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The following thesis is a collection of five short stories entitled *Christ Haunted*. The title is in reference to Flannery O'Connor's remark that "while the South is hardly Christ-centered, it is most certainly Christ-haunted." The stories, to varying degrees, incorporate themes of Southern identity and, usually, religion.

CHRIST HAUNTED

by

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CHAPTER I  
THE CHRISTENING

Her head was shaped like a traffic cone. No one told me that passage through the birth canal might cause such a thing, and my knees buckled and my mouth dropped open in blank stupefaction. Then a nurse shoved a pair of scissors in my trembling hand, and for a brief, frightening instant I thought I was being asked to “take care of it,” that my wife and I had produced a dud that would have to be sacrificed to Baal or Moloch or whoever. I was just about to voice my protest to the nurse when the doctor held before me some gory gray-blue thing, which I initially thought to be an unravelling brain, but was in fact the umbilical cord.

“Cut in the middle,” said the doctor with practiced benevolence, indicating a four-inch section his white-gloved hands had chosen as the choicest spot for cutting.

I lifted the scissors, hesitated, then did as I was told.

When we brought the baby home from the hospital, you’d have thought it was a coronation. We had a private escort (a nurse with the face of a chain-smoking meth addict, collapsed and puckered like an anus) from the hospital nursery to my parent’s Lexus (evidently, my eleven-year old Civic was too plebeian for such an occasion), which Dad was driving. Mom made a white chiffon and lace dress especially for the occasion. Apparently, this is a common ritual, though I couldn’t see the point in going

through all the trouble of making a dress for one occasion. I made a similar argument to my then-girlfriend, now-wife when I took her to the prom a decade ago. She spent over \$700 on a sleeveless black lace dress that she never wore again, but more to the point, never *intended* to wear again.

“Why not make a dress with multi-purpose functionality is my only point,” I said to Mom, who rode shotgun next to Dad while my wife, Faye, sat sandwiched between the baby and me in the backseat.

“Don’t be a smart aleck, Harold,” Mom told me.

I’ve always hated my name, which is why Mom persists in addressing me with it. In college, I told people to call me Harry, deciding that I would “reinvent” myself, though my name is the only thing I actually changed, and, in any case, let’s face it, Harry is only a marginal improvement over Harold, if there can be said to be any improvement at all, which is debatable. Mom named me after Harold Lloyd, the silent film actor, even though she hadn’t and hasn’t seen any of his movies, but once saw a poster of him hanging perilously from the clock face of the International Savings & Exchange Bank Building in Los Angeles, California, and thought he looked “cute” in his boater and round horn-rimmed spectacles. I wear contact lenses and prefer to let my thinning hair tickle the air.

I wanted to name the baby Cecilia, because it’s the closest name I could think of to “celery,” which is the most perfect sounding word in the English language, so far as I’m concerned. My wife thought that was a dumb idea and said so, but it seemed to me as good a reason for picking a name as any other. She wanted to name the baby Lily because it “sounds sweet,” and I almost called her a hypocrite when she divulged her reason, but I

held my tongue, not wanting to upset her in such a pitiable state, eight-months pregnant in mid-June. Besides, we all have our reasons for things, which we're all naturally partial to (the "reasons" and "things" both).

"We thought you were going to be a girl," Dad said, preparing to tell a story I'd heard literally dozens of times before, but which my father enjoyed telling because of what he perceived as the rich irony involved. "I wish I could've been in the room when the doctor held you up to your mother and she caught sight of your dangling little pecker." He stopped here to chuckle, as he always does. "But she spent three months slaving over a frilly little smocked dress, and so help me Christ, you were going to wear it."

"Don't blaspheme, daddy," said my mother. She had called my father "daddy" ever since I was a sloshed-stepping toddler, presumably so that I wouldn't become confused by multiple appellations. It was the kind of ubiquitous thing I had never thought too much about, but I have to admit, there was something disturbingly Freudian about it in the new context of my own daddyhood. Should my wife ever refer to me as daddy, I've made a mental note to put the kibosh on it, and quickly.

Dad continued: "Well, anyway, I tried to talk her out of it, but she wouldn't hear of it. 'It can go for a boy, too,' she said. So the first proper outfit your husband wore was a dress," said Dad to Faye, chuckling again with satisfaction, the irony now laid bare before all.

“That’s a funny story, Gene,” said Faye, the warm lilt of her voice making Dad believe she actually meant it. She could make any person feel funny or talented or useful even if they really weren’t, which was typically the case, myself not excluded.

I met Faye in ninth grade geometry, and the first thing I noticed was her green eyes, in particular the right one. The unimaginative would call it “lazy,” but it was anything but. If you really gave it a good look (and I certainly did), its movement resembled that of a hummingbird’s wings – so rapid as to be almost imperceptible. I remember wanting to carry her eye around in my front shirt pocket so that I could take it out in private moments and place it in the center of my palm, feel that wet, warm buzzing movement. I like a good pair of legs like any other man (and Faye has those, too), but her right eye was the nexus of my sexual awakening.

As we continued our ride, driving past a forest of pines and a recently chopped cotton field, I kept alert for danger. Ever since I was a kid, I constantly imagined that terrible things were going to happen to my loved ones, and that I would be left behind to fend for myself.

Once, when I was probably seven or so, my parents took a vacation to Myrtle Beach for their anniversary, and Mom’s cousin Claudia stayed with me while they were gone. I remember I imagined them driving over the Waccamaw River Bridge, and an earthquake struck at that precise moment, and the bridge gave way, the gray station wagon tumbling into the river in slow motion. I imagined them out on the open sea, in a fishing boat, even though my parents did and do not fish, and then ominous dark clouds rolled in on gale force winds and they were lost and presumed dead, until years later

when I saw Dad eating fries out of a McDonald's dumpster and tried to hug him, weeping, and Dad, with a look of utter disgust on his grimed face said, "Who the hell are you?"

Now we were riding behind an 18-wheeler hauling logs that appeared to be held together by dental floss, the cheap store-brand kind, bark raining apocalyptically in the truck's wake, and then in my mind's-eye the dental floss snapped and a log catapulted into the air like a javelin, bashed into the windshield and decapitated Dad, which caused him to lose control of vehicle, and then after rolling endlessly down an embankment, an embankment that wasn't actually there, I opened my eyes to find my entire family dead.

I was relieved when we turned off the road into my parents subdivision, letting the death trap move along without us, though I had to remind myself that most accidents happen near home. Close proximity to one's house made most people cocky, but I knew better.

My mom had insisted that we spend the first few days in my parent's two-story ranch, so that, as first time parents, we'd have help with the adjustment and Faye could "rest up." I felt a bit insulted by the implication – that I was incapable of "taking charge" over the responsibilities entailed by our new domestic circumstances. But, were I to offer any resistance, my mom would chew on her wedding ring and claim in a shaky voice that she was "only trying to help." Plus, Faye and I were both on summer break – we were both history teachers at Rutledge High School – so there wasn't much of a reason to decline.

As my dad and I unloaded the car, toting in a half-dozen packages of Huggies and another half-dozen boxes containing hand-me-down designer baby clothes my mom collected from kind donors at her church, he put his hand on my shoulder and, mustering as much gravitas as he could manage, said, “Your life will never be the same, but it’ll be worth it.” Of course, my dad wasn’t the first to tell me this, although he seemed to think so. Every father I knew had some version of this advice to give.

Donald Spieth, the middle-aged vice principal at Rutledge, told me that I wouldn’t “know what love meant until I held in my arms something I’d helped create out of nothing.” I was put off by the entrepreneurial spirit of his tone, but I accepted his handshake with as much gratitude as I could summon.

Vaughn Tisdale, my barber, got about two-inches from my face, looked me square in the eyes, poked his electric clippers in my chest and said, “Get ready, buddy. Your world is about to turn upside down.” Then, he added with a smile, “But it’ll be the best thing that ever happened to you.”

Zeke Carter, my best friend since middle school and fellow craft beer enthusiast, tried to diffuse the anxiety he assumed I must be experiencing with gallows humor: “You’re about to be murdered and reincarnated into a Toys ‘R’ Us Rewards card carrier, although your wife will keep the card in her purse for safe keeping.” Then he laughed and clapped me on the back. “Just kidding, partner. Seriously, it’s the best thing in the world.”

One thing each piece of advice had in common was a curiously ominous tone that would then be qualified by a promise that the change would all be for my own good.

But now I was starting to get it. Sometimes, when I would hold Lily, I'd get the sudden urge to squeeze her to my chest – or, rather, squeeze her *into* my chest, so inadequate were the modes of expression available to me. But, on the other hand, I had this constant feeling of dread about the dangers lurking around every corner.

I've never been a religious man, and so I didn't believe that if I prayed to some deity that all would be well, that protection for Lily would be secured. Nor did I believe in fate, that the future was just as fixed and unchangeable as the past. I had never understood the appeal of believing oneself to be helpless to fate. But, I came to realize, far worse is being helpless to *chance*. Better to be a puppet than a bug on a windshield. Unfortunately, I could no more hand my anxiety over to divine providence than I could will myself to lactate.

Speaking of lactation, Faye had to wake up twice every night to pump (milk, not iron).

“Harry, it's hurts too much to let her latch on,” she wept that first night, undoing her beige robe to show me her poor gum-burned teats. “Would it make me a bad mother to stop?”

“No,” I told her. “What difference does it make? She'll get the milk out of you either way.”

“I know, but the latching's supposed to help us bond.”

“Latching is overrated. Who wants another human being latching on to them all the time? It's so *needy*. Nobody likes a latcher.”

“Hardy har,” she said, closing her robe with one hand and patting my knee with the other.

Watching Faye pump was a bit peculiar. At first, she was shy about it, said she didn’t want me to see her that way. But, I convinced her that this was nonsense, that it was perfectly natural.

Of course, it wasn’t natural at all. She would sit on the bed of the guest room watching Animal Planet, a mechanical apparatus hanging from her naked chest, pistons pumping. The young girl who once gave me a hand-job in the back of Mrs. Elliot’s study hall had now metamorphosed into a dairy farm.

Still, once the surprise wore off, it wasn’t an altogether unappealing image. There she sat, allowing a proxy to feed off her so our child could get the good stuff and be saved the indignity of formula (we received a trial pack of the stuff from the hospital and, out of curiosity, opened a bottle, finding that it smelled like moldy pumpkins – only a sadist would let a cat drink it, let alone a baby). The rhythmic sloshing of the pump became a soothing, safe sound to me. It seemed an almost ritualistic sacrifice Faye was making, and I told her as much that first night at my parents’ house.

“You know what’s going to happen to my boobs, don’t you?”

I confessed that I did not.

“They’re going to die. My mom told me that after I was born, she couldn’t feel a thing. ‘Tweak them or shut them in the car door,’ she said. ‘It won’t make any difference.’”

“Surely that doesn’t happen to everyone.”

“Well, maybe not. But just look at them,” she said, removing the suction cups. “They look like someone let the air out.”

They did hang a bit lower, and the nipples were larger and a shade darker, and when she guided my hands to “test them out” they were softer, there was more give. The new configuration was not at all unpleasing, and in fact got me a smidge excited, which Faye noticed and quickly shut down by playfully slapping my hands away.

“You remember what the doc said. Five weeks, buddy. If you’re lucky.”

I mention the pumping business because this began very quickly to cause tension in the house. Mom insisted on keeping Faye company during these sessions and have long advisory discussions. She seemed to believe that their shared gender allowed her unspoken entry into what Faye would have preferred to remain our private world. Mom would usually find some pretense to have me leave the room.

Of particular importance to Mom was the christening. Of course, it would have to take place at First Presbyterian, of that there was no question. Mom and Dad had been members of the church for thirty plus years. I had been a member, too, taking the catechism at twelve, although I had no firm opinions on salvation. It was just something I was supposed to do. Mom was busy at work on another dress for the christening. It looked awfully similar to the “ride-home” dress, and I said so.

“Wouldn’t the other dress be perfectly suitable? I mean, you did a great job with it.”

Mom looked at me as if I were an untrained mutt who'd just whizzed on her best faux-Persian rug. "But she's already been *seen* in that dress."

"Just by us and the hospital staff. The congregation hasn't had the pleasure."

"I still can't believe that *not one person* from the church stopped by to look at her. Not even Betty and Tom, and they live next door!"

Mom went on about this insult for several minutes, forgetting about the more practical issue I had raised.

In any case, Faye thought that I was encouraging Mom, because challenging her on what dress Lily should wear implied that there would be a christening at which a dress would be worn. However, Faye and I were both unreligious. We didn't reject the possibility of a deity, exactly, but we also didn't feel the need to kiss the Messianic heiny in hopes that we wouldn't be tortured in the afterlife.

Still, I was beginning to wrestle with Pascal's wager. I'd always dismissed the premise as cowardly – better to throw one's lot in with the divine just to be on the safe side, the idea went. Now, though, I was beginning to think it might not be the worst idea. Not that it would help me, but who's to say baptism wouldn't gain Lily celestial protection, at least through her childhood? Maybe if I ever got careless and dropped her, a beanbag would be conveniently located underneath to break her fall. Maybe if, when she got older, and we were playing together outside, and for some inexcusable reason I took my eyes off her for a brief instant, the root of a pecan tree would miraculously cause her to trip and fall, preventing her from running into the road and being crushed by a sports utility vehicle. What could be the harm?

But this isn't the argument I put forth to Faye, because I didn't want her to think I was getting soft.

"Why not just humor her? You know she's been planning this thing out since we told her you were pregnant."

"That's part of the point, Harry. *She's* been planning it out. She hasn't once asked if this was something we wanted to do. She hasn't asked our opinion on anything!"

"I know, but really. What's the harm? We get up there, make a few vows, blah blah blah, let the preacher splash some water on Lily's head, *bada bing, bada boom*. It's done. Five minutes, and we'll have made the old gal's year."

"But it *won't* be done. You don't get that? What's going to happen when we don't take Lily to church every week? We'll never hear the end of it. It'll start the *very next week*."

She was right. Mom would not be satisfied to leave well enough alone. If we made vows – *sacred vows before the altar of God* – and brushed them off, we'd be handing Mom guilt-ammunition that would make the NRA collectively shudder.

"Really," Faye continued, her right eye dancing furiously, "has your mother not noticed that we haven't been to church *once* since we've gotten married?"

"Oh, she's noticed."

"So, what, she expects us to become holy rollers now that we're parents?"

"Not exactly. If we let her take Lily, she'd probably settle for that compromise."

"Not gonna happen, buddy. You need to straighten this out. I can't take much more of her yapping about it while I'm trying to milk myself with a little dignity."

How could I argue with that? Any thought of securing a little insurance policy was dead.

By the middle of the week, I still hadn't been able to bring myself to dash my mother's hopes. I sat on the recliner in the living room feeding Lily, who was wrapped tightly in a white blanket like a caterpillar in a cocoon. Dad was on the couch watching a preview of the upcoming college football season. His penny-loafed feet rested on the glass coffee table, something Mom wouldn't abide were she here. But she was at the store, so Dad could go a little wild. Faye was taking a nap in our room upstairs. I thought it might be a good opportunity to seek some paternal wisdom about how to approach Mom.

"So, Mom's all wound up about this christening thing, huh?"

"Hold up," Dad said. He wanted to finish hearing the prognosticating of a failed-head-coach-turned-commentator. Then he paused the TV and sat up, putting his feet on the ground and his elbows on his knees. "Sorry, Harold. What were you saying?"

"Just the christening thing. I think she's making Faye a little anxious talking about it all the time. You know how Mom is."

"Yep, she's got her heart set on it." He raised an eyebrow. "I get the sense y'all aren't entirely on board."

"Well, you know we don't go to church. It seems like it might be a little deceptive to get up there and go through the whole song and dance."

"Yeah, I see what you mean."

“Well, how do you get by with it? You only go on special occasions. Christmas Eve, Easter, and all that.”

“Those wood pews are hell on my back. Or ‘heck on my back’ as I say to you mother. I watch Charles Stanley on TV. She’s not terribly satisfied with that, but she’s come to accept it.”

“You watch Charles Stanley, eh?”

Dad winked at me. “Well, sometimes I sleep in.”

“I’m serious, Dad. This is going to be a problem. The christening’s not going to happen. What do I say to her?”

“Harold, you’re mother has her ideas about things and that’s not going to change. Y’all have your own ideas, too. But she means well. Best thing to do is just level with her. Her eyes will mist over and she’ll try to debate you and hem and haw a little, but just be firm about it. She’ll pout for a couple of weeks and then she’ll get over it.”

“She’ll get over all of us going to hell?”

Dad winked again. “She’s conceded my soul to the fiery lake and came to peace with it. Like the Bible says, you can’t save everybody.”

“I don’t think the Bible says that.”

“Well, don’t tell your mother that.”

Dad unpaused the TV and put his feet back up on the coffee table. Lily had fallen asleep in the middle of her feeding. I removed the bottle from her mouth and wiped Faye’s milk from her lip with my thumb.

It took another couple of days before I could work up my nerve. I knew Dad was right; Mom would get over it. She'd suffered many disappointments in her life – her father not saving enough for her to go to college, Dad never being promoted above branch manager at his bank, me dropping pre-Law my junior year to pursue a teaching certificate. She'd weather this storm, too.

I still couldn't get over the feeling that I might be letting Lily down in some way. I didn't buy into religion, but I did believe in the efficacy of a good placebo. What if the collective certitude of others, if not my own, was powerful enough to create a wall of protection around Lily durable enough to stave off disaster? I couldn't deny the possibility.

But there was Faye to consider. She, I knew, was certain that such rituals were utterly meaningless. And I also knew that I would be letting her down if I didn't firmly assert our parental omniscience. I couldn't bear the thought of her looking upon me with her lovely eye in shame. She would have to be faithless enough for the both of us.

I approached Mom as she was washing Lily in the sink. Faye was pumping upstairs and Dad was practicing his putting in the backyard, even though he hadn't played a round in two years on account of his "back problem." The kitchen still had the pungent smell of cabbage leftover from lunch. The checkered linoleum was streaked and slick from Mom's mop, which sat in a blue bucket against the stove. Lily cooed contentedly as Mom gently washed her back.

"Mom, we need to have a little chat. You probably aren't going to like it."

She stopped washing Lily and pinched the bridge of her nose with her other hand.

“I know, I know. Faye doesn’t want to do the christening. She just lets me talk on and on about it and never says a word.”

“Well, now, don’t blame her for it. I don’t want to do it, either.”

Mom turned and looked at me as if a horn had sprouted from my forehead.

“Lord, you’re not an atheist are you?”

“Well, no, not exactly. We just aren’t interested in, I don’t know...the *ceremonies*, the *rituals*, all that stuff. We just don’t think it’s necessary.”

“Those ceremonies and rituals are part of worship. Are you going to argue with me that worship is unnecessary?”

“I’m not going to argue with you about anything. You have your views and we have ours. That’s just how it’s going to be.”

Mom sighed and resumed washing Lily. “I guess you can’t save everyone.”

I have to admit, even though Dad told me this would be so, I was slightly insulted that Mom was so easily resigned to my eternal damnation. However, I was mostly relieved. I looked forward to interrupting Faye’s pumping to tell her the good news, to bask in her warm hummingbird’s stare.

As I reached the bottom of the staircase, I looked back at Mom, maybe to say something I thought might be comforting, though I’m not really sure. In any case, what I saw was this: Mom dipped her hand into the soapy water and placed it on Lily’s forehead, and with her eyes shut, prayed softly. I thought this was a satisfactory compromise. I have to admit, I even felt like disaster might be avoided after all.

CHAPTER II  
THE GREAT AMERICAN BASH

Captain Lou kicked Nature Man out of wrestling school on the third day because he kept hurting people. Hurting your opponent, Captain Lou said, is the worst thing you can do in the squared circle. This was blasphemous to Nature Man, who hadn't traveled 150-miles from Myrtle to Columbia on a moped to learn how to tickle fight. What kind of outfit was this gummy old coot running anyway? He's not even the famous Captain Lou Albano; he's Captain Lou Martini – some rheumy-eyed relic from the eighties who worked the northeast territories as a jobber. Wore cheap black tights that would fold over from his gut hang. Once wrestled Barry Horowitz at Madison Square Garden and lost in 34 seconds. Barry Horowitz! Spent the whole first day showing everyone how to land on your back so you don't get an ouchie. Taking bumps, he called it. Okay, fine. What about proper Knife Edge Chop technique, so you make your opponent's chest look like it's been strafed by a bullwhip? How do you slap on the Figure Four Leg Lock so your opponent's knee and ankle both crack in the same instant? How could Ric Flair pass Nature Man the torch if they didn't show him how to counter an Irish Whip with a back-flip over the top turnbuckle? He had crude theories about all this, but Nature Man needed a veteran who could help him coalesce his ideas into a workable ring philosophy. Instead, Captain Lou had everyone pirouetting around each other like the Bolshoi ballet. This wasn't school, this was nursery time.

Not that Nature Man was some slack-jawed moron. Sure, he knew the outcomes of matches were rigged, but what could you say about life in general except that the fix was in? The key was to be the fixee rather than the fixed. And the way Nature Man saw it, the folks who got over were those who cut the sharpest corners and weren't afraid to cause a little mayhem.

Take Varnson, for instance. Two years before, he and Nature Man started temping at a toner recycling plant on the same day. They trained together in Disassembly. This was the department where the used cartridges were ripped apart for recycling. Probably like in a chop shop, Nature Man assumed. You'd stick the screwdriver in just the right crevice to break it open, you'd pop open a door with a curved screwdriver, you'd slam a hammer in just the right spot, you'd dump the leftover toner in a garbage can. All to preserve the good stuff that could be reused: the copper, the metal, the screws.

Initially, Nature Man got the best of Varnson. He worked through the cartridges at break neck speed, while Varnson lagged behind. The incompetent dufus even sliced open the flesh between his index finger and thumb with a screwdriver, costing himself a half-hour of productivity.

At the end of the next day, Nature Man stood at the blow station blasting toner off his clothes, and then suddenly his world went into darkness. At first he thought he'd died – maybe dropped out from an aneurism and was now floating in the void. But he could hear laughter and reached up to wipe the dark out of his eyes. Varnson and a squat middle-aged woman whose name Nature Man could not remember stood holding either side of a garbage can. Dumped the toner on him. Everybody got a good laugh at Nature

Man's expense and a month later Varnson was promoted to crew chief. Don't try to tell Nature Man that talent, competence, and fair play get you anywhere in life.

Then you had Carlos posing in front of the gym's wall-mounted mirrors, flexing his track-scarred arms and shaking his long black hair around like a wet dog. Not paying attention to the moves. He doesn't need moves, he said, because he's got the look. And there you had it, the problem with our once great sport summed up in one sentence. Well, who needed them.

Half an hour outside Myrtle, the moped crapped out and Nature Man dumped it in a ditch overgrown with ragweed. After walking down 501 for half an hour, he was picked up by a snowbird traveling alone in a Winnie. So old he looked like a Shar-Pei. The old man had on a khaki fishing cap and asked Nature Man where he was headed.

"I'm a wrestler," he said. "Fighting Flair for the title at the Convention Center next week. They're calling the card The Great American Bash. Going home for a little visit first." Until he'd said the words, Nature Man didn't know what his next step would be. But here was a revelation: if he couldn't take the torch by conventional means, he'd have to make it happen on his own. A classic American tale of self-determination.

"Wrestler, huh. You don't look quite as musclely as those dudes on TV."

"It ain't about that. It's about agility. It's about ring generalship. That'll beat some pimply-assed roid case nine times outta 10."

"You gonna win?" The old man smiled and his face kinda smashed together, his wrinkles begetting more wrinkles. Nature Man didn't like the look of the smile, like the old man was amused by something.

“I expect to.”

“How far in advance do they let you know?”

“I don’t know what you mean.”

“Whether or not you win. Do they wait until the night of, to avoid leaks and whatnot?”

“You know you’ve won when the ref raises your hand.”

“Do you get to improvise the ending, or do they tell you how to do it?”

Nature Man stared at the old man for a few seconds before speaking. “You can just drop me off at the Quick-Stop up here, will be fine.”

“Now don’t get all pissy on me. I get it, secrets of the trade. I know when to keep my yapper shut.”

“Up here will do,” said Nature Man, making sure his voice evoked the proper menace, like a low thunderous rumble. He practiced his different promo voices by speaking into his old GE cassette recorder, then playing it back. His I-mean-business voice had gotten pretty good, he thought. The old man looked like he was gonna shit a two-by-four.

At the Quick-Stop, Nature Man called for a cab on the payphone, and fifteen minutes later he was headed home. Headed back to that clapboard dump with the ripped green porch awning and exterior shutters hanging off the hinges, the home he’d sworn three days earlier he’d left behind for good.

Back at home, Ma was watching a Matlock rerun in her floral-print kimono when Nature Man came in.

“Well,” she said. “Back already. My heart weren’t prepared for such a shock as this.”

“I need twenty for the cab, Ma.”

“I thought the next time I was gonna see you was on the Superstation rasslin Ricky Tugboat.”

“*Steamboat*, Ma. For chrissake.”

“Don’t you blaspheme in this house, boy,” Ma said, popping Nature Man upside the head as she went to her purse by the sink, dishes piled above the faucet. Woman never cleaned up a mess in her sad life. Thought she was the Fabulous Moolah or some such nonsense. No, she was a sixty-three year old battleax with a monthly disability check and a wandering brown teat peeking out of her kimono like a bashful cyclops.

When he came back in from paying the cabbie, Ma started in again.

“So what happened? You quit? Lord knows I’m stunned.”

“They told me I was too advanced and got worried I might hurt one of the novices. Their insurance won’t cover the likes of me.”

“I don’t reckon it would. I don’t suppose you got your deposit back?”

“They’re going to add it on to my purse after my first match.”

“And when, pray tell, will that be?”

“I’m wrestling Flair on that card at the Convention Center.”

“That so? Funny it don’t say nothing about that in the paper.” She waved an ad from the sports section in front of him. “Says here he’s rasslin a fellow named Carlton.”

Nature Man snatched the paper away, looked at the foe standing beside Flair. It was Carlos.

Nature Man pretended to be unsurprised by this, though his leg started to bounce with rage.

“That’s all part of it,” he said. “They’ve got to lay groundwork for an arrival like mine. What could be better than a surprise entrance. You wouldn’t understand the promotional side of it.”

“Oh boy, we’re going to be high on the hog before long,” Ma said, and went back to her Matlock rerun.

Back in his room, Nature Man lie sideways on the bed with his head on a pillow, ear candling. This was part of the process – unclogging the ears, sharpening the senses. People underestimate the importance of hearing in wrestling, but how many times have you seen the “Mouth of the South” Jimmy Hart creep up on someone from behind and beat them half to death with his megaphone? Many times, that’s how many. He could feel a sucking sensation in his canal, hear crackles and pops. He kind of blacked out staring at the blank screen of his TV, holding the ear candle steady and vertical, and the flame burned his fingers.

He went to the adjoining bathroom sink sucking on his knuckles, laid out a beige bath towel, cut open the candle, and spread it on the towel to examine what came out of

his head. Clumps of stuff, burnt orange. He picked up a patch, watched it flake away as he rolled it between his thumb and index finger. He performed this treatment weekly, and it never ceased to amaze him how much gunk could build up in his noggin in that little bit of time.

Ma hollered in from the hallway, “You messing with those ear candles again? I done told you that science has looked into that and proved it a lie. That gunk is just the candle itself, dummy.”

“Science proved religion a lie, too, but that don’t stop you from handing ten percent of our money over to Pastor Phil and his gang of charlatans.”

“Our money’ you say,” Ma said, laughing. “Our money my foot. I don’t see any checks coming in the mail with your name on it.”

“I’m gonna call the temp office tomorrow, get something lined up while I’m waiting on the promotors to get everything worked out. Now leave me be. Can’t a man have a little peace in his own house?”

“Your house,” Ma laughed, then turned the TV up on full blast.

Next, Nature Man performed his daily exercise regimen: twenty crunches, twenty push-ups, twenty jumping jacks, twenty lunges. That was sufficient. Just wanted to maintain what he had. Captain Lou had his pupils at the camp spend eight hours a day in the gym, more time than they spent in the ring. They all had a good laugh at Nature Man when he fell backwards in the middle of a squat, but they wouldn’t be laughing long. Having big, bulky muscles robbed you of your flexibility. Carlos would tear his hamstring right in half if he ever tried a dropkick.

Nature Man's physique was admittedly on the soft side, but he was as limber as a gymnast. You didn't have to win Mr. Universe to wrestle. Hell, look at Dusty Rhodes – “The American Dream.” He was crowned the Bull of the Woods in consecutive years, winning wrestling's ultimate test of endurance, a battle royal of twenty men locked together in a steel cage. These young jokers like Carlos were so obsessed with having abs that looked like a pack of jumbo dogs and a chest built like twin brains, but they wouldn't know a Spinning Toe Hold from their asshole.

Nature Man felt sorry for these kids who couldn't remember the time before that greasy-headed heretic Vince McMahon started calling wrestling “sports entertainment,” who couldn't remember the glory days of “Dirty” Dick Murdoch and Terry Funk and Barry Windham, when the sport had been about real competition. Now it's a goddamn circus, the whole thing a sham – scripted, planned out in advance – just like the old man in the Winnie had been saying.

After exercising, Nature Man got ready for bed. You had to take pride in your appearance if you wanted to take the torch from Ric Flair. Thus, after his evening bubble bath, Nature Man rubbed down his entire body with Oil of Olay, getting at his back with a Roll-A-Lotion Applicator. He didn't have to worry about body shaving like most wrestlers, as he had only an extremely faint blonde down on his legs and back and chest. The main issue was his eczema, which had recently spread to his ears. So, after the Oil of Olay treatment, he put on a homemade mask of Greek yogurt mixed with Tumeric for thirty minutes. This improved the angry red irritation, but it made his skin flaky, so he

applied a second Oil of Olay treatment after washing off the mask. All this was a pain in the ass, but he had to be vigilant about everything if he wanted to make it to the top.

The next morning, Nature Man made Ma sausage and egg whites for breakfast.

“I don’t like egg whites,” said Ma, sitting down at the table in rollers and the same bathrobe from the day before. “I like scrambled. You know that.”

“Egg whites are better for you.”

“So I’m too fat to eat scrambled, that what you’re saying?”

“I didn’t say that.”

“Well, you ain’t exactly an Adonis yourself,” she said, throwing one of her rollers at him.

“Nor do I care to be.”

“Dale,” – Dale was Nature Man’s civilian name – “the point is I’d like scrambled, please.”

“All right, pipe down,” he said. He knew better than to argue. Ma was tenacious about her wants, and there was no sense going to battle on the point. If Nature Man didn’t appease her she’d force herself to vomit and make him take her to the emergency room. He dumped the egg whites on a plate to eat cold later, and fixed up a batch of scrambled.

Nature Man wasn’t going to go back to Dalton Data, and he would need money for the Convention Center card. He pinched the bridge of his nose, sighed, and asked Ma if he could borrow fifty bucks for a ticket.

“Figured a big shot like you would get a seat complimentary,” Ma said, sawing a dry pork chop with a butter knife. “Is it part of the promotion that you pay your own way? Guess that’s one of those things I don’t understand.”

“I don’t want any charity.”

Ma laughed as she pulled a credit card out of her tan billfold. “Not from *them*.”

“It ain’t charity when you’re gonna be paid back a thousand fold.”

“High on the hog,” Ma said.

Nature Man got two tickets on the front row. Only a barricade separating him from the ring. Ma would pitch a fit when she got her credit card bill, but by then it wouldn’t matter. He’d send Ma down to a Japanese Spa and she’d shut her yap.

He decided to invite Gail along. She’d ignored his calls before, but he knew she couldn’t resist tickets to The Great American Bash. He’d string her along until he hit the bigtime, and then drop her like a bad habit.

Just as he thought, she called him back about five minutes after he left a message on her answering machine. Claimed she’d been washing her hair.

When she opened the door for him, his resolve softened. She was wearing a Flair t-shirt with the sleeves cut off, and he wanted to reach out and stroke the patch of freckles on her shoulder.

“You look nice,” he said, unable to think of a better line.

“Thanks,” she said, locking her door. She had on a tight pair of acid-wash jeans, and Nature Man wanted to slip his hand in the back pocket. “You did say these were front row seats, right?”

Mr. Jessup agreed to loan Nature Man the Ford in exchange for pulling weeds out of his begonia bed. Nature Man had never had a license, and kept wandering off the side of the road, catching rumble strips.

“You drunk or something?” asked Gail.

“Course not. I haven’t had a drink since I started training.”

Gail snickered. “Well, try not to kill us, alright.”

Nature Man gripped the steering wheel tightly. By the end of the night, she’d be eating out of the palm of his hand.

Nature Man watched the preliminaries with disinterest, an endless cadre of hulking freaks who knew about three moves and had the personalities of a slug. These pansies should be underwear models, not professional wrestlers.

Gail seemed to be enjoying herself, screaming expletives at the heels and words of encouragement at the faces. Nature Man had always preferred the heels, like Flair. The faces were too worried about being popular, while the heels were always looking for an opening to victory. They’d cheat if they had to, which proved that they wanted to win more.

Finally, it was time for the main event. Carlos came to the ring first, wearing a sleeveless black leather jacket, black trunks, and an American flag bandana. Gail cheered

wildly, and Nature Man felt sick. Even as he plotted his revenge, part of him had hoped things would work out with Gail. But what kind of woman would cheer for a fraud like Carlos? No woman Nature Man wanted anything to do with, that's what kind.

As always, Flair walked to the ring to the theme from *2001*. Stylin' and profilin'. His shiny silver robe, his belt made of solid gold. Gail booed mercilessly.

Carlos was young and big and didn't have a prayer. Oh, sure, he had Flair in trouble for a spell, but once the Nature Boy slapped on the Figure Four, that was all she wrote. Carlos begged for the match to end, and it did.

As Flair had his hand raised by the ref and his belt returned to him, Gail said, "Well, let's get out of here, beat the traffic. I've got to get up early in the morning."

Nature Man didn't respond. He knew that if he didn't make his move now, he never would. He'd live with Ma until she died. He'd keep getting the cold shoulder from women like Gail, women who would snicker at him while cheering on the talentless meatheads of the world.

It was time to claim what was rightfully his. With Flair's back turned to him in the ring, and Gail looking at him as if he wasn't worth a nickel, Nature Man spat black onto the concrete floor, and put one leg over the barricade separating the crowd from the ring, ready to go take the torch.

### CHAPTER III

#### JUDGMENT HOUSE

It will go like this: A trumpet blasts and corpses burst out of the grave, skeletons riding dirt geysers up into the sky, dripping flesh, unhinged jawbones spilling forth maggots and singing songs of praise, of worship. Folks ascending out of their vehicles framed by halos of light, floating off into the pale blue yonder, their vacated Civics and Darts crashing into municipal buildings, fire hydrants, and stray vagrants—maybe a baby stroller or two. Terrified flight passengers bust into empty cockpits as their planes drop towards the earth like bombs, every unfortunate thing stuck to the ground below them a potential target. Children leave parents standing panicked in the dust.

“That all?” I say, driving my S-10 along the cracked blacktop, fields of charred-looking tobacco stretching out on either side. It’s Halloween, and we’re on our way to church for Judgment House.

“That’s the gist,” says my son. His name is Clyde, like me, but we call him Trey. He doesn’t like that too much, but I doubt he’d like “Little Clyde” much better. I know I never did. And calling him by his middle name, Beauregard, would qualify as some form of child abuse. His mother wanted to call him Beau, but that name makes you think of some barefoot hick chewing a straw, or a faithful mutt maybe. Trey’s the best I can do for him.

“Your mama’s got some imagination,” I say, glancing over at Trey sitting Indian-style in the passenger seat.

He’s got on a mesh Atlanta Braves ball cap, the kind with an adjustable plastic strip in the back. I gave him the cap on his last birthday even though Trey wouldn’t know Chipper Jones if Jones slapped him upside the head. But he likes to keep his head covered. His hair is just like mine—light brown, a thick and curly mess, tangled and knotted like wisteria branches—and he’s embarrassed about it just like I was at his age. He takes the cap off, flexes the bill twice, then sits it on his knee.

“Your mama believes in holy ghosts but not the efficacy of a wide tooth comb,” I say, taking the cap off his knee and putting it back on his head. “Keep that covered.”

“It’s real,” says Trey with annoyance, adjusting the cap to his liking. “It’s all in the Bible. Mama didn’t imagine anything.”

“The Bible talks about a seven-headed dragon with feet like a bear and a mouth like a lion. They should make a comic book about it. I don’t remember anything about folks descending out of cars.”

“Ascending. Not *de-*. And it’s in the subtext,” he says. Boy’s always been sharp as a tack. He could say his ABCs and count to twenty before he could aim his piss, I shit you not. I suppose every father thinks their son’s going to be something special. We all want to believe that our batter is of higher quality than the stuff produced by our fathers, but the result is typically the same bland pancake. Though Trey’s always been able to pick up on things that others miss. And when I say “others,” I don’t just mean his sixth-grade peers, but adults, too. That’s why it’s important that I break him of this thing.

“Guess I better open the sun-roof then,” I say.

“Way this heap of junk is rusting out, you’ll have a sun-roof for real before long,” Trey says. On the surface, we’re just sort of picking at each other, but there’s not a hint of warmth in Trey’s voice. I mean, the boy really *hates* me right now. I try to summon words that will close the distance between us—words about acceptance and unconditional love, words about how a man will sometimes dig in his heels when the world turns against him—but I can’t get anything out. I have to make Trey recognize what he stands to lose, even if I have to lose him myself. What kind of father would I be if I let his soul turn into some ominous black thing haunting over the world?

I’ve been living at the Budget Inn (\$500 a month for long-term guests) ever since Ruth, my wife, found Jesus and joined the flock of Pastor Strickland. She wanted me to find Jesus, too, but He has so far proved elusive.

I always do the same thing when I’m here alone in the evenings or on any days off from working at the furniture plant (the same plant where Pop was a foreman for fifteen years and that will probably soon be relocated to Taiwan or some other third-world hell hole): I watch horror movies. I bought a cheap little Sony DVD player that I hooked up to the hotel’s twenty-inch flat-screen, and on it I watch one blood-curdling catastrophe after another.

Watching scary flicks was what Trey and I loved to do most together. We preferred watching a psychopath chase horny teenagers around with a chain saw over a game of catch in the yard or a morning of fishing at my father-in-law’s pond. Ruth never

cared for this particular father-son activity, thought Trey was too young for those kinds of movies, but she begrudgingly accepted the Saturday afternoon ritual because it was the only time you'd catch my arm draped across my son's shoulders, his head resting in the crook of my armpit. But when Strickland came into the picture, she couldn't tolerate it any longer. Those movies glorify the Devil, she tells me.

When I had Trey to myself one recent Saturday at the Budget Inn, I figured we could sneak in a viewing of *Rosemary's Baby*, a mutual favorite. But he told me it wasn't right for him to watch those kinds of movies anymore. When I assured him that his mother would never find out, he snapped at me that it would be wrong to deceive, and asked how I could suggest he do such a thing. The anger and disappointment in his voice frightened me like Mia Farrow birthing the anti-Christ never had or could. I knew at that moment that I was losing him.

Earlier today, I was watching *Halloween II*—the one where Michael Myers terrorizes Jamie Lee Curtis in a hospital—when the phone on the fiberboard nightstand rang.

It was Ruth calling about my plans for Trey. I wanted to take the boy trick-or-treating, maybe over to the Haunted Corn Maze at Olsen Farms. But Ruth thought that plan sounded too Satanic.

“There's this thing the church does,” she said, ending her words with a click of the tongue. She always does that click thing when she's worked up about something. She was anticipating me giving her lip. She was right to be concerned. “Judgment House. It's

like a Christian alternative to all the glorification of evil and whatnot. They put on skits acting out scenarios that might get you sent to hell if you're not careful."

"On the Haunted Corn Maze, some dude in a hockey mask tickles your sides from behind," I said. Ruth did not laugh. She found Jesus but lost her sense of humor. I used to always be able to get her going with my jokes, get her laughing in that sweet, high register that made me hard in study hall, but no more. She no longer responds to the same stimuli. Ruth says she's "born again," but to me it doesn't seem like birth so much as usurpation. Jesus has not given her new life; He has taken command of her senses.

Finally, after fuming over my wisecrack for a few long seconds, Ruth clicked her tongue again and said, "If you want to see Trey tonight, you'll take him to the church. *Comprende?*"

Ruth always says *comprende* with just a touch of playfulness, and hearing that in her voice then made my pecker flutter a little, gave me a pang of hope—hope that the old world might somehow be salvaged.

"Okay," I said. "I can do that."

"Pick him up at seven," said Ruth with one final click, hanging up the phone, breaking our connection.

Now, here on the road, the S-10 shakes as the blacktop fractures and collapses into tiny pits, gravel shooting out behind like a bullet hail. The fall sky covers the land like a bright orange sheet, and the tobacco fields give way to a forest of ancient oaks dipping so low into the road that the branches scrape the peeling red roof of the truck.

Then the forest opens up into a pumpkin patch. Out the passenger-side window, looking past the bill of Trey's cap, I see a man with a straw hat nailed to a cross, black crows perched on the horizontal plank pecking at his eyes. Ever since I moved out of the house I have waking dreams—visions of men being ripped apart. I know what I see now is just a scarecrow—it must be—but from this distance I swear I can see blood and flecks of iris dusting the air, the desperate flickering of trapped hands. I look over at Trey, his bony legs still pulled underneath him, who glances out too but shows no indication that the image means anything to him.

I return my eyes to the road, running the back of my right hand over my mouth, feeling the dry, harsh grit of two-day-old stubble.

At the far end of the patch is an old cemetery surrounded by a chipped white fence. My father is buried there. He died of a heart attack when I was Trey's age. Mom and I noticed him stone dead in his Barcalounger—his feet up, eyes open, a Pall Mall filter hanging out of his mouth. Not *found*, but *noticed*.

The three of us were sitting around the television watching *Wheel of Fortune*, Mom telling Pop that his cigarette's out. He could have been dead an hour or more, and if not for that spent butt, might have sat dead another hour or two unnoticed. He was a man uninterested in speech. I can't even remember what his voice sounded like. What I do remember is Pop's skin, dried out by sun and smoke, deep leathery grooves suggesting a man of a more advanced age.

I inspect the back of my hands on the steering wheel, their cracking dry skin, afraid of how Trey will remember my voice.

The cemetery rests members of Snow Hill Baptist Church, the church itself emerging over a slope in the blacktop. I've always wondered how the hell a church around here—a place where even the cold feels heavy and dry—got a name like “Snow Hill.” Probably just some errant wish.

My parents had been members here and made sure I was in the pew sitting between them every Sunday, but I quit going once I moved out on my own. Ruth would take Trey on occasion, but mainly just for the socializing—the Sunday school gossip and the cover-dish suppers. But when Strickland took over the congregation about a year ago, she “caught a fever for the Word,” as she once put it to me. A lot of folks did. Ruth said Strickland wanted worshippers, not church-goers.

The church is as old as Methuselah, with its Gothic arches and steeple, but a fresh coat of paint makes it look as new and white as freshly laundered sheets. Looking at it gives me an eerie feeling, like I've taken us through some kind of time warp. I park in dirt grooves that approximate a parking space, looking out my window expecting to see a horse-drawn buggy rather than a four-door sedan.

I walk to the passenger side and open the door for Trey, who hops down and kicks up dust all over my best pair of Levi's without even looking at me.

I absently reach into the front pocket of my orange plaid button-up for a pack of Camels, forgetting again that I quit smoking when Ruth kicked me out. Watching TV alone in the Budget Inn made me think of Pop in his Barcalounger, and I figured it was time to give it up. I don't miss it too much, but my clothes are still cig-haunted; the

weight of the pack is still present in my shirt pocket, and the smoke smell never washes out.

I pat the pocket twice and watch as Trey ascends the church steps, noticing in the fading light of dusk how his long, flat nose and thin, pale lips twitch in the chill like his mother's.

At the entrance stands Pastor Strickland in a modest black suit and crisp white shirt, his face stretched so tightly you'd think a light flick might cause the skin to snap off. Strickland sticks his bony, blue-veined right hand toward me to shake, and grips my shoulder with the left, the power of his fingers surprising.

"Evening, Clyde," he says, his smile revealing tiny, gapped teeth.

"Preacher Man," I say, "Long time no see," feeling the crushing cold grip of his shake. I call him Preacher Man because I know he doesn't like it. A grips my hand a little more tightly.

"Decided to rejoin the flock?"

"Not quite. We came for the sugar-free candy and other secular whatnots."

"No candy here. Just the body of Christ and his blood."

"Always tastes like crackers and Welch's to me."

"You lack imagination."

"And you got plenty to spare, I guess."

"Okay, Clyde. Have it your way. Just keep your heart open."

"Sure thing."

Pastor Strickland releases his grip on my shoulder to let me pass through the dimly lit foyer.

Strickland and I go back a ways. We were both in the same Sunday school classes together, both played on the same rusted, net-less basketball hoop in back of the church. I thought he was okay enough back in those days, but he was always a little off. His mother homeschooled him back when there wasn't much of that going on, and he got stranger and stranger as her lessons started to stick.

One late Sunday afternoon shortly before Pop died, Strickland and I were playing H-O-R-S-E on the creaky old slanting post. I liked to play it loose and crazy, throwing up hook shots with the left hand while standing on one foot, shots from behind the backboard, granny-shots with my eyes closed. But Strickland's approach was more practical—a basic jump shot from the free throw line (a piece of packing tape), a bank shot from eight feet out, and a twenty-footer from the side. Of course, he always won. But what's odd thinking back was his demeanor—he disapproved, without words, of my carefree tactics while taking no pleasure in his success. Even a stupid game of H-O-R-S-E was approached as the Lord's work.

Anyway, this one Sunday, I got on a bit of a roll. Everything was going in. Strickland couldn't match my crazy-ass shooting, and it was clear he resented having to make the effort. With the game in the balance, I banked a granny-shot with my eyes shut. Strickland picked up the ball and stared at it for a moment, then looked at me with his icy blue eyes.

“I ain't gonna shoot it that way,” he said.

“Fine. Guess I win then,” I said, and did a little victory shuffle.

“You didn’t call it. You’ve got to say you’re gonna bank in a granny-shot. But you didn’t, so I can shoot it any way I want.”

Now, as I know it, this is indeed how the rules of H-O-R-S-E work; you have to call the shot beforehand. But we had never played that way before.

“That’s some bull, Strick,” I said. “You know we never play it that way.”

“I ain’t gonna shoot it that way. It’s stupid. It’s prideful not to shoot it the right way.”

“Then you lose, like I said.”

He turned to the basket and shot a jumper, textbook form. The ball whistled through the rim, touching no iron. Then, he just walked away without a word.

“Hey, that don’t count,” I called to him. “You still lose.”

But he walked on, and we never played ball together again.

As we got older, Strickland became more and more of an enigma to me. Folks got to calling him Preacher Man, laughing at him in his pressed suits whenever he’d show up in town. As a teenager, I thought it was just his weirdness that bothered everyone, but I think now it was really fear. There’s something kind of frightening about a person who views every task, even a game of hoops, as a battle against sin.

Still, I envied his ability to fully commit himself to some greater purpose, even if I thought his chosen purpose was misguided, even dangerous. I’ve never found anything worthy of that kind of reverence. But now I know I’m going to give that commitment to my son, even if it makes him hate me forever.

I looked around for Trey, who went in the church ahead of me, but I couldn't find him.

After Trey comes out of the bathroom, Pastor Strickland leads a group of about twenty of us into a parlor room with old-fashioned gray curtains and gray carpet. Divots in the carpet suggest that furniture has recently been moved. The overhead lights are out, leaving the room illuminated only by a cheap strobe light.

In the first room, two teenagers agonize over whether or not to have premarital sex. The boy is being pushy, while the girl tries to resist. Fornication goes against God's word, the girl tells us—she actually says the word “fornication.” But ultimately, the girl gives in and instantly becomes pregnant. I struggle to stifle my laughter, and Trey pinches my arm.

The procession moves on to the next room. In the middle of the room is a gurney, and on the gurney lies a girl wearing a hospital gown, covered in blood below the waist. A doctor and nurse—teenagers both—step into the scene.

“Things didn't go like we planned, Nurse,” the doctor says. “We made a mess of it, but the job's done.”

“It came out fine, Doctor,” says the nurse. “The baby is dead; that's the point.”

The doctor and nurse speak to each other in the leaden, practiced tone of inexperienced B-movie actors, yet the inauthenticity adds to the general creepiness. I put my hand on Trey's shoulder, feel him tense at my touch.

The doctor steps behind the gurney, pulling from underneath a doll resembling a fetus with a pair of scissors lodged in its head.

“Would you like to hold your baby?” the doctor says.

Abortion Girl takes the doll in her hands and begins to scream.

“Why,” she wails. “Why did I do this?”

Now the smell of copper fills the room, and I swear the doll twitches.

Pastor Strickland steps into the foreground while the wailing continues.

“This is the ugliness of sin,” says Strickland, sticking out his hand towards the gurney. “The price of sin. This is what happens when you tear flesh out of flesh, when you kill something God created and gave a soul. This is how you are left, hollowed out, bloody, and alone.”

I grab Trey by the cuff of his shirt and yank him, pulling him out of the room. He says something to me, but I can’t hear the words, only Abortion Girl hollering and Strickland incanting.

Outside, I’m getting Trey into the truck and slipping on dirt, unable to think straight. Then I feel a crushing grip on my shoulder.

“Come back in, Clyde,” says Strickland. “The show’s just starting.”

I slap his hand from my shoulder and push my finger into his chest.

“How can you show that kind of ugliness to kids? You’re sick.”

Suddenly, the severity dissolves from Strickland’s face and his shoulders relax, as if some clandestine personality has taken control of his body. With a strange, quiet kindness in his voice, he says, “It’s the world that’s ugly, Clyde. It’s the world that’s sick.

What you saw in there, that's what sin looks like. Everyone knows about sin, but most can't understand its power until forced to face it head on. What kind of Preacher Man would I be if I didn't teach my flock how to recognize the rottenness all around them?"

He puts his hand on my shoulder again, but this time he applies no grip, just lets his hand rest there.

"You're sick, Clyde. You're sick of spirit. Look what your faithlessness has brought you to. You're alone in that cheap motel. You don't have your son, your wife; this is what your sin—your pride—has brought you to. Now you've had to face it. That's why you're upset. The Lord is moving inside you. Don't resist."

For a moment I can't move, Strickland's words somehow calming me to near paralysis. Then, I turn my head back toward the church and Abortion Girl is standing on the steps in her bloody gown, smiling at me.

I turn back around and Trey is crawling into the truck.

"Don't worry, Trey," says Strickland. "We'll keep working on him."

When he says this, I deck the son of a bitch. A closed fist right to the jaw. He goes to the ground, but doesn't seem all that bothered by the lick, like he's used to this sort of thing. But I'm not used to this sort of thing, and I bust my hand up pretty good. I've crushed the bones in my knuckles to dust.

"Let's just go, Dad," Trey says, hanging his head out the passenger side window. "We can just go to Olsen's."

There's a resignation in his voice, and that scares the daylights out of me.

Trey doesn't say much to me in truck. I know I've humiliated him.

I think back to a barbeque Pop took me to a couple of years before he passed; the Collisons'. They had a big barbeque every year on the Fourth, and half the Snow Hill congregation showed up. Frank Collison and Pop were Deacons together. A pig on the spit, bottled RC Colas on ice, kids pulling sand burrs out of their bare feet. That kind of thing.

I had a crush on the youngest Collison daughter, Judy, who was a grade ahead of me. I was trying to impress her with insults and mild physical abuse, the way kids do. I'd say her breath stank, yank her pigtails. Make her run after me and yell mean things back. She'd tell me I had ugly feet, which I do; high arches, and long bony toes.

Anyway, after feasting on a plate of pulled pork and spicy baked beans, I saw Judy blowing dandelions beneath a loblolly pine. The seeds dusted around her face, and it seemed to me that by some strange miracle she existed inside a snow globe. In a fit of longing, I ran towards her, threatening to fart in her general direction.

As I chased her through a gaggle of mixers, closing in, a jerk of the collar stopped my momentum.

"What the hell is wrong with you?" Pop boomed at me. He yanked up on my collar so that his face was just a quarter-inch from mine, and I could smell mustard and ashes on his breath. "Act like you've got some sense!"

I said before that I couldn't remember the sound of Pop's voice, but in this instance I can remember its feel. It was like some kind of sonic blast that made my skin

vibrate, and not in some abstract sense. My flesh was literally moved by the force of his voice. Or, at least, that's how I remember it.

Beyond Pop, Judy had stopped running. She was standing by the spit with her older sister, Dawn. They were giggling at me through their hands, the eyeless sockets of the pig looming just behind, with its mouth beneath the dry snout worked into a grin.

I stared back at Pop with hatred, and I did hate him in that moment. It was the kind of feeling that had a sensation to it, a warm buzz that I can still recall all these years later. The love between father and son, it seems to me, can't be summoned in quite the same way.

Now, here in the truck, Trey has his head resting against the fogged window and I know he's feeling something like that now. Twenty years from now, this is a moment he'll remember with the kind of stark clarity that only hate can conjure.

I'm taking Trey to Olsen Farms like I wanted to from the beginning. Maybe something of the evening can be salvaged.

"Hey, we'll have fun at Olsen's," I say, nudging Trey's knee, forgetting my hand's busted. I wince in agony. I should do something with it—wrap it up or something. It looks like the puffy hand of a 500-pound man. I decide to worry about that later. "You always liked the Haunted Corn Maze, right? Remember Dracula?" I make an evil laugh in a deep tenor, like Bela Lugosi: "Muhahahahaha."

"I think I've changed my mind. Can't you just take me home?" Trey says without looking at me.

“Listen, what happened at the church—I couldn’t let you watch that. Your mama wouldn’t have let you watch something like that a year ago.”

“It ain’t a year ago,” says Trey, tracing a circle on the window with his thumb. “You just need to accept how things are now.”

But there’s no way I can do that. After a while, the truck stops shaking as the road smooths out, red reflectors illuminating the yellow traffic lines. Just on the outskirts of town, I pull into the parking lot of Olsen Farms. I say “parking lot,” but it’s really just a rectangular patch of field where Travis Olsen chopped the weeds and cut the grass flat enough for vehicles to park without getting stuck.

At first, Trey won’t move to get out of the truck—just keeps his head resting against the glass. I go around and open his door.

“Come on,” I say, nudging him with my elbow. “You’re not scared of a bunch of rednecks in bedsheets, are you?”

Trey sighs and gets out. “Alright,” he says. “Let’s get it over with then.”

Beyond the parking area, cornstalks rise tall and green. At the far end, Olsen and his wife sit in front of a plastic folding table to collect money—five bucks a person. The old man wears a dark blue dungaree coat over denim overalls. His wife stands in a black sweatshirt with a grinning orange pumpkin in the center. She takes our money. We appear to be the only customers.

“Two for you, Clyde?”

“That’ll work.”

She tears off two tickets and hands them over. It seems to me the tickets are superfluous; they know I've paid, and it'd be a lot of trouble for anyone to sneak in around them. I hold the tickets up to Mr. Olsen and nod to him, arching my eyebrows. He smiles faintly and nods back.

"You'll need this," he says, handing me a flashlight out of a cardboard box sitting at his feet. "Make sure you return that."

I place my good hand on Trey's back to guide him toward the entrance, and he flinches just a hair.

The entrance is an opening like a large door frame, the stalks neatly cut away with a corn picker. Some farmers hire professionals to cut out elaborate mazes you can get lost in, but Mr. Olsen prefers to do the job himself, and it's nothing too fancy. Nothing that would confuse most people.

For the first minute or so I point the light ahead and we walk, the ground rustling beneath us.

"Who do you think will come at us first?" I say.

"I don't know," Trey says. "Probably Dom Olsen with a burlap sack on his head."

I laugh. "Dom's got the worst case of acne in the annals of time," I say of the Olsen's teenage son. "He'd be scarier if he ditched the sack."

Trey starts to laugh with me. I haven't heard him laugh since I took up at the Budget Inn. Not a real laugh, anyway. When he gets really tickled, his body convulses and his voice rises in pitch until there's barely any sound.

As we round a bend, somebody jumps out of the field and grabs Trey at the sides. It's Dom wearing a hockey mask instead of a sack, and he growls as Trey squeals and runs ahead, laughing. Then Dom turns to me and roars again, his hands in the air with the fingers made crooked like claws.

“Solid work, Dom,” I say and turn the flashlight ahead to see where Trey has gone.

We come upon the usual tricks—teenagers wearing white bed sheets or makeup to resemble the dead, all yelling and growling as if the key to fear is a roar of unintelligibility. But as we near the exit of the maze, everything gets quiet except for the sound of night critters. I have my arm around Trey's shoulders. He was relaxed a moment ago as we laughed our way along the path, but now in the silence he begins to tense. I take my arm away.

The light catches the exit and Strickland is standing there with Ruth. I suddenly feel afraid, but not of them. I know they are here to take Trey away from me. I steel myself and walk toward the exit.

“Preacher Man,” I say, not yet acknowledging Ruth. “Scared the sin out of enough kids for one night, I guess?”

“I'm sorry, Clyde. I really am,” he says, and I can tell he means it. He looks at me with a sad look on his face, his tight skin now loosened by pity, then places his hand in the middle of Ruth's back.

“See you Sunday,” he tells her, then turns and walks to his truck, an old rusted Ford pickup that idles in front of Ruth’s Buick. In the tailgate sits Abortion Girl, still in her bloody gown, still smiling at me. Strickland nods at us as he drives off.

“I guess Strickland called you up and told you I was misbehaving,” I say to Ruth. She’s wearing a crisp white shirt buttoned to the top and a beige skirt down to her ankles. Not the tight sweater and jeans she would have typically worn before all this happened. “Listen, do you know what they’re doing out there? What they’re showing kids? I had to get Trey out of there. I mean, did you see that girl?”

“I didn’t see any girl, Clyde,” she says, and the hairs on my arms stand up. “Pastor came by the house and told me y’all had run off. I followed him out here.”

“Glad I can spend some time with my own son without getting spied on,” I say. “You talk about how bad it is letting Trey watch some harmless movies, but then you want him to see that kind of ugliness.”

“It wasn’t for Trey. It was something you needed to see.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you. Trey already understands. He’s been saved. We want you to be saved, too.”

My neck flushes when I’m angry, and I can feel the blood pumping in my jugular. I start to protest, but then I realize that Trey has not come out of the maze.

“Where’s Trey?” I say, looking around frantically. “Did you see him come out?”

“No,” says Ruth. “Have you lost him?”

I run back into the corn maze, taking the route in reverse, searching for Trey at every turn and dead end, shouting his name. Soon I come to the entrance and the only sign of him is his hat on the ground, lying still at my feet. Olsen and his wife have left their post and everything is completely dark. I must have dropped the flashlight back at the exit. I wander back through the maze once more, unable to see anything in front of me. With both hands, I grasp at the blackness like a blind man, hoping to feel Trey's tangled curls.

Suddenly, I hear a soft rustle and someone steps out of the field about 20 yards in front of me.

"Trey," I call, but I quickly realize this figure is too tall and thick to be my son. "Who is that? Dom? Have you seen Trey?"

And then I realize the figure is holding something at his side. I slowly step closer and see the white mask. Then the man lifts his object up and yanks at it with the other hand, and the soft chirping of crickets is annihilated by the explosive whirring of a chain saw.

The figure runs toward me, holding the chain saw high in the darkness of the night.

There's no time to speak as the distance closes between us, but as I start to move I think that this is a hell of an improvement over Dom's usual ass-grabbing.

At first I retreat, stumbling back towards the entrance and my S-10, but as I start to turn a bend I remember Trey. I can't leave him here.

I pivot back around as Chain Saw Man is closing in on me. I stand bouncing on my toes for an instant, then fake to the right and explode to the left, like I'm trying to lose a defender and drive to the hoop. He bites on the fake and his footing fails on the attempted recovery. I look over my shoulder as I run and on one knee, Chain Saw Man angrily chucks his weapon at me. It propels like a helicopter, but lands well short.

I keep moving.

Soon I can no longer hear the whirring, but I know I'm still being pursued.

A bed sheet with no legs flaps in the chilled air, covers my face and tries to smother me, but I rip it away and keep moving.

A scarecrow sweeps its hand at my collar as I charge past.

I keep moving.

Dracula tries to suck my blood dry, his laugh more terrible than anything Bela Lugosi could ever conjure.

I keep moving.

I'm afraid, but it's not a fear of what might be done to me, but rather of what I'm being prevented from finding.

The maze, which earlier seemed so easily navigable, turns and twists into one dead-end after another. I call for Trey over and over, but he doesn't respond.

Then, suddenly, in the distance I can see a light. I move toward it. Eventually, the single light becomes two, and I realize it's the headlights of Ruth's car.

When I finally make my way through the exit, I have trouble adjusting my eyes to the light. Through squinted slits, I see Trey getting in his mother's car. I shout his name,

but he doesn't respond. The car pulls into the road and drives away. I run towards the blacktop and realize that I won't be able to stop them.

Later, I'll go back to my S-10 and drive to the Budget Inn alone and sit on the edge of the bed and open a can of Vienna sausages. I'll stare at the TV, watch Jamie Lee Curtis as she peers out of her broken bedroom window only to find that the terror she thought she'd just vanquished has disappeared back into the black night and will surely come for her again. I'll sit and know that things could be different with Trey if I would just accept how things are, and I'll hate myself for being unwilling to do so.

Standing panicked in the dust, I watch the car go around a bend, and the light vanishes, a trumpet blasting off in the distance.

CHAPTER IV  
THE VARIETIES OF DEPRAVITY

I had a strong suspicion that Pearl – the lady my mom paid to clean the house and iron clothes every Monday – had been watching my pornographic film. By “my pornographic film,” I do not mean to suggest a film in which I performed or directed or otherwise had some personal stake or ownership, but rather a VHS video cassette I owned, purchased from Larry’s Adult Depot located just outside the town limits.

The town proper consisted of Tater’s Quick-Fill, a twenty-four hour Laundromat, and one flashing yellow traffic light. The latter put the town in temporary infamy, as tourists traveling to or from Myrtle Beach tended to ignore it, earning Rutledge, South Carolina a spot on *Newsweek’s* list of the country’s top ten speed traps. When the list was released, the townsfolk took an odd pride at being noticed, and strutted about with a little more pep in their step, chests poked out a bit further. Soon, however, *Newsweek’s* list disappeared from public conscience, and our feet were heavy once again.

Donny and I hit up Larry’s one scorching June afternoon, a Saturday, just a few days after our high school graduation. All around, the grass was sparse because the river was so close, and the pine trees stood tall and ugly, dropping their cones onto roads and yards like spiked turds. Our little town was dead – the life sucked out when the furniture plant went under – only there was no lingering stench to tip off the locals. We were all like termites in a hollow tree.

Donny parked around back behind a tall wood-paneled fence – private parking, in case one’s pastor or Sunday school teacher should drive by just as one was walking inside.

In particular, I did not want Ricky, the youth pastor at Rutledge First Baptist Church and Pearl’s oldest son, to putter by in his Volvo and see us going into that den of iniquity. He wasn’t a fire and brimstone guy like Reverend Caldwell, the head pastor. Really, he was worse: he’d shake your hand and give you this sad look, like you’d disappointed him. Hell, he didn’t even have to catch you in the act – it just always seemed like he knew exactly what dishonorable thing you were up to, even if you didn’t know yourself. Then, next time he had you in youth group, you’d get the feeling that he’d written a sermon or prayer with just you and your specific evil deed in mind.

When we got out of Donny’s Thunderbird, disorienting waves wafted off the asphalt, as if the heat were rising from underground.

I had never been inside such an establishment before, and neither had Donny. We were eighteen now. We weren’t perverts, but worse: virgins. Donnie would lie about his own status – claimed that Darla Ray dropped her Looms for him after prom, even though Darla told everyone he’d gotten stank-eyed on Lord Calvert and passed out in his daddy’s porch swing. But I didn’t have the heart to call him out on it, despite the hell he’d give me for my own persisting chastity. Regardless of his deception, we both came to Larry’s wanting to learn how to pleasure a woman with a little *éclat* before heading off to college.

We went in through the rear entrance like every other customer – I suspect the front door was probably rusted shut through disuse. We wandered up and down the aisles,

unsure what we ought to be looking for. Each aisle was organized according to some topical interest. I never imagined that there were so many categories of sex: girl-on-guy; girl-on-girl; mechanical-apparatus-on-girl; guy-using- mechanical-apparatus-on-girl; orgies of dizzying proportions; sex acts involving midgets; foot fetishes; food fetishes; sex acts involving cartoon characters; anal; Asian (apparently an aesthetic as well as a racial category); something referred to as “barely legal;” and on and on.

After ten minutes or so, the clerk asked if we needed any help. He was chubby and dressed casually – wrinkled cotton shirt, tattered jeans, Birkenstocks.

“This is our first time,” I told him.

The clerk pinched his pock-marked face together suspiciously. “We don’t sell guy-on-guy here,” he said, then raised his hands defensively. “Now, I don’t personally got a problem with it if ya’ll swing that way. To each his own. But ownership’s not quite as liberal in their line of thinking.”

“We ain’t queer,” said Donny, giving me an annoyed glance, then taking a bite off a Milky Way. “We like pussy fine. We’re just browsing.”

“Alright then,” said the clerk. “Let me know if I can help.” He started to walk back to the counter, then turned back to us.

“We got some tranny stuff if you’re into that.” He held up his hands again. “I’m just saying. I don’t judge.”

When the clerk was gone, Donny grabbed me by the collar of my polo.

“Why the hell did you tell him that?” he said, then shook his head. ““Our first time.’ Jesus, Chase. Think before you speak.”

Donny walked away from me, annoyed, and went up a ramp and through a wood door frame into another room.

I took full measure of my surroundings. The wooden walls were unpainted, and the place smelled like saw dust. Behind the clerk's counter, I could see into the bathroom; the inside was only partially tiled and in places there were exposed pipes. It was as if construction of the building had never been completed. I wondered if this was intentional, if the owners created a sterile ambiance to put skittish, guilt-riddled patrons at ease.

At the end of the video aisles, along the far wall, there was a station of many different sexual devices. These included dildos of various shapes and sizes – most magnitudes larger than my own comparatively modest unit. Some were obscenely veined, like the arm of a professional wrestler. All the colors of the rainbow were represented, like some perversion of God's covenant with Noah.

Also, there were contraptions of rubber designed to look like lady parts. I picked one off the rack; the plastic and cardboard packaging claimed that it had been made from a mold taken between the legs of some apparently well-known starlet. It looked frighteningly lifelike; there was even a triangular thatch of light brown hair just above the crevice.

“That might be too advanced for you,” said Donny, now standing over my shoulder.

Donny was tall and rail thin. Some of our less sensitive friends joked that God forgot to give him an ass, just welded his legs and torso together. “How can you shit

without an ass?” they’d joke. “The Lord didn’t forget your pecker, too, did He?” Donny was kind of sensitive about the whole thing – he ate constantly but to no avail.

Anyway, I quickly put the lady parts thing back on display. Donny laughed.

“Okay,” he said, “these are buy one get one half off. They look pretty good.”

He handed me one of the boxes, the one evidently intended for me. The packaging was much larger than normal commercial VHS fair and was covered with graphic still shots, presumably from the film. *The Passion of the Christ* it was called, like the Mel Gibson film. It appeared to have been selected from the “Hollywood” aisle, which included alternate interpretations of popular films. Judging from the stills, the filmmaker had a decidedly different take on the crucifixion at Calvary than did Mr. Gibson. The more familiar understanding of “passion” appeared to be emphasized. I wasn’t sure why Donny thought this particular film would suit my tastes – not that I knew enough to have developed any – but I didn’t ask questions.

Incidentally, Donny wouldn’t let me see what he’d picked out for himself, although I did see him linger especially long on the Food Fetish aisle.

I gave Donny my half of the money, and he made the purchase at the clerk’s counter.

“These are fine choices, sirs,” the clerk said. “Not too nasty for beginners, but nasty enough to do the job.”

He chuckled good-naturedly, placed the movies in brown paper sacks like what’s used at the liquor store.

Just as we were turning to leave, the clerk grabbed me by the wrist. His other hand held a tube of some kind of clear gel, and he squirted a dab in the middle of my palm.

“Tell me what you think of this here,” said the clerk, massaging the gel into the middle of my hand with his thumb. “Ain’t that nice.”

It was nice – it felt kind of warm and relaxing, like drifting on a float in the middle of a pool. But I wasn’t about to tell that to the clerk.

“Now, just imagine what that might feel like on the lower extremities,” he said, pulling his hand back and indicating a display sign. “Stuff’s half off this week only.”

Donny started to laugh. I turned to him and pushed him towards the door.

“We’re good,” I said.

Then we left, much to my relief. The things I’d just seen combined with the blast of heat upon reentry into civilization gave me a woozy feeling. The varieties of depravity were stupefying.

“Y’all come on back now,” the clerk called to us. As the door swung shut, I could hear him chuckling.

Here’s why I suspected Pearl had been watching my tape:

I spent that entire summer before college bagging at the Piggly Wiggly. One day in early August I got home from my shift around 3:00 pm and decided to take a look at the tape again, now an afternoon ritual. It was cued up to my favorite scene, which involved Jesus, Mary Magdalene, and the backseat of a chariot. I had gotten through the

whole thing several times at this point, but it was a couple hours long, so that was spread out over a couple dozen total viewings. I was starting to feel a little less guilty about the whole thing.

But as I sat on the end of my bed to turn the tape on, I found to my bafflement that the movie was not on the proper scene. It was skipped to the part where Judas betrays Jesus and He turns Himself over to a cadre of buxom Roman guards.

Now, I should explain what kind of entertainment set-up I used. My television was one of those 13-inch sets with a VHS module built right into the body. Anyone who has ever owned such a set probably knows that if you leave a cassette in the module, it will often start running automatically the next time you turn the television on. Because of this, I was usually very careful about ejecting the video and placing it back in its usual place – the lockbox under my bed where I stored especially valuable baseball cards and the savings bonds my Aunt Faye sent on my birthday each year – and kept the only key in my wallet. But, alas, after my previous viewing, I got careless and left the tape in the machine.

Anyway, so the tape was on the wrong scene. My first thought was that my mother had been in my room and turned on the set. But I quickly eliminated the possibility for three reasons.

First, the tape was *way* beyond the last point at which I'd last viewed – like fifteen minutes or something. That means that whoever turned on the television *did not stop the tape* for approximately a quarter hour. Clearly, this person had been unembarrassed by what they had seen and continued to watch. That my mother –leader of her circle group at

church – had stood by (or, worse, *had actually got on my bed*) for that amount of time watching a pornographic movie was unfathomable.

Second, the last time I had watched the tape was the usual afternoon viewing from the previous day. My mom was always gone to work – she was a 5<sup>th</sup> grade math teacher – before I got up in the morning and would not be home for another hour or so.

Third, and most importantly, that day was a Monday. Pearl was presumably the only person who had been in the house since I left for work around 8:30 am. I knew from the occasional Monday off from school or work that Pearl often vacuumed my bedroom while watching soap operas.

So, ergo, Pearl had watched my porno tape. The conclusion was inescapable.

Anyway, I was able to quickly deduce the culprit. Even still, it was hard to believe. Pearl was a middle-aged lady known to sing in a gorgeous alto in the church choir. I had often heard her humming graceful hymns – “The Old Rugged Cross,” “Amazing Grace,” the Doxology, other wondrous tunes I couldn’t identify – while ironing shirts or mopping the kitchen floor.

Pearl had handsome features – a strong chin, smooth cheeks. Her build was sturdy, powerful. OF course, “handsome” is usually a nice way folks have of describing a woman who looks like a man. But she had a soft-stride to her gait – the way she would swing her hips – that was unmistakably feminine.

Of course, until that particular Monday in August, I had never taken any special notice of Pearl – at least not on any conscious level. But I began to wonder about her.

I wondered about her work as a house maid. Most of the lower-class white women in Rutledge would not condescend themselves to clean the toilets of folks they saw at church or filling up their cars at Tater's, and would instead take the hour drive to Myrtle Beach to tidy up after tourists in one of the many hotels. Did her son's role in the church humble her in ways that placed her above that kind of petty racial pride, or did it simply never occur to her that she ought to feel shame?

Given the circumstances, I wondered about her love life, too. Had she taken a lover in the twenty years since her husband was crushed to death by a backhoe in a construction accident? Maybe her discovery of my tape had been an accident, and the images she saw made her feel the weight of loneliness and had awakened some long dormant desire.

Whatever the case, I was no longer concerned about being exposed as a common pervert; now I simply wanted answers.

On Sundays, my parents and I went to church at Rutledge First Baptist, which was near the town line, just half a mile or so away from Larry's Adult Depot. The Sunday after my discovery, we attended as usual. Pastor Caldwell – a squat septuagenarian with dreary jowls – droned on for an hour about original sin, about our souls that were damned if we didn't shape up fast.

“Jesus is coming back real soon,” he said. Pastor Caldwell had a way of looking straight into the congregation that created the illusion that he was staring at each parishioner individually, like a portrait in a haunted house.

“Is your soul prepared? Will you ride to heaven in a fiery chariot like Elijah? Or will you be tossed into the pit of fire that can never be quenched? Won’t be nary a soul so kind as to even *spit* on you. Eternity is at stake. Think about that word: *eternity*. That’s a right long spell.”

The last sentence garnered a few nervous chuckles, a couple of hacking coughs.

By the end of the sermon, the furtive watch glancing and suppressed yawns inspired Pastor Caldwell to make some bland joke of apology, like a trigonometry teacher whose tortuous formulas had all been for our own good. The choir mournfully moaned the Doxology off key, and at last we were set free.

Someone driving by the church as we filed out to our cars would no doubt make note of our careful gaits, our slouched shoulders – like whipped dogs. After church, we would reward ourselves with half-off corndogs at Tater’s, and the general mood would improve.

Rutledge First Baptist was the oldest church in the county – built in the 1890s – and was framed by sturdy oaks. Underneath one of these oaks, I saw Pearl standing by her rusted Buick, speaking with Ricky.

She was wearing an old-fashioned calico dress and a white pill-box hat. She placed her hand on Ricky’s shoulder warmly and laughed about something. I realized then that I knew absolutely nothing about this woman – not the warmth of her character, the weight of her words, the sound of her laugh. All I knew was that she could make the kitchen linoleum sparkle, that there were never any stray creases in my shirts, and she

was a good singer. I'm sure we'd exchanged greetings before, but I could not recall what her regular voice sounded like.

Ricky saw me looking in their direction. He leaned over to his mother and whispered something in her ear, then started to walk over to me. Could he know? Might Pearl have told him what a sick, twisted deviant I must be – not merely watching smut, but *blasphemous* smut?

“How's it going, Chase?” he said, sticking out his hand for me to shake, his broad smile revealing small gapped teeth that reminded me of Chiclets.

“Well enough,” I said, taking his hand. He had one of those grips that crush just about every bone in your hand, like he thought a handshake was a test of otherworldly will.

“Hope I'll see you at youth group tonight.”

“Yeah, I'll be there.”

“Alright, then,” he said, making as if to walk off. But then something occurred to him and he turned back. “You know Jesus loves you right? No matter what you do, he always forgives.”

“Yeah, sure, I know that,” I said, my voice cracking.

Now what the hell did that mean? Was that his coy way of letting me know that he knew exactly what I was up to – blaspheming and lusting in my heart and spilling my seed upon the earth? On the other hand, what eighteen year old boy wasn't up to those things? Could've just been an educated guess, I thought. There was no way to know just then, but I was worried.

Later that evening, Donny and I were tossing a baseball in the First Baptist parking lot before youth group. Even though we'd just graduated high school, and youth group was technically organized for kids still in grade school, it wasn't unusual to stick in the group for an extra year or two. Young folks in Rutledge didn't tend to spread their wings and go off exploring the greater world.

Church was basically an all-day affair with a brief reprieve in the middle. Donny had on a gray wife-beater and a pair of khaki shorts that hug low on his narrow hips, his boxers exposed by a good three inches. Belts didn't help him either – like trying to choke a greased chicken neck. No matter how tightly he cinched his britches, they would always droop below his waist. I told him he'd probably be fine in sweatpants.

“Hell no,” he said, throwing the ball at me with a little extra umph. “The only people who wear sweats are folks who've thrown the towel in on life.”

“The downtrodden?” I asked, tossing the ball back in a lazy arch.

“Sure, them,” he said. “I ain't ready to give up just yet.”

“You know, I wear sweats when it's cold and I'm just watching TV or something.”

“Exactly,” said Donny, tossing the ball over his own head and catching it behind his back.

We tossed the ball in silence for a time. I considered telling Donny about Pearl and my suspicions, but for some reason I couldn't get it out. After a few minutes, we sat on the freshly mown grass beneath an ancient oak.

“Have you ever known anyone who enjoys going to church?” I asked him.

“Black folks seem to like it fine. They stay there all damn day. You can hear them singing a half mile away. Seems like they’re having fun to me.”

“True,” I said. “But they focus on heaven” – I didn’t know if this was true, but assumed it must be – “and we focus on hell. Who can enjoy that kind of talk?”

“Memaw seems to like it good enough. She’s always gung-ho to get us all out here, that’s for sure.”

“No, I mean really *enjoys* it – like they are going to eat a high-class steak dinner or something. Not running through the doors so Big Daddy up in the sky won’t strike you with lightning.”

Donny thought for a minute. “I can’t think of anyone off the top of my head.”

“Mom always tells me that going to church was the greatest joy in her life. But she always seems really tense when she says it.” I kept quiet for a minute, thinking.

“Remember that *Twilight Zone* episode with the little boy who could read minds? And all the people in the town were really tense around him, saying ‘it’s a real fine day’ and stuff like that to him. And he’d wish people off into the cornfield if they didn’t think happy thoughts. Or turn them into a jack-in-the-box or something. It’s like that with Mom.”

“I bet there’re white people who enjoy church somewhere,” said Donny, standing and brushing himself off.

“Probably,” I said, “but not around here.”

Ricky was just out of seminary. He was tall with a mass of curly dark hair – hair like Pearl’s, except hers was graying – and had a nice curve ball. He dressed like most of

the kids in our group – cargo shorts, American Eagle polo, flip-flops. Donny said men shouldn't be allowed to wear open-toed shoes because they don't generally attend properly to their feet like women, plus he said the male foot is just an all around ugly thing. It was hard to disagree with him looking at Ricky's calloused and cracked pair – hairy toe-knuckles, nails a quarter-inch thick.

Ricky was a friendly enough guy, kind of hard to dislike. He had visited my mom in the hospital a few months before when she had her appendix out. He said some real comforting things to her, said a nice prayer before leaving. He'd come around to the house every week or so, too, just to chat and see how we were.

Ricky would open the meeting with a prayer, a thanks to God for protecting us all week even though we did not deserve the privilege. I kept my eyes open during the prayer, judging the sincerity of each person by how tightly their eyes were clinched. I met eyes with Carson Taylor – broad shouldered guy with bad acne – and we both quickly looked down like we'd caught each other with peckers in hand. Ricky's eyes were clinched tightest of all, like he was constipated.

“Amen,” he said, his face relaxing, as if he'd finally expelled all the backed-up waste from his body.

Then he went into his lesson, this one centered on the thief redeemed by Jesus while each suffered on his respective cross. The theme of these lessons was always the same: we are all effectively thieves and murderers in need of God's sweet redemption. Merely *thinking* something impure was just as bad as actually doing that impure thing.

This seemed nutty to me – actions are what ought to count, I thought – but it was a central belief of the church.

That particular evening, the topic of conversation centered on how one should deal with the secular world and its teachings that often contradicted the Bible. Ricky told us that evolution was a lie straight from the pit of hell.

“What about the dinosaurs?” Donny said. “They’re supposed to be millions of years old. Where are they in the Bible?”

“God always looks to test our faith,” Ricky said. “Think about Job. God let Satan come in and take everything from him, including all his children. But Job would not be deceived. He would not abandon the Lord.”

“What’s that got to do with dinosaurs?” Donny said.

“Well, just like God allowed Satan to test Job, maybe this is a way to test our faith as well.”

Ricky stood up out of his chair, looked out at us with his hands turned upward.

“Are we going to believe what some scientists tell us about what they dug out of the ground? Or are we going to put our trust in God’s word?”

When he said “God’s word,” Ricky looked up, pointed skyward.

The rest of our group seemed inspired. Carson Taylor furrowed his brow and nodded his head affirmatively. Sara Perkins – pale and lovely in a flowered sundress – looked up beyond the tip of Ricky’s pointed fingers, as if she might see God Himself looking down from a smoky cloud rather than the cracked beige ceiling. Claude Denton

was staring at Ricky with slack-jawed wonder, unable to comprehend anyone putting stock in some scientist rather than the Lord Almighty.

Donny was unmoved. “If I got you right, what you’re saying is that God planted the bones in the ground to test us. Wouldn’t that be a lie?”

“God is not capable of sin, and therefore cannot lie.”

“But trying to trick people with fake bones would be a lie.”

“But God doesn’t want you to be deceived. He wants you to trust His word.”

So, they kind of went back and forth like this for a while. Donny was the sort of guy who wasn’t satisfied with taking someone at their word, including God.

I understood what Donny was driving at. It made us all look bad to deny things that were understood to be fact – all for the sake of clinging to a literal Biblical interpretation. It seemed so unnecessary. Why couldn’t one believe in both God and evolution? The Catholics got on board – why not us Southern evangelicals?

Still, it kind of annoyed me when Donny pulled this kind of stuff. If religion makes some people happy, why piss on it? They weren’t hurting anyone.

Also, I couldn’t help but sympathize with Ricky. It seemed possible to believe in both God and evolution, but it didn’t hold up for me. Evolution is a messy, brutal business – why would a benevolent God make that his method for expanding life on Earth? I supposed it was plausible enough for the jealous God of the Old Testament, but what about the God of the meek represented in the New Testament? What about the peacemaking Jesus? Plus, the idea that God created everything and let evolution take over

– I don't know. That kind of God sounds so remote from creation as to be irrelevant. If He can't or won't intervene in the world, why pray? Why believe in Him at all?

Next morning, I called in sick to work and hid out in the pine woods that flanked the far side of our house. I didn't want Pearl to know I was home, watching. Our nearer neighbor was a quarter mile down the road, so I wasn't worried about anyone else seeing me.

She showed up around 9:00 am, as usual, and let herself in the front door that Mom always left unlocked for her on Mondays.

I waited for a few minutes, then emerged from a thick tangle of brush. I went to the back end of the house – tip-toeing, although I realized this did nothing to enhance my invisibility – where I could look in the kitchen window. I squatted below the window frame and peered in.

I could see Pearl at the sink filling up the mop bucket. She was humming a tune I couldn't quite make out. I knew it would probably be awhile before she got around to vacuuming, but I decided to set up beneath my bedroom window and wait for the sound of my television going on. I'd left the tape in the module, so I would be assured of catching her in the act.

Of course, the question was what I would actually *do* when I caught her in the act. Would I tap on the window and give her the thumbs up in solidarity? Wag my finger at her disapprovingly, let her know she was in a fix? Maybe take her by surprise and ravage her on the bed?

For that matter, what sort of “act” would I be catching her in?

Later, I was startled awake by the whirring of the vacuum. Somehow, I had fallen asleep with my face mashed against the vinyl siding.

Slowly, I lifted myself onto my haunches and spied into the window. Pearl sat on the bed, the vacuum upright beside her. She was watching the television. The volume wasn't turned high enough for me to hear over the racket, and I couldn't make out what she was watching. Her face betrayed nothing – no pleasure, no disgust.

I watched for a few seconds, minutes. Finally, she let out a laugh, shook her head. Then, she got up and turned off the television and continued vacuuming out of the room.

I decided there was nothing to do but go on inside and get to the tape, see if she'd watched anything. I was going to just walk on in, pretend I got off work early. But as I rounded the corner I saw an old S-10 pulling into the driveway. It was Ricky's truck.

I decided to hang back. I didn't want to talk to that guy and get into anything spiritual, not with the ugly business I still had to attend to in my room. What was he doing here anyway?

I went back under the kitchen window. I heard Pearl let Ricky in.

“Thanks,” I heard Pearl say. Carefully, I peeked over the sill and saw Pearl set a paper plate covered with plastic wrap on the kitchen table. Quickly, I ducked back down.

“You did the right thing, calling me here,” he told her. “I'll take care of things.”

“What will you do?”

“Purify,” he said. “Cleanse the defiled thing from the world. Send it to God.”

“I don’t want to lose my job. What if they find out.”

Without song, her voice had the uncertain quiver of the old.

“The boy won’t say anything. He’ll be relieved, the burden of sin lifted.”

Now my stomach tightened, and I could no longer hear their voices.

I was in a fix. I thought about walking back up to Tater’s where I’d left my car, just get in and drive, put the whole thing behind me. After all, Ricky didn’t plan on telling anybody. I could just be shut of the whole thing.

But, for some reason, I wanted to see what Ricky had planned. How could he purify a VHS cassette tape? Maybe toss some holy water on it? But that seemed too Catholic. I knew whatever ritual he had in mind, it was something I needed to see.

Suddenly, I heard the side door open and shut. I ducked down behind an azalea bush. Ricky and Pearl walked past to the far edge of our property, near the spot in the pine woods where I’d hid earlier. Ricky had the tape in his hand, and there was something I couldn’t quite identify sticking out of his back pocket. Pearl was carrying a red gas can, probably gotten from the can of Ricky’s truck. Without speaking, they collected stray sticks and tossed them in a pile. After satisfying himself with the assemblage, Ricky held the tape up and looked to the sky.

“Lord,” he said, his voice a shout but somehow intimate. “Satan sent this evil thing to test the boy, and he gave into temptation. But I want you to forgive Him, Lord. Cleanse his spirit. As you take this evil out of the world, also take the evil out of the boy.”

Let him feel the sweet cleansing burn in his stomach, let him know that he is clean and forgiven.”

He tossed the tape on the wood pile. Then, he nodded to Pearl, who began pouring gasoline onto this makeshift altar. Ricky pulled the thing out of his back pocket – a butane lighter, it turned out – and set the mound ablaze.

It was strange to me that Ricky cared enough about my spirit that he was willing to put on this show. Shouldn't he have been visiting a hospital or something? And as I considered that, I suddenly felt sorry that I was going to let him down, that he was going to all this trouble for a lost cause.

As I took everything in, I started to feel something moving inside me. It wasn't some come-to-Jesus moment – there would be no Pauline conversion – but I did indeed feel some kind slow pleasing burn start in my stomach. And then I began to weep – loud weeping that Ricky and Pearl must have heard, but they did not turn around. The burn began radiating throughout my entire body and I had the feeling that the heat was shooting out of my nose and mouth and ears, and that maybe if I could step outside myself for just a moment I would be able to see all the bright hot ugliness leaving my body.

And then the feeling was gone. But I kept watch of Ricky's sacrifice long after they'd departed, stood right in front of the thing and felt the dying heat.

After the flames were spent, I watched big clouds of smoke rise into the air and then vanish, as if something invisible were breathing it all in.

CHAPTER V  
LIQUEFACTION

Wendell and I lounged in lawn chairs on his daddy's front porch, playing checkers and spitting sunflower seeds into a brass spittoon. His daddy used the spittoon for its God-intended purpose and made Wendell wash it out every evening. He would dump the dark, fetid juice in a ditch just behind the house, then squirt blue dish soap all around the inside and blast it clean with the green garden hose. His daddy didn't like us using the spittoon in such an unsanctioned manner, but his daddy wasn't around right now to stop us.

It was raining despite the visibility of the sun, and Wendell said this meant the devil was beating his wife. He thought that was hilarious even though it's just an old saying we probably first heard his daddy say sitting at his ankles in beshatted cloth diapers. It was one of those dry summer rains that somehow intensifies the heat. The way the yellow-orange glow of the sky mixed with the green-gold of the tobacco field across the highway made me think of a cantaloupe rind.

After a long stand-off, Wendell took my king and pumped his fist in triumph. Scooter, a shaggy dog of indeterminate breed, sat at attention and wagged his tail, as if he expected to benefit from the good fortune of his master. Indeed, Wendell scratched Scooter's ears with one hand while with the other he produced from his pocket a treat that resembled a small brown bone. He flicked it into the air with his thumb – like you might

a coin – and Scooter leapt to snatch it out of the air. This particular trick was evidently not Scooter’s forte, and the treat bounced off his nose and into the foundation garden below. Scooter scurried desperately into the bushes to hunt down his lost treasure. Wendell chuckled and shook his head in wonder.

Wendell wore brown work-boots crusted with dry mud, a blue work-shirt with his name stitched on the left breast pocket, blue pants stained in spots by motor oil. Donned the uniform of a working man, despite having been unemployed for five months. Got canned from the Quick-Lube when he forgot to replace the oil cap on a hatchback and ruined the engine.

“Hey, don’t worry about it, Kern,” he told me, clapping me on the back and fetching us each a cold Pabst from the foam cooler at the far end of the porch. “It’s a long day and there’s a lot of checkers to play.”

Wendell could really hackle me, his easy-going manner in the face of all strife. Wore the same clothes everyday like he expected at any moment a job would materialize right out of the goddamn ether, a job perfectly suited to his meager talents, a job he would be ready to assume at a moment’s notice. I asked him if he’d checked the want-ads lately.

“Nope,” he said, taking a relaxed pull from his beer. “I just keep my eyes and ears open. Something’ll turn up.”

I’d think how pathetic Wendell was, then have to remind myself that I wasn’t any better off. I’ve been on disability close to a year. One week from a year, in fact. Slipped a disk while bending under my desk to turn on the desktop at my workstation. When folks

found out I was injured on the job, they assumed I must have been working in construction or performing some other hardy labor. I never disabused them of their error. It's not exactly a prideful thing to go on disability as a Vault Custodian, which was the title of my job. Which was just a fancy way of saying I was a file clerk, tasked with creating mortgage files for completed loan docs, which I'd then store alphabetically in the electronic key-accessed Vault. Only *my* key could get you into the Vault, I was told, which I was supposed to take as a point of solemn pride. However, this clearly wasn't true, because files vanished all the time, and what would they do if I was out sick and a file was needed?

Anyway, the last disability check was due at the end of that week. The government had calculated that precisely one week from that day I would be able-bodied once again. Fit and ready to make my contribution to the economy. Thinking about it gave me chills, even though it was damn near a hundred.

When the rain stopped, I walked across the mostly grassless yard toward the asphalt driveway, skipping over mud-puddles, planning to fetch a fresh pack of sunflower seeds out of the glove box of my faded-blue Thunderbird. But my plans went awry when the ground started to shake beneath me.

At first I thought I was having a seizure, or maybe I had the spins from drinking in the heat, but then I turned and on the porch saw the checkers dance off the board. The spittoon capsized, splashed sludge and spent shells onto the steps. And suddenly I was standing in quicksand, the ground turned liquid beneath my feet.

Wendell looked at me with horror and tried to stand but was forced against his will into a dismount, did a little three-quarters summersault off the porch and into the boxwoods below. This proved fortunate for Wendell, as an instant later the porch ceiling collapsed. Poor Scooter cowered on a bed of pine-straw and whimpered pitifully.

There hadn't been a major earthquake around here since Charleston, 1886. Geologists had been telling us we were long overdue. Now, here we were, the reckoning upon us.

When the shaking stopped, the ground turned solid as before, as if the sensation of sinking had been part of some fever dream. But then I tried to move forward and couldn't budge, fixed to the spot. I peeked down and found myself buried crotch-deep in the soil.

I'd heard about this kind of thing. Soil liquefaction, it's called. Wet dirt loses strength and stiffness in response to a sudden change in stress conditions, causing the ground to behave like a liquid. I'd watched a documentary about Woolly Mammoths on cable. Archeologists dug up a herd that had apparently all died together, standing upright. There had been a lake or some kind of water source near the spot they were found. The scientists interviewed speculated that perhaps while taking their drink, an earthquake struck and the Mammoths sank into the mud deep enough so that they couldn't free their legs.

Just imagine that for a minute. At first, the predicament probably strikes the beasts as a mild nuisance. It doesn't hurt or anything – you just can't go anywhere. But then the hunger sets in; the desperate thrashing ensues. And then the realization that your herdmates can't help you because they're stuck too. The gradual, terrible recognition that

to be freed will require the occurrence of a miracle. And then the form of the miracle imagined deteriorates into a wish that some predator – a Saber-toothed tiger, maybe – might happen along and sink its sharp, efficient fangs into your jugular.

Wendell stand upright and fondled a nasty scrape on the side of his face. Scooter tentatively rose and sniffed the air for further danger.

“Hey,” I called to Wendell. “A little help here.” I was irritated at Wendell, as if the earthquake and my resultant predicament were somehow his doing.

“Chop, chop,” I shouted when he didn’t immediately respond, clapping my hands twice for good measure. Wendell scurried over, then took full measure of my situation. He scratched his head and circled around me, as if just the right angle might present a solution.

“Man,” he said. “How the hell could this have happened?”

“It’s geology,” I said. “Don’t think too hard about it. I don’t need you having an aneurysm or something.”

“What do you know about geology?”

“I’m college educated, asshole.”

“You got an associate’s from Tech, Mr. Big Scholar. Do they even offer geology?”

“Nevermind, just help me up, will you?”

Wendell bent into a squat and wrapped his arms around me in a bear hug, then tried to lift me out.

“Just cut it out,” I said, pushing him away. “That’s won’t work.”

“Well,” said Wendell, breathing hard, almost puckered out. “what do we do about it then, Mr. Smart Guy Geologist?”

“What do you mean ‘what do we do?’ I’m stuck in the goddamn mud! Take a guess.”

Wendell removed the Quick-Lube mesh-cap from his head and rubbed the sweat off his forehead with his sleeve.

“Well, we could wait till Daddy gets back with the truck. Tie you up to a winch and drag you out that way.”

I pinched the bridge of my nose and closed my eyes real hard.

“No, dumbass. Do I look like a plow to you? Go around back to the shed and get a goddamn shovel.”

Scooter had wandered over to the scene and sniffed the area where my legs were stuck. He looked at me askance, then scraped at the mud with his left paw.

“Atta, baby,” said Wendell, laughing. “Dig Uncle Kern out of there.”

“Will you go on and get the shovel,” I said, grabbing a handful of mud and slinging it at Wendell. “Stop messing around.”

I thought about the Mammoths again and wondered when annoyance turned to panic. There’d have been plenty to drink. Probably not much grub, though. Was it those first pangs of hunger? Or did they expect even then that they would be saved somehow, or at least nourished? Maybe they didn’t finally wish for death as I originally supposed. Maybe they expected a miracle right up until the end.

“Hey, Wendell,” I said as he’s trotting off to the shed. “Hold up a sec.”

Maybe I should have offered some sort of apology, told him that I didn't blame him for what's happened, told him that his blind faith in some grand cosmic plan was enviable, that I wished I were capable of such a thing. The reality is that, as much grief as I gave him about being unequated, at least being a mechanic is a skill. I mean, you could train a monkey to do what I once did – data entry, making file, filing away files. You probably wouldn't want to let a monkey change your oil or replace your alternator. I should have explained all this to Wendell. Instead, I reached into my pocket and tossed him my keys.

“Go into my car and open the glove box. I got a pack of David's in there.”

Wendell obeyed.

I started to get uncomfortable waiting for Wendell to come back with a shovel. Uncomfortable and bored. The heat seemed to have intensified in the fifteen minutes or so that I'd been stuck here, and dark half-moons formed under the pits of my chambray shirt. I was thirsty after a morning of drinking and being out so long in the heat, and my bladder had gone numb.

Gnats buzzed constantly about my face, trying to burrow into my ears and nose and eyes and mouth, any orifice the little bastards could find. After a while I gave up swatting at them. I never understood how Scooter could nap peacefully while those pests crawled and buzzed ceaselessly around his eye-sockets and beneath the flaps of his ears, but now I got it. Once you accepted that there was no relief to be had, you could pretend

nothing was being done to you, nothing at all. I stopped feeling the numbness in my bladder.

A handful of sunflower seeds puffed out my right cheek. To distract myself, I opened them one at a time with my tongue and teeth and spit the spent shells out at Scooter, who gave up trying to dig me free after only a few half-hearted scrapes. He refused to acknowledge my insult, rested on his haunches with stoic dignity.

Finally, Wendell emerged from around the corner of the house and trotted over empty-handed.

“Where the hell’s the shovel?”

“Can’t find it. It’s probably in the cab of Daddy’s truck. He used it last week to bury a dead cat. Probably never put it back.”

“Well, that’s just grand. What do you recommend we do?”

“I guess we’ll just have to wait for him to get back.”

“Or how about you drive your lazy ass into town and buy a shovel or bring back help or something, for chrissake. I gotta get out of here.”

“Now, Kern, you know my truck’s on blocks.”

“Take the Thunderbird then.”

“Kern, you know dang well I can’t drive a stick.”

He’s right. I did know that. Wendell was probably the only mechanic since Karl Benz who couldn’t handle a stick. When we were thirteen, his daddy would take us out to the parking lot at First Baptist and try to show us how it was done. I took to it pretty quickly, but for Wendell the dual tasks of depressing the clutch and shifting gears proved

as difficult as trying to pat his head and rub his belly at the same time. It's not that Wendell's dumb exactly, he just can't focus his mind on more than one task at a time. Maybe that's why his attitude is so laid back. When he plays checkers, he doesn't think beyond the checkerboard. When he's cracking sunflower seeds, he doesn't worry that he'll work like hell to get one stubborn sucker open, only to find it hollow. And, I don't know, maybe there's something to be said for that.

So, we waited. Wendell dug through the porch rubble and managed to find the checkerboard and most of the pieces. He was enraptured by this tiny miracle, and even I had to admit it was a welcome surprise. Wendell sat Indian-style in front of me and we played for hours, using loose pebbles for the few missing pieces.

The devil beat his wife off and on. We looked up into the dying light and opened our mouths and let our gullets fill. Scooter poked around in the boxwoods for his lost treat for a long time, then napped in the pine straw. We didn't speculate about where his daddy was, at least not aloud. For all we knew the earth might have opened up on his stretch of highway and he drove right into void.

"Don't worry," Wendell kept saying. "He'll be back shortly."

And, despite myself and all the time that's passed, I continue to believe him. I imagine Wendell's daddy pulling up in his Ram and asking us what the hell we're sitting around for. Even in my daydream he doesn't have a shovel, and so they tie a winch around my waste and drag me right out of the ground just as it starts to rain again. My legs are dead asleep and so I have to wait for the blood to get flowing again before I can

stand. Then I picture Wendell and his daddy helping me up and I take a couple of shaky steps forward, hoping that this time the ground will hold true.