if it's only for special kids?" He shifted a little in his wheelchair as he spoke,

though there wasn't much he could do to adjust his position. He was strapped in around his belly and chest to keep him from falling out.

"I guess he thinks we need therapy."

When Grams picked me up, she didn't use her "I expected better from you" voice. She just gave me a look that expressed as much. I swear she went to night school and took classes to learn those looks. Heck, she probably taught the classes.

I waved goodbye to James. "See you," he said.

As we left the building, a man approached who could only have been James' father. He wore a black turtleneck that made his skin shine like metal in sunlight and I recognized his gait from a TV special on recovering soldiers: the measured footsteps of someone who has learned to walk a second time. Watching James' dad approach, I felt disconnected pride that someone I didn't know had reclaimed part of their humanity in that simple act of putting one foot in front of the other.

James' dad didn't say anything to us but "Good day," and walked into the school as though he were the principal.

The first My Friends meeting James and I attended was the following Thursday after school. When we entered school's the multi-purpose room, twenty chairs were arranged in a circle in front of the stage. Half of them were occupied by the My Friends regulars and their sponsors. I had been Red's sponsor last year, when he still considered me his friend.

Aaron sat in one of the other chairs, as far from the regulars as he could get, and I couldn't tell if he was giving me a murderous look because he blamed me and James for his getting stuck in this circus or because I wasn't in this entirely alone like he was. Apparently the

principal didn't think any of us suspension kids needed sponsors, but James and I might as well support each other getting through this. Mrs. Williams wasn't likely to let me off wheeling him around between classes once the suspension lifted.

I kicked one of the empty chairs out of the circle and James wheeled himself into the spot. Mrs. Williams might expect me to wheel him around but we both knew he was capable, so I let him do it.

Benji's dad was the facilitator for the My Friends club, which meant that he was supposed to keep us calm and organized while we all worked out our issues which must invariably spring from our peculiarities. Except this was the first time anyone had been sent to My Friends without their differences defined beforehand.

"Let's welcome our visitors, everyone," Mr. Simmons said to start off the session. The three of us glared at him. Why he felt the need to rub it in that we were here without reason, none of us could figure. Everyone waved or said, "Welcome." Susie said it was nice to have new people and not everyone found their differences at the same time and wasn't it great that we were all there together even though we were all different which she guessed was the reason we were all there together and she thought we were all going to enjoy ourselves and don't feel like we needed to open up on the first day but of course we were welcome to –

At this point Mr. Simmons cut her off, thanked her for giving the welcoming speech, and said, "Typically, new members and their sponsors introduce each other and say what differences they are trying to overcome. Since you three are here without sponsors, it's fine if you don't introduce each other, but if you do, our formula is 'This is my friend, X. He has Y difference.' Got it?"

I glanced at James and said, "This is my friend James. He has no legs."

“This is my friend Liam. He has no brains.”

Everyone sat quietly for a moment; I think some of them were trying to figure out if we were trying to be funny. Some obviously knew it and were trying to figure out whether they should be offended. Red and Jo just watched us, each from his own corner of the circle. Red watched us like a soldier deciding if we were dangerous opponents or worthy allies. Jo studied us as though we were a new kind of bird.

When no one had said anything for over a minute, I said, “And this is our friend Aaron. He has a concussion.” I didn’t know if this was true. He might have sustained one in the wheelchair crash.

“All right,” said Mr. Simmons. “Let’s get started, then.”

We spent the first twenty minutes or so going over the progress each Friend had made over the two weeks since the last meeting. Half of that time was taken up by Susie telling us she had finally come to an acceptance with the fact that she had been born with only nine toes. “I don’t even want to consider prosthetics anymore,” she said, smiling as though she had just won Olympic gold.

Jo said he hadn’t spoken to anyone about the things he heard in their minds for over a week. Benji squirmed a little as his Friend spoke, and I wondered if Benji really wanted to be here or was forced to be here because his dad was the facilitator. It occurred to me that I might deserve inclusion more than Benji since we haven’t heard from either my dad since Mom passed away last year. I’ve heard that bad relationships with your parents can be detrimental to your mental health. It certainly hadn’t been good for my friendship with Red.

Red didn’t say anything, though Min seemed to be pushing him. She didn’t give up on him, and I respected that about her. Perseverance in a fractured friendship is either the most

admirable of qualities or the most unintelligent. But in Min it could only be admirable. As I started to feel sorry I couldn't be friends with Min and Red like I once had, the music that I knew was James' influence struck itself up in my head again. We can be friends, it seemed to say, friends forever.

But underneath the melody of the music's surface, I thought I heard an undercurrent of doubt and secrets.

A few weeks after the wheelchair race incident, James invited me to go with his family to the Smoky Mountains for Fall Break. Grams wasn't pleased with the idea of me spending vacation with people we barely knew. When I told James, he said we should come to dinner sometime so she could get to know them and maybe it would work out. Honestly, I was curious about why he wanted me to come with them in the first place, but the chance to see something outside Santa Lucia County was too good to pass up. We don't have mountains in Florida. Even our tallest hills look like piles of dirt compared to the foothills they get up in Alabama. The beach is great and all, but it gets boring after ten or fifteen years. Grams agreed to dinner when I promised her a month's attendance of early Mass on Sundays.

The night of the dinner, Grams wanted me to dress up in my Easter clothes – a blue and tan button-down with khakis and a pair of shoes that still pinched a little. "It's just dinner," I said, but she was as resolute as a priest in confession.

The Del Mars lived in one of the newer neighborhoods out toward Pensacola, just before John Valley becomes Cricket Spoon. On the outside, the house looked like any other house in the neighborhood, though thankfully not exactly alike. Inside, though, it looked like the ocean had passed through and left a suburban home in its wake.

Mr. Del Mar met us at the door. He wore a turtleneck as he had the day of the wheelchair race, but he walked more stiffly. I wondered if it was possible to regress once you had learned to walk again.

A large swimming pool, visible through French doors, filled most of the back yard. It had an extremely shallow end that looked barely more than a foot and a half deep.

“It’s so James can get in the water,” Mr. Del Mar explained when I asked. “When we moved in, we had the pool modified so that there would be an area shallow enough for him to get in. We couldn’t imagine denying him the water. It’s in the blood, you might say, what with Helen being in the Navy.”

“Just because I’m in the Navy doesn’t mean I enjoy being *in* the water, dear,” called Mrs. Del Mar from the kitchen. “It just means I like being *on* the water.”

“Of course,” said Mr. Del Mar. “My mistake.” He whistled a few bars of the same tune James sometimes whistled.

I gazed at the pool again and thought of a medical special I had seen the night before. “Have you ever considered getting him one of those prosthetic mermaid tails?” I asked.

Mr. Del Mar stared at me as though I had suggested we shoot his prize show dog and mount it on the wall. Thankfully, James wheeled into the room before things could get more uncomfortable. He positioned himself by the couch and leaned against his straps to shake Grams’ hand.

“Nice to meet you,” he said.

“Likewise,” said Grams, trying hard not to stare at James’ lack of legs in their pillowcase covering.

When we sat down to dinner, I felt like I was in a seafood restaurant. The room was decorated like a marina – shells, oars, nets, and other boating paraphernalia adorning the walls as though they had been thrown against the walls and had hung where they landed. The Del Mars brought in baked fish and veggies along with Grams’ sweet tea and my Coke. They all drank water. You would think Mrs. Del Mar had enough water around without drinking it at dinner, too.

After dinner, Mrs. Del Mar said, “I hope you’ll consider letting Liam come with us. I think they’ve gotten pretty close over the last few weeks.”

He and I took this as our cue to leave the room and went to James’ room. It was true; we had become friends very quickly. James’ novelty and my schism with Red made us ripe for new friendship.

“Is your dad okay?” I asked.

“Yeah, he’s just had a long day is all.”

James was lying. It was the same sort of lie I’d told myself and anyone who asked when Mom was sick. I didn’t press it. Instead, I looked at the titles on James’ bookshelf. He had a lot of books that surprised me, including what seemed to be every fairy tale collection on the planet.

“Why do you have all of these?” I asked.

“You promise not to laugh?”

“Promise.”

“I read them to learn my family history.”

I coughed to cover up the laugh that came despite my promise.

“Seriously,” he said, looking almost offended. “I don’t know much at all about my family. Dad’s got no family left, but he and Mom had a fairy tale romance, so I figure this is the best research I can do.”

I stared for a second trying to decide whether to run, and then James bent over and laughed so hard I thought he’d broken something. I joined in, and when we recovered and ventured back into the living room, Grams said she thought it would be fine for me to join the Del Mars on their trip.

We stay in a cabin for our mountain vacation. It has two stories and enough beds for eight people. Mr. and Mrs. Del Mar sleep upstairs in the big bedroom, so James and I have free reign of the lower floor as long as the kitchen and sitting area are clear enough for everyone to use them. It takes no time for us to grab the trundle beds set up near the sitting area. We plan to watch TV as late as possible.

“Do you ever think about finding someone?” James asks me one night after all the channels have switched to infomercials. We’re lying on our beds and the blue light of the electric lantern makes the room look closer to the ocean floor than a mountaintop. His parents are asleep upstairs. “I mean, someone you’d want to marry?”

“Sometimes. Usually I think it’s Min Coulter, and about that time Red thinks the same thing and it’s all over.”

“I don’t think I could find someone in John Valley,” he says, putting his hands behind his head. Even at night, he wears long sleeves and his pillowcase. I wonder how many of the pillowcase shorts he owns. Does he have dress pillowcases for church and prom? But I know what he means. It would be almost like dating a sister for me to go out with most of the girls

from John Valley. I've known them all my life. Shouldn't that make it easier to date them instead of harder?

"Sometimes," James says, "I think I want what my parents had."

"A fairy tale?" I ask.

"Yeah," he says. The music in my head starts again, and James begins to ramble in time with the melody. "Dad's not going to be with us much longer. That's why they wanted to take this trip. His seventeen years are almost gone. That's how long you get when you leave the ocean – seventeen years. Not even enough time to raise a child, much less love the person you come to land for."

"What do you mean, leave the ocean?"

"Dad's a merman, or something like it. It's the only thing that makes sense. I've read every fairy tale I can find, and the only ones that make sense are the ones with merpeople. You notice he's walking around like he can't control his legs more often now?"

I had noticed, but it hadn't seemed right to mention it before, since I was their guest. At times Mr. Del Mar had seemed almost as incapable of walking as James, and tonight during dinner he had nearly stopped breathing, recovering only once he had drunk an entire glass of water.

"You know something about fairy tales? They never mention what happens to the kids," James says before we fall asleep.

Our resort in the mountains has a heated indoor pool near the main office, so it's still warm enough to swim despite the chill of October. Although it doesn't have a special shallow end like his pool at home, one night James and I go swimming while his parents are out at dinner. James keeps himself near the edge in case his arms get too tired.

James' swimsuit looks even more like a pillowcase than the shorts he wears at school. He floats like a half-drowned sailor when he's in the pool, and all that wet fabric looks like it's going to pull him under. He doesn't look like the son of a merman and a Navy officer, but despite his heavy clothes, he moves in the water like most people move on land. When he dunks his head underwater, his hair really could be sea grass or reeds. I wonder how he survived as a baby.

"You wanna see?" he asks me the night before we go back to John Valley. "The defect that almost killed me?"

I say yes, but I don't know if I want to. This isn't like Red's skin, which he can't help but share with us. While I'm debating the sincerity of my curiosity, James wriggles out of his pillowcase and pushes himself up so that the stubs of what should have been his legs are lifted into the air. Except that instead of stubs, he has just one stub. Blue and green scales cover it as it tapers to a blunt point.

After a few seconds of silence in which I try to reconcile what he's told me with what he's shown me and what I know from growing up in John Valley where it's normal to have freaks for friends, I ask, "How much time is left on his legs? A year, two years?"

"Not even that. But I'm not going to wait for him to leave," James says, lowering himself onto the bed and hiking on his pillowcase. "I'm going to leave first. I'm running away."

"How are you planning to do that?" I ask, hoping that I hide the panic in my chest well. Red's place is hardly filled and my new friend wants to leave. "You don't exactly have the right equipment for running."

"I have a plan," he says. "But I need your help."

He tells me about a merfolk ritual he found in one of his books, and the whole time he does, the music is sloshing in my skull more fervently than it ever has. I tell him I'll think about it, and I do nothing else the whole drive home. Mrs. Del Mar asks if I'm okay because she hasn't seen me this quiet the whole trip. "Do you need a Dramamine? Sometimes these mountain roads can get to your stomach."

I tell her I'm fine. I do not tell her that I am debating whether to help her son run away from a family that is already doomed. Is it criminal to help destroy something that is going to disintegrate anyway?

When we get back to John Valley, I absentmindedly thank them for taking me and tell James I'll see him at school. The plan divides us like a sand dune, and I feel myself scrabbling over the top because I know that it is the more difficult route and the most worth it. When you stand on top of a sand dune, it's the closest you can come to being on a mountain in Florida. You can see at least half a mile in every direction, maybe a couple of miles of ocean. They don't let you climb on sand dunes anymore.

At the next Friends meeting, when Mr. Simmons asks us what progress we've made, James is silent. The music is only a low hum in my head. I say, "I've made a decision," but when he asks me what it is, I can only shrug. I don't know why we call it self-awareness if all it does it make things muddier.

The night we enact James' plan, I sneak out of the house and ask myself how we are supposed to get to a beach. The Hunter's Moon fills the night sky with orange, an ocean on fire.

When I reach James' house, he is waiting in his wheelchair beside the gate to the back yard. Something shines in his lap and he does not smile. He nods me into the yard and swings the gate closed before wheeling over to the poolside. I do not ask him about getting to the ocean. I

am afraid to ask and he will not talk. He locks the wheels of his chair and unstraps himself. He hands me the knife he has held in his lap and I ease him down to the concrete, which has become sand, the infinitesimal grains catching the fiery light and surrounding us with its glow. The water laps my legs and James' tail stub. The sand already cakes my jeans and the salt stings my legs. I am thankful I thought to wear something long-sleeved because the wind on the beach chills even when it isn't wet with mist.

James strips his long-sleeved shirt and his pillowcase shorts so that he is naked in the paling moonlight. His skin is covered in the small blue and green scales that I first saw on his tail. He shivers in the wind. As he clings to my right arm to keep himself upright, he holds out his other hand for the knife, and I hand it to him because I don't know what else to do.

"You can't watch as I go," he says at last. "You need to look away until I'm gone. I don't think it will work otherwise."

"You sure about this?" I ask, though I know he is.

"If you want to leave now, go ahead." But he knows I won't. He has to have my help, and I won't be the friend that leaves because of pain. I won't be like Red.

I turn around, straightening as much as I can, and say, "Will you ever see them again, do you think?"

I feel his hand slip down to my wrist and he says, "I don't know."

The knife glides across my palm so easily that for several seconds I wonder if he's really going to cut me. Then the fire of the salt air blowing against the cut assaults my nerves and I hold back a scream. The blood drips down my fingers like rain mixed with tears. The ocean laps my feet and I feel James' hand slip away.

The moments go by and I can hardly keep myself silent long enough to be sure I haven't screwed up the ritual I'm not supposed to understand. Standing on the beach at night with my hand bleeding onto the white sand, I wonder which of us will be loneliest in the end.

"Did it work?" I ask the moon when I can wait no longer. "Hey, James, did it –"

Scraped and gouged sand informs me James has dragged himself into the waves. The water glows beneath the moon and I tell myself that the pathway of light that haunts the beaches of the world with its intangible promises is not the moon. I tell myself that it is James, and that I will come back to the ocean on nights when the moon is full and look for my friend James, the fish. I walk out of the Del Mars' back yard and wonder if they will ask me about James or if they will know he has left them for his father's people.

## RED II: BEATING

*Liam Newman, 2003*

I'm standing in the main hall at school when Red stalks by, straight-backed and silent. He hasn't said a word today, not even to Min. Someone's going to get it. I lean against the wall and hope that I won't end up fighting for my life with my former best friend.

Jo's standing in the middle of the hallway, like he wants Red to confront him. He's the stronger of the two in every way but physically. Red's been bulking up lately, the muscles under his skin trying break loose.

Jo whispers something, his face calm, but his stance makes me think of the mongoose I saw facing a cobra on *Animal Planet*, prepared to face the enemy and come out the victor, whether alive or dead. Before I can think about stepping between them, Jo's on the ground. Red's fists shine, but it's hard to tell whether with sweat or blood. He shouts at Jo, but I don't hear what he says. The blood on his hands reminds me that when we were kids, Red cut his arm on a rock while we wrestled near Coldwater Creek. We didn't know he was bleeding until he wiped his arm on his swim trunks and left a dark red smear on the blue polyester.

Aaron Ross pulls Red off of Jo. Jo just sat there and let Red pound on his face. I don't get that. Why go out of your way to confront someone and let him do all the fighting? I finally process Red's words. "Leave me alone," along with a few dozen words I wouldn't repeat within ten miles of Grams. Red has a lot of hate in him. Why haven't I seen that before? At least Jo

doesn't look like he went through anything worse than rolling in the blackberry patch behind the Winn Dixie. Like hell without the hospital visit.

“Help me out here,” says Aaron, and I'm recruited to help get these two cleaned up. I support Jo as we take them to the showers in the gym even though neither of them looks like they need support. I guess we're to keep them apart, but they don't seem interested in picking up the fight. When Red goes under the water, the blood rinses off and makes his skin look like it's melting and sinking down the drain. Jo wipes his face where the bruises are forming already. He tells me thanks and puts his hand on my shoulder. The gesture reminds me of my days in the My Friends club and that Jo has a way of knowing what people think. I start to ask him if he will tell me what's going on between him and Red, but he shakes his head and says, “Not all friendships can be expressed. Remember James?”

He waves to Red as he leaves, and in that moment I understand why Red might want to beat him. I walk over to the half-wall outside the showers. Red turns his back and pretends not to hear, but I talk anyway.

“Seems like he wanted you to hit him,” I say. “It also seems like you didn't want to do more than rough him up.”

Red turns off the shower and grabs a towel. I half expect it to come away dyed the color of his skin.

“You at least want to tell me where the blood came from?”

He threw his towel aside and said, “You don't want to mess with that kid. He's too sharp for us to hold onto.”

“What's that supposed to mean?” I ask.

“Just leave our business to us, Liam. It’s bad enough I have to deal with one person digging into my private life. I don’t need another one.”

Though he seems to hate Jo, I realize the two are closer than any friendship I’ve ever known, closer even than James and I were the night he slipped into the water. If that friendship hasn’t broken yet, it probably never will. And as much as it sickens me to think, I can’t stand the idea that someone else gets Red’s friendship.

He tugs on his clothes and as he heads for the door, I say, “You know what? I’ve had enough of all of you. Jo goes around figuring out people’s problems and causing a ruckus, you act like you’re carrying the weight of death on your shoulders, and you’ve both acted like we can’t be friends because of some higher purpose or family business and I’m tired of it.”

“I’m sorry you feel that way. Believe me, I would blow the whole thing to Kingdom Come if I could.” He sighed and stared in what I knew was the direction of Lucius Park. “I can’t get rid of it.”

After he’s gone I wonder if he meant his grudge against Jo, our friendship, or the Park. It doesn’t matter. Everything around Red takes a beating eventually. I’m surprised Jo has lasted this long without one.

## THE CLOSET

*Christopher Murray, 2006*

The Murrays kept several skeletons in their four closets, and one of Christopher Murray's greatest childhood pleasures came from taking the various bones of these skeletons out and trying to piece them together. Christopher figured that there were bones from at least three different people. In his parents' closet he found two adult skulls, whose remaining skeletal jigsaw pieces were divided between the hall and bathroom closets, while his own closet held a smaller skeleton minus the skull. The two older skeletons were also incomplete.

The first time his mother caught him playing with the skeletons, Christopher was setting up the small skeleton like a scarecrow in his window.

"Put those back where you found them," she said, brushing the dirt off his hands where he had been handling the bones. "I don't want to see you playing with those again."

After this, Christopher resolved to play with the skeletons only while they were inside the closets. The next time his father came home from a business trip, Christopher was playing with the skulls in his parents' closet. His mother was out shopping. She hadn't been able to in the last few days because she had been having headaches, and Christopher took advantage of the empty house to reacquaint himself with the skulls. He worried they might be lonely or forget him.

Christopher determined that one of the skulls was a man's and one was a woman's. Mrs. Skull had a long scar of dirt across her cranium. Christopher was about to answer Mr. Skull's question

about whether they had got any pets since Christopher's last visit when Mr. Murray came into the closet to put away his suitcase.

"Christopher," he said, "your mother out?"

"Shopping," said Christopher looking up at his father.

Mr. Murray nodded and said, "Well, finish up quick before dinner. We'll keep this between us."

Christopher said, "Okay," and answered Mr. Skull's question after apologizing for the interruption. He didn't want to seem rude when it might be a long time before he could return. When his mother had headaches, she stayed in her room and often sent Christopher to a friend's house so he wouldn't bother her. Christopher imagined the headaches as tree branches or river banks that looked safe until you were dependent on them. Sometimes Christopher wondered if his mother felt little landslides when she had her headaches, or if skulls could still get headaches after they died.

At school a few weeks later, Christopher's classmate Salvador Wood talked about what it was like to be adopted, and when he mentioned his Uncle Hernando's death Christopher asked if they were close because he had once heard his father ask a friend that question after a relative's death. Sal said, "No, he died the day I was born. I think it's our family's skeleton in the closet, because he died in prison."

"Does that mean you keep your uncle's skeleton in the closet, or someone else's?"

Sal laughed. "It means a secret no one likes to talk about. I only know because Miguel overheard my dad talking to Aunt Rosa about it on the phone after they took my mom to the hospital to have me."

Christopher shook his head, shaking his straw-colored hair into his eyes. "I'm pretty sure it means you keep a skeleton behind your Nikes."

"Why?" Sal asked.

"Because we have three of them in our closets at home."

"Prove it."

"Come over this afternoon and I will."

They spent three hours after school connecting and disconnecting the old bones instead of doing their homework. They moved the bones in his parents' room to Christopher's closet to make it more fun. Putting an adult's arm and a child's arm together was almost as hilarious as making the skulls face backwards or switching the hands with the feet. When their parents found out about the unfinished homework, they were both grounded, though neither the Woods nor the Murrays ever knew about moving the bones. Despite the punishment, Sal and Christopher built a friendship sturdier than a childhood tree house. They did their homework together, played video games together and terrorized the local girls together. Occasionally they attempted to figure out whose skeletons Christopher had in his closet and why they were in the house.

"Maybe your parents are serial killers," Sal once suggested as a way of avoiding his math homework.

"No, they're too nice to be serial killers. Besides, why would they keep the bodies of their victims in the house where I could find them?"

Sal had nothing to say to that.

When Christopher was eleven, he had his first vision. He was playing with the skeletons one night after his parents had gone to bed when the vision came. It was of a tree, the perfect tree, a tree where he and Sal would be able to go when they needed to get away from parents and

school and even each other if that ever happened. He saw the tree's limbs in the crisscrossed shadows of his room. It was a tree that could hold secrets like a closet. The next day, he and Sal decided they would have to find the tree, so they began searching the woods behind Christopher's house. They went tree by tree because although Christopher knew he would recognize the tree even if it were surrounded by a thousand identical ones, he also worried that they might overlook it if they weren't careful. They spent hours testing the trees, looking for the one from Christopher's vision, gauging the feel of the bark, listening for the sound of the trees' hearts like old man Wind did when he thought no one was looking. Sometimes when Sal listened to the trees, Christopher thought his friend was sad and would ask if he wanted to go play something. Sal would always say no and shake himself awake like a drowsy crow.

The days that they spent at Sal's house were noisier than the days at Christopher's but Christopher enjoyed hearing Mr. Wood talk about his relatives in Texas, and Mrs. Wood always gave him something extra when they asked for snacks.

"You're too skinny," she would say. "You look like a scarecrow." Christopher and Sal would always exchange looks when she said this. Sal and Christopher could have been twins if they were judged by body type.

They stayed away from Miguel's room when they played at Sal's house because Miguel and his friends Peter Hayes and Tyler Mitchum were always playing around with something they called Project Vación. Sal and Christopher never asked what this was because the first time they did Miguel cracked his knuckles and told them it involved a lot of math. Being included in something by the older boys wasn't worth the horrors of math. Once, Christopher had a vision that Vación would make John Valley famous, the way Dr. Pepper did for Waco.

When they were fourteen, Sal and Christopher found the tree.

Christopher's father was out of town on business again and his mother had arranged a night out with some other moms, so the boys ordered a pizza and brought the skeletons into the light for the first time in months. Christopher was starting his third slice of sausage and black olives when he had another vision. He made his way to the woods out back and started running through the trees. He went further into the woods than he and Sal had before and at last came to a clearing centered on a huge oak tree. For a dozen yards in any direction the tree was the only thing taller than a foot. It drank the moonlight as Christopher had once drunk his mother's milk, and its leaves shook in a rushing sibilance that whispered of quiet secrets the tree longed to share with him. Its limbs rattled like a living skeleton in the wind.

Sal came up behind him and Christopher realized that he hadn't given a reason for leaving. He was glad that Sal had followed. Sal would be happy they had found the tree.

"We're near the edge of Lucius Park, aren't we?" Sal asked.

"I guess we are."

"I wonder how long it would take to climb it," Sal said as he walked toward the tree.

"Too long," Christopher said. "There aren't any branches low enough to grab." He wrote the image of the tree on his mind so that he would be able to see it all night in his dreams. "This tree isn't made for climbing," he said.

"Why not?" asked Sal as he embraced the rough bark like someone closer than a friend. "It's a tree. All trees are made for climbing."

"Suit yourself," Christopher said. He sat beneath the tree and watched the fireflies shooting through the moon-bleached grass like drunken falling stars. He heard Sal grunting with the effort of climbing the tree. Christopher wondered how many secrets a tree could hold and how long it would take to learn the secret of the skeletons.

Sal had nearly made it to the lowest branch of the tree when he fell and broke his wrist. On their way back to the house, Christopher leaned over and whispered, "I told you so."

"Keep your stupid tree," Sal whispered back.

Mrs. Murray handled the situation with great poise considering she had had one of her increasingly frequent headaches earlier in the day. Christopher imagined this headache as a tree limb falling like Sal had. His mother told Sal's mother that they would pay for the ER visit and the cast, but Mrs. Wood said boys will be boys.

Sal didn't go back to the tree until his cast was off, and then only by daylight, so Christopher found himself alone at the tree in the next few weeks during the afternoons and evenings. The tree never stopped talking, but he couldn't figure out what it was saying. He took comfort in the unintelligible tree speech, because ever since the night Sal had broken his wrist his parents had been quiet at the dinner table. At first, Christopher thought it was because they were upset with him for going into the woods at night. Soon he realized that there was something else bothering them. He had another vision one night as he drowsed beneath the oak tree.

The tree had finally decided to let him in on the secrets, but first it would only show him the people who had secrets. It wanted to see how he used its knowledge before it gave away too much.

He saw Miguel with Peter and Tyler drinking from plastic sports bottles. No surprise. They were hiding the truth of Project Vacación. He saw his parents. There was something there to do with the skeletons, and something else that Christopher almost understood before the vision shifted. Sal was stuffing a box into the back of a closet like an old Halloween costume.

After the vision, Christopher noticed that his father was going on more business trips than usual. He would come home on the weekends, give Christopher something from whichever city he had been to last, and fly out after the morning service on Sunday.

The first night Christopher was alone with his mother during this flurry of business trips, she made spaghetti and forgot to take the bay leaf out of the sauce. Christopher found it half crushed on his plate and thought of the tree and its latest vision. He said he wasn't hungry and went to his room. He tried to relax and rearrange the skeletons for a while but the Skulls weren't up to their usual chatter and Christopher couldn't stand the quiet.

He started spending more time at Sal's house and at the tree. When he and Sal were together, Christopher didn't have to think about his parents and the almost-revelation he had had beneath the tree. When he was at the tree, Christopher was most often in a lonely mood, and he would sit and think until the sun and the wind and the tree had beaten the lonely thoughts from his mind.

During one of his father's business trips, Christopher's mother planned an evening out with the other moms in her circle. Christopher planned to spend the evening with Sal and Miguel riding around the edges of Lucius Park, possibly going inside and searching for ghosts that no one expected to find. Miguel's girlfriend Lisa would probably come along too, which meant Sal and Christopher would be expected to make the experience properly spooky until Miguel told them to knock it off. When Sal and Christopher came home from school, they learned that Mrs. Murray had canceled her night out because of a headache. Christopher wondered if there was any land left to slide in his mother's head. He wondered if her headaches were because she missed his father so much, and if parents were allowed to be lovesick after they had children.

They didn't catch any ghosts that night, but Christopher caught a few secrets. They were driving into Lucius Park when Christopher saw the future bob in front of him in time with the tennis ball on Miguel's radio antenna. The vision was strong yet vague like the one he had under the tree. Christopher saw Tyler Mitchum returning to John Valley after a six-year absence for Peter and Lisa's wedding. Christopher also saw that there were no ghosts in Lucius Park, but one day Jo Josephs would go right to the heart of the Park and blow the lid off the Lucius family's secret that was too big for any size closet. Doctor Who's TARDIS couldn't hold that secret. Christopher saw Sal's secret. He saw his mother's secret too, and the two swam in front of him as the truck bounced down the knobby road. He struggled for a minute to untangle the two, but the images stayed: Men who were not his father posing with his mother's headaches inside a box the size of a small skeleton while Sal took pictures and stuffed money into the skulls from Christopher's closet which talked about landslides and broken wrists.

Sal shook Christopher's shoulder. "You okay? You look like you've seen —"

"There aren't any ghosts," Christopher said. He put one leg over the tailgate and said, "I have to head home."

Miguel hit the brakes and Christopher hopped off the back bumper. Christopher heard them shouting at him as he ran, but he knew that if he didn't run quickly the ground would slip from under him completely and he wouldn't be able to escape the vision. He ran through the corner of the Park, crossing a creek and fighting through the underbrush. It took almost thirty minutes before he came out near the tree. He turned to face his house and waved his thanks to the tree, praying that his mother's headaches were just headaches and not something else like the vision had hinted.

Christopher stopped when he reached the back yard. There was a light on in his parents' bedroom. The nightstand lamp, he guessed. By its light he could see that there were two people in the room, although his father wasn't due home until the morning. Christopher checked the driveway, but his father's car wasn't there. In its place was a Sentra like Mr. Simmons'. There was even a Wal-Mart Smiley Face on the dashboard. Christopher eased the door open but could not prevent it from making noise as it closed. He heard Mr. Simmons say something incomprehensible and his mother said, "No, Christopher's out with friends. You're imagining things."

He was all but silent as he sneaked into his room and pulled all of the bones out of the closet. He stuffed them in his pillowcase as though he were making a scarecrow of skeletons and tried not to think about what was happening down the hall. His mother was cheating on his father. He had to get the skeletons out of the house before his father came home. She was cheating. The bones rattled in the pillowcase, but the people in the master bedroom didn't notice. On his dad. Christopher left the door open when he left. Behind him, his closet was empty like a hole in a tree's silhouette left by a fallen branch.

Sal was waiting at the edge of the tree's clearing, looking between the tree and Christopher's house. Christopher couldn't remember if he had asked Sal to meet him here or not. "They aren't meant to be in closets," he said.

Sal nodded. They said nothing to each other as they walked around the tree to the edge of Lucius Park. They followed the invisible line until it crossed Blackwater Creek by the crossroads. This was the river's swiftest bend, and it rushed past them toward the heart of Lucius Park, the deep place where no one ever went and wouldn't go until Jo revealed the secret. The

bones in the bag grew heavier as the boys approached the river, heavy like the box in the back of Sal's closet.

"They're my bones," Christopher said.

"But your parents' secret."

The bones were heavy like straws filled with concrete, as if the bones missing for so many years were rejoining their counterparts. It took both of them to throw the pillowcase into the river. They lifted and swung, the riverbank squishing beneath their feet. On the third swing, the bones dove into the river.

In the same instant the soil beneath Sal's feet crumbled and took him with it into the river's current. Christopher shouted as Sal went under, and though he saw something heavy and dark float into the Park, he couldn't tell if it was Sal or the sack. He ran along the bank, looking for any sign that Sal might still be struggling somewhere, but the current moved too swiftly, carrying its treasure of death away. As the flotsam left his sight, the images of his vision finally unwound themselves. He called for Sal, but he couldn't see past the unscrambled skulls and pictures and boxes to look for his friend. There was a tall figure on the other side of the river, and Christopher thought for a moment that it was Sal. But Sal wasn't that tall, and the figure was indistinguishable from the rest of his visions. Eventually, the visions cleared, and the figure had left the other bank.

Christopher was still sitting by the river when Sheriff Cody found him the next afternoon. He asked Christopher all kinds of questions, but the only answer Christopher gave was that Sal was gone, had slipped and fallen into the river. Christopher was checked out by the ER nurses and Doctor Green, the local psychiatrist. They found nothing wrong with him except a slight

case of insomnia and the shock anyone would expect in someone who had watched his best friend slip into death.

There was no doubt in anyone's mind that Sal had died in the river. Even the Woods seemed to know from the moment the sheriff told them where he found Christopher that their boy wasn't coming back. Mrs. Murray told them that she was so sorry for their loss. "I'm just so glad that Christopher wasn't lost, too." Later she told Christopher that she didn't know what she was thinking letting him associate with Sal and Miguel for so long. "It's nothing against Harold and Liz, but they adopted those boys and there's no telling what kind of family they came from." She seemed to have forgotten that Sal and Miguel were Mr. Wood's nephew's kids in her ecstasy. It might have had something to do with the headache from the day before.

Christopher was quiet the rest of the way home, and he said nothing until they got home and he was alone with his father. "I threw them in the river. I'm sorry it took so long," he said.

His father nodded and held him close for a while, like a scarecrow hugging its supporting post. "You know about the affair?"

Neither could have said which one asked the question, but they both nodded as if the other had. Something about that knowledge bound them together and Mrs. Murray seemed to sense that her secret was no longer her own. She never said anything about Mr. Simmons or the affair, but her headaches stopped and in a few months she moved out. She left a note for each of them on the kitchen counter, but Christopher put it in his closet with the souvenirs his father had brought back from all of his business trips.

The search for Sal was truncated because it was certain he had been carried into Lucius Park by the river. Although Christopher and the other had been willing to drive around on the edge of the Park and even go in a little ways that had been the one time they had ever gone in.

Most people avoided going into the Park, though few had any reason other than its reputation as a wasteland. A few of the county deputies organized a search party that tried to find Sal in the Park, but they got no further in than a few hundred yards before they were forced to turn back. Later they tried using a helicopter to look for Sal's body, but the operation failed because they could never get a clear view of the river and the surrounding area. After six months, there was still no sign of Sal and the Woods decided that enough time had passed that they could have a memorial service. It was held at the church, and Miguel and Peter revealed the results of their years-long Project Vacación: a sports drink the color of summer trees that supposedly gave the drinker visions. Christopher tried some but it didn't do anything for his visions except make the images he remembered fuzzy and confused again.

After the service, Christopher helped Miguel sort through Sal's things. Mrs. Wood had asked Christopher to come and take something to remember Sal by. He didn't need anything to remember Sal, but he agreed because he knew Mrs. Wood needed him to say yes.

Most of Sal's clothes would go to friends and relatives who needed them and Goodwill would take the rest. The pictures and knickknacks were divided between the Woods and Christopher, though Christopher didn't know why he took the ninja turtle he'd given Sal for his tenth birthday. When they first got to the closet, Christopher hesitated. The box was waiting in there and he wasn't sure he was ready to open it. The closet held a third of Sal's clothes, two sets of roller blades, a pair of official NBA basketballs, a gallon Ziploc bag full of pogs, three Harry Potter books, a bottle of Vacación Sal had sneaked from Miguel's room, and no skeletons.

Miguel dug behind the basketballs and roller blades until he found a box big enough to fit a small skeleton. He pulled it out and put it on the bed next to Christopher, where it made a crater in the comforter. Miguel seemed to be glad of the burden. "You should take that," he said, "just

put it with the turtle and the pictures. I'll drive you so you don't have to carry it all the way home."

When Christopher got home, he took the box to the tree and left the rest of Sal's memories in his room. They were not put in the closet because Christopher wasn't hiding them. He sat beneath the tree and closed his eyes. The tree might have been the wrong place to come to think about Sal. He hated his mother for distracting him from Sal the night they had thrown away the skeletons. If her secret hadn't mixed with Sal's, Christopher might not have rushed home and Sal might be alive. They could have waited to open the box until Sal was ready and then they could have had contests to see whose skeleton was the most outlandish.

*It can't be true*, he thought. It didn't seem to stick, so he tried again, thinking of anything but the secret in the box.

Christopher sat with his arms crossed and his knees bent, his jeans riding up and exposing his ankles. His hair was dripping with the sweat of the August sunlight, dyed green by the foliage, which had settled over the woods as if keeping an eye on the young man whose neck it was burning with the careful pace of a surgeon. He stared at the box, his inheritance from Sal. Christopher wanted to push the secret into the back of his closet where no one would find it until they found him too. Once he opened the box, the skeleton would be in the light and he would lose what was left of Sal.

Christopher imagined that he was sitting beneath an oak tree in Doctor Green's office, its roots weaving together to make him comfortable on the makeshift couch.

*Don't be nervous*, the not-there shrink said. *Let's try a little word association to loosen us up. I'll give you a word and I want you to tell me the first thing that comes to mind, and keep going for as long as the string of words will go, okay?*

Okay.

*Pineapple.*

Fruit fruit cups drinks glasses dishwasher sink kitchen house rooms door closet skeletons  
in come out of clothes hide hide and seek seek and you shall find finders keepers keep it secret  
Can you keep a secret? pinky swear oath blood brother best friend share borrow magazines in the  
closet Sal in the closet with magazines ---

Christopher called the imagined session short, despite Doctor Green's supposed protests.  
Some things were left in the closet.

He opened the box with a deep breath. It was filled with magazines that he realized Sal  
had bought secondhand from the senior guys who also sold pirated movies for the price of a  
movie ticket and pills that were guaranteed to make your girlfriend happier than she'd ever been  
in bed. Sal and Christopher didn't have girlfriends and movies were never Sal's thing.  
Christopher preferred to spend his money on video games and he knew now that Sal had spent a  
week's allowance once a month on magazines whose pages stuck together from the oil in the  
senior guys' trunks.

In one magazine, a sun-bleached tan surfer guy is smiling at the camera, his  
unmentionables covered by a sticky note from Sal that explains things to Christopher, but it's  
only the start of a note and even with the other three that Christopher finds on the other pages of  
the magazine it isn't a full letter but fragments of half-ideas that might have become a rehearsed  
speech if Sal had lived long enough. Later on, Christopher will burn the magazines beneath the  
tree like a shaman purifying the tribe's guilt by incinerating the object of condemnation, but  
Christopher will keep this magazine that has Sal's notes in it. He does not need the notes to

understand, though sometimes he will try to see what Sal saw in these guys whose bodies are more than any guy's should be. He won't ever quite see it, but he will try for Sal's sake.

## MANY ARE CALLED

*Tyler Mitchum, 2013*

God, they'd wanted his sizes. Tyler had never heard of asking guests for shirt, pants, and dress sizes at any wedding, in or out of John Valley. Still, he had filled in the blanks on the response card, not wishing to seem rude or ignorant. He remembered a vague reference to special attire somewhere on the invitation, but the card had disappeared sometime after the memory of Sheila's neck – and its salty sweet, bread and butter taste on a summer evening – had resurfaced. He hoped he had the time and date correct. He told himself he was coming back because of Sheila's neck or some misplaced, half-forgotten friendship that had once existed between Peter and himself. A small part of him wondered if he just wanted to know why they'd wanted his sizes, though he couldn't deny a sense of satisfaction in his Armani suit and the small stack of business cards tucked into his breast pocket.

The town hadn't changed much in the six years since he had left for college. The Rusty Nail was boarded up for repairs. Someone had spray-painted the word *Vación* on the side of the bar as though it was a brand logo and not something cooked up by dream-addled high school students. Tyler wondered how Miguel was doing. It had been seven years since Sal's death. Tyler had been studying abroad in Spain that semester and hadn't made it back for the funeral. Maybe he would look Miguel up after the wedding.

Tyler pulled into the church parking lot and killed the engine, reading the other license plates and taking some comfort in the fact that he was not the only out-of-town guest. He leaned

back and wondered what he was doing at a wedding for people he hadn't spoken to since high school instead of working on the Dresden account, which the Landons had said was his to baby. Tyler sat up when he heard a car door shut. It was his brother, Will, and his wife, Anna. He hadn't seen them since the last time they came out to Gainesville.

He got out to meet them and almost missed that they were wearing identical clothes. His five-year-old nephew's tiny suit was a miniature version of the suit Will wore, right down to the gold-embroidered initials on the lapels – "L" on one side and "P" on the other. Anna's dress, sleeveless and modest despite the modern design, also had embroidered initials on the shoulders where the lapels would have been.

"Hey, Ty," said Will, catching his brother in a hug. "Glad you made it."

"Yeah, well these things only happen once, right?" Tyler's words tasted stale.

"That's what they say," Will said with a grin.

Stephen tugged on Tyler's pants leg, and he leaned down to look at his nephew.

"Uncle Ty, where's your suit?"

Tyler gave his tailored suit a confused look and said, "I'm wearing it."

Stephen shook his head adamantly and said, "No, silly, the one for the wedding. Like mine and Dad's."

"Well, I don't have one like that, Stephen. That's just you guys."

"No, everybody's got one. Why aren't you wearing yours?"

Will came to Tyler's rescue, scooping up the child and explaining, "Maybe Uncle Tyler hasn't found his yet. The Raines special ordered suits and dresses for all of the guests," he explained. "They have them in the choir room for the out-of-towners. I can help you find yours if you like."

“No thanks,” said Tyler. “What I have is fine.” It was Armani, a gift from the senior Landon as recognition for Tyler’s landing the Dresden account, and he would be damned if he was going to exchange it for something that would make him identical to everyone else in John Valley. He had spent the last six years trying to get away from John Valley, first with college and then with his job. He hadn’t returned even when Stephen was born, or for any of the birthdays since. The only times he saw his family were at graduation and the times they drove through Gainesville, sometimes on the way to Disney World and sometimes just to reassure themselves he still existed. When did he become so separate from them? Had it started with college or was it further back than that?

Will shrugged and carried Stephen into the sanctuary. Despite the lines of stained glass windows on either side of the building, the doorway seemed filled with shadow. As Tyler entered, he felt justified in his separation from his family and John Valley. Except for him, everyone attending the wedding seemed to be wearing the custom clothes. They looked like Southern angels in the stained glass light. Tyler looked for Sheila, wondering if she would be in the wedding party or in the pews. She and Min Coulter had been close to Lisa in high school. If Sheila was in the wedding party that would make Tyler’s reunion hopes a little more difficult to fulfill.

Tyler didn’t recognize the usher who asked him bride’s side or groom’s. The man must have been one of the out-of-town friends not special enough to warrant being in the wedding party but close enough to require some sort of job. Tyler said groom’s because he thought he would be able to spot Sheila better from there. The usher asked him if he need help finding his suit before seating Tyler behind Will and Anna, even offering to fetch it. Tyler declined.

“I’ve already got a suit,” Tyler said.

The usher looked like Tyler had just insulted his sister; maybe he had. Maybe that was why Lisa's parents had gone through the circus act of dressing their guests in identical suits: they had a family friend offer to clothe the wedding. "I see that, sir. Enjoy the wedding." The usher returned to the door to help Rebecca Lucius to her seat. Along with her Raine-provided dress, she wore a matching cardigan and a hat that held a small dove. She chose the bride's side and sat in a patch of deep blue light beneath Jesus calming the storm.

"Long way home to Gainesville," Will said leaning back over the pew so that the tinted light colored his head golden and his chest and arms red.

"Yep," said Tyler.

"You could always stay the night. We've got room."

"You can have my room," Stephen said, squirming in place to look at Tyler. "But you gotta wear your suit." Anna hushed him and turned him around, reminding him he needed to sit still during the wedding. "But he's gotta wear the suit," Stephen protested. "He'll get thrown out if he doesn't."

Tyler said, "I'll be fine, Will. Honest."

He watched the last few guests arrive. Nobody came up to him saying how good it was to see him; maybe as few people remembered him as he remembered of them. Old Man Wind nodded to Tyler from a golden-lit area across the way. Tyler looked away. One of the town's final Native Americans, Samuel Wind had a reputation among John Valley's youth of being more shamanistic than Christian, although many of the old ladies in town thought of him as second to Jesus in holiness. Tyler wondered why Wind's adopted son Jo wasn't in attendance. Wind always seemed less unsettling with Jo around, and he certainly hadn't been drinking since he adopted Jo.

The more people arrived, the more out of place Tyler felt. The only gray suit in a sea of whites dyed by the light, he settled into his seat like a grease stain on a piece of fine china. The cloned formalwear only disturbed his dignity, it seemed. In the last seconds before the pianist struck up the wedding march, a man a good twenty years older than Tyler slipped into the back row wearing a pale blue suit that probably hadn't seen daylight in ten or fifteen years. Despite the difference in their ages, Tyler felt a strange connection with this man who dared to stand out from the town's conformity. The pane in whose filtered light the man sat was one of the few clear ones in the church's windows, and the light did nothing to improve the appearance of his suit. In that light, Tyler noticed the man had stuck black letters on his lapels – L and P. The kinship he had felt with the man vanished as the ringbearer and flower girl started down the aisle. He hadn't rebelled against so much as coopted the wedding uniform. The white rose petals the flower girl dropped shifted color every few feet like slivers of mood rings.

Sheila and her escort came second in the line of bridesmaids and groomsmen. Tyler took her in as she moved past, her bright face, her already tanned neck, the delicious curves he remembered. If she saw him, she did not acknowledge it. The wedding party's clothes were identical to the clothes the guests wore, except that they had an extra touch of color in the tie or the sash, and they were arranged so that each couple stood in the same color of light on the sides of the stage. Sheila's color was blood red, like Red Lucius' skin after summer. When Lisa and Peter stood in front of the minister, they were the only ones standing in clear light. As soon as the piano stopped, the minister began his marital sermon.

“A reading from the Gospel according to Matthew: And again Jesus spoke to them in parables, saying, ‘The kingdom of heaven may be compared to a king who gave a wedding feast

for his son and sent his servants to call those who were invited to the wedding feast, but they would not come.’”

Tyler shifted in his seat and wondered when parables had become acceptable wedding Scripture. He vaguely remembered something about the nature of love and marriage being established in Eden from Will and Anna’s wedding, and most TV weddings had something light and happy. This was just dismal. His eyes wandered around the room as the minister continued reading, but he kept returning to Sheila and how her neck seemed to be performing a tease for him, showing him a little as she turned to look at Lisa and Peter, taking it back when she looked out at the crowd. If he really had come back to see her, maybe his mission was coming closer to success. He found himself wondering whether she would even acknowledge him in his Armani and, when he started to figure out whether he could reach the choir room before the reception before he had to talk to Sheila, he berated himself for considering becoming part of the John Valley crowd. Tyler’s ears and brain finally reconnected with the minister’s voice just as he thought Sheila saw him.

“‘For many are called but few are chosen.’”

“‘And so it is that out of the many, Peter and Lisa have chosen the one with whom they shall remain for the rest of their lives.’”

He began to lose himself in the nights he had shared with Sheila in high school. He could remember the outfit she’d worn on every holiday for those four years, like the sequined jumpsuit on Fourth of July their senior year. Or was that junior year? And the ... well, mostly he remembered what she looked like after she took them off. He was thinking about what it would be like to get her out of that foolish bridesmaid’s dress when everyone applauded and started chatting about the reception. Had he missed the wedding party’s exit? He listened for details

about the reception. It was in the high school auditorium down the street; there was nowhere else big enough in town to hold it, not with most of the town in attendance and the out-of-town guests. Tyler walked behind a clump of people he assumed were out-of-town relatives and ignored the renewed stares of the people around him.

The man in the pale blue suit was walking on the other side of the street with one of the bridesmaids and a couple of other young women. He seemed to be regaling them with some past exploit, the telling of which had captivated the other women but left the bridesmaid looking for a way out of the crowd. Tyler noticed it was Sheila about the same time she dashed across the street to him.

“Hey, Ty,” she said, taking his arm as though it had been last night that they had said goodbye under the bleachers and not six years ago. Tyler pulled her close and eyed the man across the street, noticing that his black letters were starting to wilt in the Florida heat. Not exactly how he had imagined getting Sheila back, but he wasn’t complaining.

“You’re not wearing your suit,” said Sheila.

“Not you too.”

“You look so out of place, that’s all. At least you’re not trying to mimic the real ones,” she added with a nod to the man across the street.

“What does it matter which suit I wear, Sheila? You used to worry about getting me out of my clothes, not which ones I had on.”

“Stop projecting,” she said with a wan smile. They were silent the rest of the way to the reception.

The usher that had seated Tyler was waiting outside the auditorium, his suit now accented by a black armband that read SECURITY in bold white print. Tyler laughed and thought that

things must really be bad in John Valley if they had to post security outside of wedding receptions when the whole town was invited. When Tyler and Sheila reached the door, the usher held out his arm. “No suit, no entry.”

“What?” Tyler stopped mostly from shock at the idea that someone would bar him from the reception based on his clothing.

“You heard me. You don’t wear the wedding suit, you don’t get into the reception.”

“That’s ridiculous.”

“Take it up with the bride and groom,” said the guard.

“Come on, Rick,” said Sheila, stepping between them and using the tone Tyler remembered her using on him before they went under the bleachers. Tyler resisted the urge to lean forward and kiss her neck while she sweet talked the guard. “He’s with me. No one will mind just this one.”

Rick raised his eyebrows at Sheila. “You gotta deal with Lisa if she freaks, then. I ain’t responsible.”

“Thanks, Rick,” she said, cupping his cheek in her hand in a way that made Tyler want to give her a firm kiss just to clarify who was accompanying whom here.

As they waited in line for finger foods, Tyler asked, “What was that all about?”

Sheila laughed, exposing that beautiful neck of hers. “Oh, Lisa got it into her head that her wedding could only be perfect if everyone wore the same thing. Obviously, her dress was a little fancier than everyone else’s, but the idea was there. Something about being given your robes instead of earning them. I don’t understand it, really, but it’s the bride’s day, right?”

Tyler said he guessed it was and put a few cheese cubes on his plate.

“I didn’t realize you were coming back, or I would have made sure you got your suit on time,” Sheila said as they got their punch. It looked familiar beyond the fact that it was the basic sherbet and soda punch that everyone served at receptions.

“Oh, they used original Vación for it,” Sheila said when he commented on the punch. “When you mix it with ginger ale and pineapple sherbet it makes the perfect gold. You heard about Vación, right? Miguel Wood cooked it up after our senior year. It’s being bottled by Dr. Pepper now. Kind of a regional drink. They say it may take off outside the Gulf Coast in the next year. Best thing to come out of our high school yet.”

Tyler couldn’t help but ask what his architecture degree was worth in that case, pulling out one of his business cards and emphasizing the fact that he had an office in one of the finest firms in the region.

“Oh, Tyler,” Sheila said, placing the card beside her plate without more than a glance. I meant Miguel’s still in John Valley, you know. What you’re doing is great, but you left, didn’t you? Never shed a tear for leaving us all in the rearview mirror.”

“Well, it wasn’t exactly –”

“Oh, don’t apologize. You’re so sensitive today. I’m just making conversation.”

Samuel Wind and Rebecca Lucius were chatting at one of the other tables. There was something dark about their faces that Tyler couldn’t explain. Rebecca’s nephew Red was sitting sullenly beside them, staring across the room at Min Coulter dancing with Liam Newman. Min’s deputy badge was tucked inside her bra, making her left breast appear to have a square lump. The man in the pale blue suit must have found someone to vouch for him like Sheila had for Tyler. He was making his presence known, dancing with two young women whose names Tyler couldn’t recall in a way that made even Sheila blush.

“Who is that guy?” he asked Sheila.

“That’s Benji Simmons’ dad,” she said. “Remember, he used to lead the My Friends club, and then there was that scandal around the time Sal died? Well, the next year, Simmons had his license revoked. This is probably the soberest he’s been since.”

The lights on the dance floor recreated the effect of the stained glass windows on the wedding suits in a psychedelic swirl. Lisa caught Rick’s attention from her and Peter’s table and when the guard came over, she whispered something to him and pointed at Simmons. Tyler watched with morbid curiosity as Rick lifted Simmons by the collar of his faded suit and carried him to the back door that faced the woods in Lucius Park. One of the other wedding guests held the door open so that Rick could launch Simmons through the door with both arms.

Tyler’s mouth fell open and he turned to Sheila for an explanation, but she only said it was sad that Simmons hadn’t worn the suit the Raines had ordered for him.

“Is that what you’re going to say when Rick tosses me out back?”

“Don’t be silly,” she said standing and taking his hand. “No one’s going to toss you out. I vouched for you, remember?”

Tyler figured that, since he was at a wedding reception, he might as well be dancing, so he followed Sheila to the dance floor. He danced with her like he had in high school, holding her close and occasionally burying his face in her neck, but the uniformity of their fellow dancers’ clothes ruined the effect for him. In high school, everybody had been the same on the inside, but they’d at least dressed differently enough that they could be grouped properly. The jocks, the geeks, the loners, the “normal” kids – everybody had their look. Now it was all identical, the only differences lying in the spinning colored lights and Tyler’s dark grey suit.

Tyler found himself wondering again why he had come to this affair. He wasn't enjoying himself. He had been ridiculed at every turn for not buying into Lisa's insanity. As he turned in the dance, he caught sight of the room where they stored the bleachers during events like this.

"Hey," he said, "you remember graduation day under the bleachers?"

Her smile said yes.

"How about we go back and make another memory?"

"Tyler, this is a wedding."

"Exactly," he said, leading her towards the edge of the dance floor. "Two people coming together as one and all that."

"Is that the only reason you came? To get laid?"

"I don't know why I came," he said.

She thought for a moment. "All right. Maybe if I get you out of that suit, Lisa won't realize it isn't one of hers."

The room was long, dark, and filled with bleachers and extra party supplies. Tyler closed the door behind them and grabbed a moving blanket someone had stuffed into one of the metal stands. After they knocked over a stack of plastic punch cups, they stepped more carefully, feeling their way along the rows until they reached an open area between two bleachers. Tyler thought he could still tell where the door was and he watched it absentmindedly as Sheila took off his coat and tie. He reciprocated by undoing the buttons on the back of her dress. As they laid down on the blanket, Tyler's mind was filled with memories of other times beneath these bleachers and the longing that had settled into his groin, so close to Sheila's he might explode, and his eyes, drinking in her looks again as though he would never be satisfied.

He was about to enter her when the door to the room opened and the light flicked on.

“Can you believe this?” Anna said. “Someone’s come in here and knocked over the extra cups. Do you think there are more farther back?”

Anna took a few steps into the room and froze when she looked down the row of bleachers to where Tyler and Sheila laid. “Tyler! For God’s sake.” She turned away and Will stepped in behind her. Tyler made eye contact with Will. He couldn’t say what Will was thinking before he turned away with Anna. When the door closed behind them, Sheila said, “Rain check?”

Tyler mumbled something and started putting his clothes back on. He didn’t bother to button his shirt or tie his tie. Sheila was able to return almost to the same appearance as she’d had when they arrived. The extra business cards he’d brought spilled as he picked up his coat and lay scattered across the floor, immediately attracting the dirt of twenty-five years of bleacher storage. As they left the storage room, he felt himself lifted off the ground by his collar. He tried to wriggle out of his shirt, but whoever had him had grabbed him round the waist as well. In his turning, Tyler saw a flash of black armband. “Rick,” he said, “what do you think you’re doing?”

“No suit, no entry,” he said.

“But you already let me in,” Tyler appealed. “You said Sheila would have to deal with it if I wasn’t welcome.”

Tyler twisted and caught a glimpse of Sheila staring at him. Her neck was covered by the collar of his suit jacket. She had put it on to combat the chill. Tyler hadn’t noticed how cold it was in the auditorium, colder than it should have been in May, even with the A/C units running full blast.

“That rain check will be a while in coming, I guess,” she said as Rick carried Tyler around the edge of the auditorium.

“I can walk, you know,” Tyler said.

“I know.”

They reached the back doors, the ones that faced the woods, and Rick hardly pressed the exit bar before heaving Tyler out onto the ground that sloped toward the trees.

Tyler tumbled for a few yards before running into a sand bag that stopped him about halfway from the trees. He sat up, stiff and worried about broken bones. He was grateful that the sand bag had broken his fall. He touched his limbs and joints and pressed and felt until he was satisfied that nothing was broken. The rocks and brambles had scratched his skin where his shirt hung open. His suit pants were torn and filthy. He would have to have them cleaned and repaired. He looked up. He had thought there was a tall dark figure in the shadows of the trees, but it must have been his addled brain playing tricks on him. An owl swooped down to catch a mouse a few yards to Tyler’s right, and the sudden movement spooked him. He jumped back off of the sand bag and tried to stand up. Then he saw what he had run into: not a sand bag, but Simmons’ limp body. The suit’s ragged edges had been made worse by the slide down the hill. The vinyl letters clung to the grass farther up like grass seeds.

“Hey man, you okay?” Tyler asked.

Tyler shook the man’s shoulder before trying to turn him over so that his face was toward the sky. Tyler searched Simmons’ wrist for a pulse, feeling again his kinship with this man who had been thrown out of a wedding because of the bride and groom’s standards. He checked the man’s throat.

Nothing.

## THE DEBT-KEEPER

*Morton Swinburne, 2021*

No one died in John Valley. Since shortly after its founding in the late 1830s, not one death had been recorded in the town or most of the surrounding area. Occasionally, people went to see Morton Swinburne, the local Debt-keeper, and they vanished. No one knew where they went. No one ever asked. For those left behind, it was the same as if the Debt-keeper's clients had died, so memorial services were held when the time seemed appropriate. This arrangement had two distinct effects on the lives of John Valley. It kept most outsiders outside, and the preacher never preached about death. Even when he was asked to perform a memorial service, the preacher could never quite bring himself to mention death.

One sweltering August day Morton Swinburne sat in the back room of his office on Maple Street. He was a thin man with dark hair that never grayed during his long tenure as Debt-keeper. Despite the heat, he wore his usual dark suit. Swinburne kept the back room dark, with only a small kerosene lamp on the shelf behind him. From his desk Swinburne could see the front door and the building's only window, which was shrouded by the tangled shadow of an old stunted maple tree, the last of the ancient arboreal ranks after which the street was named. He could not see the two bookshelves because they were carefully tucked to either side of the front room, away from the furthest reaches of the grotesque caricature of sunlight that sometimes entered the window.

“What can I do for the great-great-granddaughter of the famous John Lucius?” he asked when Rebecca Lucius entered. He hadn’t recognized her at first. It was the light that had tricked him into unfamiliarity. He was so used to viewing people in the light of his kerosene lamp that seeing them in any other light made them seem like bright shadows of themselves. That was why he hated making trips outside the office to keep his appointments. He was not always certain he had met the correct person.

“I have an appointment,” said Rebecca, sitting straight and proud like a matron from the 1800s. “Why else does anyone come to see you, Debt-keeper?”

There were many stories about the title’s origins and many debates about the original role of the Debt-keeper. Many said the debt-keeper’s role had been spiritual or sociological. There were even some who postulated that the debt-keeper himself was not human, pointing to the fact that a man named Morton Swinburne had always been debt-keeper in John Valley. The general opinion was that such ponderings were so many piles of hogwash, old wives’ tales and other terms not deemed acceptable in polite company. Swinburne did little to explain or debunk any of the rumors.

“Yes, I suppose you have.” He reached into a drawer and pulled out several forms. “We’ll be sure to give you the finest service, Miss Lucius, as befits someone of your status.”

John Lucius had been the one to set aside the Lucius Park however many years back and had made the arrangements for its care. The Park was one of the more deserted areas in the state, and no one outside the family could remember why John Lucius had sequestered a third of the county. None of the family ever gave the reason. Yet for all the mystery surrounding the patriarch’s greatest achievement, the Lucius family was not one of John Valley’s more prominent. In fact, the Lucius family was remarkable in that they were all unremarkable. Ever

since John's legendary act, not one member of the Lucius family had ever left the county, much less the state, nor had they in any way distinguished themselves. The Luciuses were the quintessential nonentities.

"You will forgive me if I cannot recall the details of your debt," Swinburne said leadingly.

"There are more important things than my debt, Morton."

He blinked. He could not recall anyone in all his time as debt-keeper who had called him by his first name. Most people could barely speak his surname or title when they came. "Such as?"

"Your wellbeing, Morton. Your salvation, if you will."

Swinburne resisted the urge to scoff and allowed himself an infant smile instead.

"Do you know where Jo is right now, Morton?"

"No, I'm afraid I don't, Miss Lucius. He has a reputation for wandering. If you are concerned for him, perhaps you should speak to Sheriff Cody." Swinburne doubted the sheriff would know where to find Jo. Besides, Jo would turn up later that day. He was Swinburne's afternoon appointment.

"Jo is in Lucius Park. He has been for three days."

"Fascinating," said Swinburne, "but trespassing is not in my jurisdiction. If Jo is snooping around your ancestor's private reserve, I suggest you talk with the sheriff."

"You don't understand, Morton. Joshua Josephs is walking the path which will take him to the heart of Lucius Park."

Swinburne snatched a pencil from the cup on his desk and began to fill out the topmost form in front of him. He turned his eyes from his guest to the paper as if to dismiss her. “I don’t see what you are getting at, Miss Lucius.”

“I would be worried if I were you, Morton. In fact, were I you, I would consider leaving town.”

“Why would I do that, Rebecca? Because Jo is sniffing around your great-great-grandfather’s mad scheme? It sounds to me as though you’re the one who should be leaving. If there are any secrets buried in that waste, they are yours, not mine.”

She used the desk to push herself up. In the half-light of the kerosene lamp, she would have intimidated anyone but Swinburne. “Listen carefully, Morton. Jo Josephs is in Lucius Park. By now he has learned why John Lucius set aside the Park and is traveling back to town. When he emerges he will come to your office. If you value your life, do not wait for him. Be anywhere but here when he comes.”

Swinburne stared at her. Her eyes were hard, stubborn. “Miss Lucius, I can assure you that I have no intention of leaving. I assume that you would like to settle your debt now.”

She sighed and returned to her seat in the chair. “Yes, Morton. I would like that.”

They spent only a few minutes filling out the paperwork. The forms were not entirely necessary, but Swinburne had found they had a calming effect on his clients. *See*, the simple pieces of paper seemed to tell them, *it’s no worse than a visit to the doctor’s office.*

Swinburne was just filing the last of Rebecca Lucius’ forms when his second appointment entered the room: Samuel Wind, one of the few pureblooded American Indians left in John Valley, a descendant of the tribal chief who ruled when the first white settlers came to

the area. John Valley had long been the wonder of historians and anthropologists because of Wind's ancestor. The man had made peace with the first white settlers almost immediately after the two races met. Even when all the other tribes in the region fought wars against the white man or were deported to other parts of America, the strange, peaceable chief had kept his tribe from conflict or distress. Wind moved with more assurance than Miss Lucius had. He didn't bother closing the door. The wind was picking up outside and blew the door shut.

"Mr. Swinburne," said the Indian as he sat in the chair. "It's been a while."

Swinburne nodded. "Thirty years, give or take."

Wind nodded back. "It's time to pay my debt."

Swinburne smiled at the ease and acceptance of the old Indian. He pulled the necessary forms from a drawer in his desk. When Wind cleared his throat, Swinburne snapped the lead of his pencil, stopping in the middle of the first line.

"You heard about Jo?" Wind asked.

Swinburne wasn't smiling anymore. "He's been in the Lucius Park, I believe. Miss Lucius mentioned it earlier when she came in."

Wind nodded as though he had expected an answer like this. "I saw her come in before. Doesn't seem like anyone ever come out of here."

Swinburne leaned back in his chair. "You must have missed her. She left not long after she came in."

"I know she left, Mr. Swinburne. I said I never saw her come out."

Swinburne could not remember having two clients so close together who were focused on such trivial matters. Usually his clients either accepted what was coming or desperately pleaded for more time to pay off their debts. "Is there a point here?"

“I worry about Jo. He’s different, sees things from another angle. Preacher would say he sees with God’s eyes. Whatever it is, it’s gotten him in trouble more than a few times. Like when he told the sheriff not to press charges against the drunk driver that ran into his parents thirty years back. Trouble was, no one had said anything about the accident to Jo then. They had him at the station for hours trying to figure out who had told him.”

“God’s eyes,” Swinburne said softly. “Why would God punish Jo by letting him see the world as He does?” He waited for Wind to explain how the story was relevant, or perhaps to answer his last question.

At last, the Indian said, “I think he knows who you really are, Mr. Swinburne. Jo said before he went into the Park he would come for you. He’s been in there for three days. My grandfather always said three days in the wilderness changed a man, made him more himself than he was before. I don’t think he ever meant Lucius Park, though. Even the wolves leave that place alone. When Jo comes back, I wouldn’t wait for him, Mr. Swinburne.”

“Samuel, are you ready to pay your debt?”

The other man nodded, his loose silvering hair making a shifting curtain around his head and shoulders in the lamplight. “Yes, sir. It’s about time I pay that one.”

Swinburne returned his attention to the forms on the desk and began filling in the blanks and bubbles with information. Then he had Wind sign in the appropriate places before signing the forms himself. “All right,” Swinburne said after the last signature had been applied. “Nothing left except the payment. Hold out your arm. Either one will do.”

Swinburne retrieved a syringe and a tourniquet from the cabinet beneath the mantelpiece. He attached a fresh needle to the syringe. He did not bother with alcohol. None of his clients needed to worry about infection. Wind held out his left arm and Swinburne inserted the needle

just below the elbow. He filled the syringe with the Indian's blood and withdrew the needle. As he filed the forms away, Swinburne heard a gasp from behind him. He turned and met Wind's eyes.

"What happens now?" the old man asked.

"The debt is paid," Swinburne replied. He held up the vial of blood so that it caught the light of the lamp. "You leave without going out again."

"I see. One more thing, Mr. Swinburne. Would you mind explaining why we pay in blood?"

"I would, Mr. Wind, but I don't think you have the time to hear it."

The Indian nodded and closed his eyes. His chin dropped to his chest and he exhaled, his hair once again veiling his face like a silver waterfall. Swinburne waited, looking for the inhalation that would not come. Wind was still, or his body was. Swinburne could not resist a moment of speculation about what Wind himself would be doing at that moment, soaring with eagles or running with wolves whose spirits had long known the man's ancestors. As Swinburne watched, the body of Samuel Wind sank silently through the floor, peaceful in its attitude yet violent in its implications. The Debt-keeper nodded and placed the vial in a cabinet filled with thousands of its identical siblings. What was the old proverb? 'The life is in the blood.' Say an ounce of blood equaled a day of life. By that conversion, Swinburne had been collecting debts long enough to give himself a lifetime to rival Methuselah's.

As Swinburne closed the cabinet, the wind forced the front door open. Jo's hair and shirt whipped like rags in the wind and dirt and leaves blew in from the street. There was very little sunlight filtering through the maple leaves. Clouds had gathered over the town and were flowing

overhead with the speed of a river. A few flashes of lightning lit the clouds and kept Jo's face in the shadows. He was wearing a loose flannel shirt and jeans which were torn and bloody. The shirt's color was obscured by the blood and dirt which caked it. Swinburne noticed a shadow that seemed stuck to the porch behind the young man.

Swinburne remained motionless as Jo made his way to the back office. If Swinburne hadn't known who to expect, he might not have recognized him. Beneath the shirt and jeans, Jo's arms and legs were bloody and mangled. His hair was matted with blood where the wind hadn't pried it loose and there were several twigs sticking out of it at odd angles. Jo was smiling and his eyes were gleaming with the light of the storm. His right arm hung rigid and swollen beside him.

"Hello, Mort," said Jo, shortening Swinburne's first name to sound like *more*. "I'm here about a debt."

Swinburne remained standing. "Yes, most people who come here come about a debt." Swinburne dug in the drawer for the necessary forms. Jo held up his hand to stop the Debt-keeper. It looked like it had been cut to the bone by a sharp rock.

"I'm not here about a personal debt, Mort. I'm here about someone else's."

Swinburne paused in his rifling. "Oh? Whose?"

Jo's smile faded and he said, "Yours."

"I don't think you understand, Jo. I'm Debt-keeper, not debt payer."

"Yes, those were the terms of the contract you signed with John Lucius. Funnily enough, I don't think that contract was entirely legal. I've been in the Park, Mort."

Swinburne resumed his search for the forms. "Yes, so I've heard. How was your trespassing trip?"

"Informative."

Swinburne raised his eyebrows.

“Imagine for a moment,” Jo said, “a small town that doesn’t know it’s a town yet. Even with the advances that medicine has made, their lives are difficult, and death is a terrible certainty. There are harsh winters and the land doesn’t bend easily to others. Much like the settlers themselves. I imagine that if anyone came along with a guarantee that death would come gently, they would have taken that offer without a second thought. One day a man like that does come along, and he finds the man who has the most to lose, a man with more children than any other in the area. John Lucius had an awful lot of children, didn’t he?”

Swinburne sat, sensing he had another loquacious client to handle. “I wouldn’t know, Jo. He died a long time before either of us was born, didn’t he?”

Jo ignored the question. “Anyway, this stranger—let’s call him Swinburne.” Jo paused, but if he was disappointed by Swinburne’s lack of reaction, he did not show it. “Maybe he’s Death itself, maybe an apprentice – but he comes along and offers sweet death in a world that doesn’t believe in such a thing. He sets up a contract, and doesn’t tell old John Lucius the fine print: Swinburne won’t just deliver the citizens of John Valley to the land of death without more pain than a needle prick, but he’ll also take a little of their life from them. Just a little, no more than a day or two, or Swinburne would not only arouse the suspicions of the town, but whoever it is that doesn’t want him to make that contract. And there had to have been someone who wouldn’t want that contract. Why else would Swinburne make the contract so appealing, but require one man to speak for the entire town?”

Swinburne kept his face straight. Jo hadn’t presented anything aside from theories. There was nothing to worry about. “He likes to damn people? He wanted to be left alone, didn’t want questions. There are plenty of reasons Death might have.”

“But Death isn’t supposed to take odd jobs, Mort. Death is only meant to take people in their own time, so he had to hide it from his Boss, the Man Upstairs. I suppose after an eternity of collecting souls precisely on schedule, he might have started craving a real taste of life – not the mere existence he holds, but true *life*. That’s why the payments you take are blood. You’re saving up a lifetime, aren’t you, Mort?”

Swinburne paused. “Interesting story, Jo, though it is a bit fantastic in places. Did you ever consider going to study as a writer? With ideas like that you could be a bestseller.” He retrieved the syringe that had taken Samuel Wind’s payment. “There is a flaw, though. How are you supposed to escape me, if I’m Death? The only person to beat him was Jesus Christ, if you believe the Pastor, and only after being dead for three days.”

Jo shrugged. “Escape isn’t all it’s cracked up to be,” he said. “Look at what happened to me escaping Lucius Park.” He held out his bloody arms.

“Yes. What did happen to you in there?” Swinburne asked, prepping the needle for another payment.

“I died.”

Swinburne stared at the young man, uncertain of how to take the statement.

“Yeah, I thought you would react that way. Funny thing, you mentioning Jesus. He was about my age when he broke your power over in the Middle East, wasn’t he? Thirty-something.”

“Thirty-three,” Swinburne replied instinctively.

“Yeah, thirty-three. I suppose I’m a little older, but hey. A debt’s a debt.”

“Precisely, Mr. Josephs. Now, if you wouldn’t mind holding out your arm.”

Jo sat up. “I’m not paying a debt, Mort. You are.”

Swinburne smiled. “No, Jo. As I said, I only collect on debts. I don’t pay them.”

“Yeah, but if you owed someone a debt, you would have to collect on yourself, right?”

“I suppose so, but I don’t owe any debts.”

“You do me,” Jo said, and continued without giving Swinburne a chance to react. “Thirty years ago you collected on my parent’s debts when Samuel Wind drove drunk and hit their car. That’s why I told the police not to press charges. They would have lived if you hadn’t shaved that extra day off of their lives.”

“They would have died eventually.”

“Of course they would have, Mort. Everyone does. Even I did. The point is, you caused two premature deaths. That means you owe a debt, right? The debts you cover are wrongdoing, aren’t they? Nothing as trivial as money.”

Swinburne placed one hand on Jo’s shoulder – the less bloody of the two – and leaned in so that their faces almost touched. “I suppose that is correct, Mr. Josephs. However, I’m afraid you aren’t so righteous yourself. I’ll have to collect on that.”

Jo smiled his mad smile again. “You want to collect on me, go ahead.” He held out his left arm. “You’ll have to roll the sleeve up yourself. I’m afraid the cottonmouth made sure I couldn’t use the other hand.”

Swinburne turned back the flannel and prepared to fill the vial with Jo’s blood. He moved so quickly he thought he might have broken the needle off in the young man’s arm. The blood rushed into the vial violently, so that Swinburne almost thought it was eager to leave the body of its dead-but-alive owner.

“Join me, Mort,” Jo said. He got to his feet and waved to Swinburne. Strangely compelled, Swinburne followed him to the porch. The storm was close to breaking. It looked worse than Hurricane Ivan had when it landed in the next county. Swinburne was so focused on

the roiling sky that he nearly tripped over the shadow he had noticed earlier. When he caught his balance, he realized what the shadow was – Jo’s body. He turned to Jo.

“How?” he asked, unconscious of his hands moving through their aged, familiar routine of drawing blood.

Jo shrugged. “This is a first for me, too, Mort. I told you I was already dead.” Jo’s eyes fell to Swinburne’s arm. Swinburne’s other hand was clenched around something that was sticking out of the arm. It was Swinburne’s syringe. Jo’s blood was flowing in Swinburne’s veins. “Looks like you collected on yourself after all. How does it feel, Mort, to know that you’ll never escape being Death? Your stores of life-blood are useless if you bungle the job.”

Swinburne threw the syringe against the stunted maple and clutched his arm although no blood was flowing from the pinprick. He wondered if Jo had worked that part out as well, that it wasn’t the loss of blood that had killed his victims for the last few hundred years, but the subtle poison on the needle. The sting of death, some called it.

“Damn you,” he spat at Jo as he fell against the door frame.

“That’s a bit impossible at this point,” Jo replied softly. Then he knelt and hoisted his body up on his good shoulder. “See you around, Mort.”

Swinburne watched Jo walk off toward the Park, a double-dark figure under the stormy sky. He cursed himself for a fool and collapsed on the porch. Tricked by an upstart of an orphan. He should have taken Jo years ago when he took the parents.

When the tornado came and sucked away the old building, Swinburne had vanished like all of his clients. He did not hear the celestial sound of his blood vials crashing against the walls of his office. In the sunshine that followed the storm, the stunted maple stood alone, abandoned even by death.

### RED III: DYING

*Minerva Coulter, 2025*

I didn't know what to say when Pat Baker called from the Rusty Nail reporting a fistfight between Red and Liam except that I would deal with it. Sheriff Cody said he didn't like the idea of me dealing with Red alone, but I told him if Red was drunk enough to swing at me, he was drunk enough to miss. My mother didn't raise a fool and Red's, God rest her, didn't raise a woman-beater.

I drove to the bar. We only have the one bar in town, despite the population boom the last few years due to the new bottling plant Dr. Pepper brought in. The bar matches our only church in its loneliness. You would think in a town this far South there would at least be two denominations in a town large enough to have a church, but everybody just goes to the same one. Red had already left by the time I got to the Nail, and when I asked Liam what he knew, the only answer he would give was that Red had come over to him at the bar and taken a swing. No threats, no explanations, just brawling. Pat backed up the story, said he didn't know what had gotten into Red, other than the drink. I rolled my eyes at both of them and told Liam to head to the station to file his statement with Cody. Red's not the kind to just start a fight without reason. I dated him off and on throughout middle and high school, and he even proposed two or three times during our senior year and my time in college. I never said yes.

When we were twelve, I convinced Red that he should run away with the circus because with his skin he would have his living made without having to learn any new tricks. The circus

never came back after that summer, and Red never got the chance to live his circus freak dream. Sometimes I wonder if I jinxed it by telling him about the circus instead of letting him figure it out on his own.

He was home when I pulled up in front of his house, but he didn't answer when I called. The door was open. I could hear the shower running in the back room, so I made my way there. Red was sitting in the tub letting the water cascade over him and wash away the blood from the fight. He always seemed to get covered in blood when he fought, no matter how unscathed his opponent was at the end. There wasn't much red left in the water, but I could see the traces of it on the floor of the tub.

"Ain't going to close your eyes, Min?" he asked.

Red was the one who taught me that a kiss didn't have to make noise. One day he came up behind me and put his lips to the nape of my neck, just firm enough that I could tell he was there, but not so hard that all I felt was a wet mouth on my skin. A whisper of a kiss.

"Nothing I haven't seen before," I reminded him as I leaned over and turned off the shower. I tossed him a towel and told him to come out into the living room. "And you know that window of yours squeals like hell, so don't run. Just sit down and talk with me."

A few minutes later we were staring at each other across a table still hidden by covered dishes, like ghosts after a funeral. "Why did you hit Liam?" I asked when I realized he wasn't going to tell me on his own.

He shrugged. "Didn't like his face."

"Come on, Red. Don't give me that crap. You two used to be the best of friends. What happened?"

He stared at a half-eaten casserole and I was half afraid he was going to smash the glass lid and get blood all over himself again. “You know it was his idea to go to the Broxson place that night,” he said. “Liam thought it would impress you. We should have left as soon as we saw Jo there.”

It took me a minute to remember what he was talking about. I hadn’t thought about our night in the haunted house for years. The things you lose when you get into a career. There had been a haunted look to Red’s eyes for years afterward, but now it seemed like his ghosts had left him, and the silence there was more maddening for him than the multitude’s unrest.

“Then the bastard disappears before I can make sure he really knows what he’s talking about,” Red said. “He was the last one, you know. The last one to disappear before death finally came back to us. It’s like he took certainty with him when he gave it back to us.” His hands found the funeral bulletin from his father’s service and he started playing with it, folding it, unfolding it, tearing the panels apart along their folds. “Why couldn’t he have waited a little longer? A few more years and the old man could have disappeared too and I wouldn’t have to be in this mess.”

He gestured to the cluttered house around him, but I knew he meant his life. He had spent a lot of his life hating his father for abandoning him, and I guess for having Red in the first place – making him one of the strange kids that crop up in John Valley and heir to the Lucius family history that finally revealed itself a few years back. Now the man was dead, and there was no one left to hate. Jo was gone, and so Red’s favorite target for frustration and anger was no longer available. I understood why he had hit Liam, but I doubted Liam would.

Cody called and asked what my status was. “Fine,” I said. “I got his reasons. Are they pressing charges?”

“Still up for debate. He didn’t do something stupid, did he?”

He meant did Red kill himself.

“No, he’s fine. Want me to bring him in?”

“Don’t bother. He’ll be better off sleeping in his own bed.”

I considered giving Red some comfort that night after my shift, but I knew he wouldn’t remember it and I would regret it. I’m through living my life around what Red needs or wants.

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## VITA

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