

WHITESIDE ANNA E., M.F.A. *The House that Jack Built* (2009)
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The following thesis will serve as an exploration of a family in turmoil. In this work, I seek to discover what happens when a family, wrecked by the devastation of financial loss as well as spiritual loss, moves into a house that is crumbling at the foundation. Whether the characters are struggling to rid the house of the previous owner, possums, or alligators, they are all searching for a solution to life's greatest struggle: the inability of human beings to work together.

THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT

By

Anna E. Whiteside

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Committee Chair _____

Committee Members _____

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APERETIF

They were already ten minutes late for the Colson's party, but Emma would not get out of the car. "This lipstick is the wrong shade," she said. "It just won't do." She pulled down the mirror and tried to blot it off with a receipt. "Do you have a tissue?" She asked Jack. "I can't go in there with something this red on."

"No, I don't," he said. "I think you look fine." And he did. He really did. The lipstick was a little redder than the kind she usually wore, but it didn't make her look like a hooker or anything. Besides, there would be plenty of women at the party that'd make her look like a nun in comparison. Dale and Mimi Colson had come onto the social scene a year back when Dale had been promoted to vice president over at Artac, the local insurance company that had just gone global. Their parties were known for being often extravagant, usually boisterous, and always a little bit tacky. Jack and Emma had not been to one yet, Emma having only met Mimi at the club earlier that summer.

Jack's mother had been appalled that Jack and Emma would even *think* about going to this party. "Oh Jackie," she'd said, "I've heard the most terrible things about those parties. And those people sound perfectly vulgar. I just hate that so many of those types have been joining our circle lately. I don't see how they end up getting, you know, nice jobs, anyway. When nice people like you are having so much trouble. And how is the search going? Did you talk to Dad's friends over at the bank like I suggested?"

Jack changed the subject; he didn't like talking about how he had been unable to find a job when the mill his family had owned had closed, and certainly not with his mother. She liked to bring up that Jack had been a manager at the mill so why couldn't he get a job somewhere else?

So Jack had moved the conversation back to the Colson party. "That house, mother. 921 Stark Avenue. Did we know someone who used to live there? Did I maybe have a friend there growing up? Why is it so familiar?"

But she hadn't known anyone who'd lived on that street. She'd thought about it for a while and had tried to remember everybody in the neighborhood. "Oh well and then Martha Blanchard did live on that street – remember, you had her for Sunday School? But I suppose that was before her husband ran off – with another man!" She had reminisced like this for a while, and although she'd regaled Jack with an entire encyclopedia of scandal for that neighborhood, she could not remember who had lived in that house.

He had been there before, though. He was sure of it. As soon as he had seen the invitation in the mail, the address had struck a cord. Who lived there, he had wondered, and why do I feel like we should stay away? As they sat in the car, Jack craned his neck around his wife to look at the house. He felt nervous all evening, but being there now and still trying to figure out why this house bothered him so much made his palms go dry and his stomach prickle. The flowers and the lawn ornaments and the lighting were completely different, but he remembered this house.

It was not enormous, but it was still big enough to take up the entire corner. He guessed that it had been built sometime in the 1940s, maybe right after World War II. It did not look like it belonged in this town in Georgia—more like a house that should be in the middle of a moor in the English countryside. It had been made of river stones, probably from the big river flowing downhill from the neighborhood, the river that eventually would flow past the mill, its turbines now stilled.

A vine had overtaken one of the walls in a way that gave the entire place a feel of intentional wildness. A balcony stuck off the far left side, and Jack could make out a few potted plants that had been placed along its edge. A fern sat in the corner, its tendrils flowing from behind the railing like Rapunzel's hair. The master bedroom, he thought. But how do I know this? Nearly every inside light had been turned on, creating a garish effect rather than a glowing one, as though they were about to walk into a wake rather than a party.

“Have we been to this house before?” Jack asked Emma.

“I don't think so,” she said as she pulled out a new tube of lipstick – a different shade – and put it on over the old. The new color she'd tried was a rosey pink, and he could still see traces of the red lipstick. She looked more like a teenager who was still trying to figure out makeup- not bad exactly, but not sophisticated.

“Well,” she said and sighed and stuffed the lipstick back in her purse. “I guess this will just have to do. Remind me never to wear that shade again. Do I look completely trashy? Should I go somewhere and wash this off?”

“I think you like fine,” Jack said. He put his hand on her shoulder and leaned in to kiss her on the cheek, but as he was leaning to her she turned her face to open the door.

His lips went into her hair

“Come on,” she said. “We’re going to be late

When they walked into the foyer, he remembered everything. The carpet had been ripped out in favor of gleaming hardwood floors, and the room had been painted from yellow to beige, but he could still remember the way that carpet had left rub burns on his knees, and how they’d worried that they would leave it dirty. And then of course, there was the way that this foyer had no windows and no way for people outside to see them.

Directly ahead of them was the staircase. They had done it on that, too. That was what he remembered the most about this house, because that was when they had figured out that things like sex on the staircase were always harder than they appeared in movies. He noticed the rails and the way they were light grey, a color he hadn’t seen before on a railing. His palms began to sweat a little. It had been high school, years ago, but this was definitely one of the places where he and Linda Bradshaw, daughter of the Ken Bradshaw of Bradshaw realties, had screwed.

The summer he’d been here, the summer he’d been going with Linda, this house had been empty. Linda had a habit of stealing keys to houses her father was selling, and so they had done it in at least one house in each subdivision built during the late 1960s. This had been one of their favorite houses for about week. It hadn’t stayed on the market that long, or they would have kept coming back. They’d liked it because it was beautiful,

but also because they could make cocktails and pretend like they were successful adults in a fancy house. Like perfected versions of their parents.

“Is something wrong?” Emma asked him. He shook his head.

“No,” he said. “I thought I had been here before, but I was wrong.”

As they walked through the doorway to the living room, Jack surveyed the crowd for familiar faces. While he had seen a lot of these people before, he hadn't been properly introduced to most. He nodded to Bob Jordan and was about to cross the room to greet him when he noticed that he was standing next to Mandy Walsh, the realtor who had been helping Jack look for a new house. Of course, Jack thought. Mandy works for Bradshaw real estate. Bradshaw real estate probably bought this house when it went back on the market, and Mandy must have been the agent. Old Mr. Bradshaw didn't show up around the office much anymore, probably because he was too busy tending to Mrs. Bradshaw and her drinking problem. Though Jack and Linda hadn't ended on the best terms and though he hadn't seen her in years, Jack had still used Bradshaw real estate, partially out of trust and to be honest with himself, partially out of nostalgia.

Emma didn't know that they needed to move, not yet. He wanted to find a place so that he would have a sort of pleasant alternative when he broke the bad news that they simply did not have enough money for the mortgage. It had been hard finding things in their price range, but Mandy had been understanding. Jack turned his head so that Mandy wouldn't see him. Emma noticed this.

“Are you sure nothing's wrong?”

“Yeah, I’m fine. Just, there are more people here than I thought there would be.”

“Oh,” she said and waved a hand. “These parties have quite a reputation. We don’t have to stay long. Let me go find Mimi so I can introduce you to her, I’ll be right back.” And she was gone.

Jack glanced at Mandy to make sure she hadn’t seen him, and then he turned his face so that she would not. This could only end in disaster, he thought. And of course he should have known that something like this would happen. At the time, the logic of not telling Emma had been perfect. Their marriage had been on the rocks since before the mill closed, and it had only gotten worse. Emma would leave him if she knew, if she knew before had had a solution. And if they ran into Mandy, she would surely say something. He had not told Mandy that Emma was still in the dark about all of this. In fact, he always took pictures of the houses, saying that he would get them developed and show them to Emma. Still, there were enough people at this party that he might just be able to avoid her.

He heard a woman yell, “Oh, there you are!” and he turned around to see his wife approaching with Mimi Colson. Mimi had on a red dress so tight that if she’d been about three years younger and twenty pounds lighter, all of the men in the room would be flocking to her. She put her arm around Emma and squeezed her shoulder.

“Well I’ve met your darling wife – and let me tell you I just love this girl to bits – but I haven’t met you. I’m Mimi,” she said and held out her hand. Jack took it. The strength of her grip surprised him.

“Jack,” he said. “Though I guess Emma’s told you that.”

Mimi smiled a kind but condescending smile, not unlike a tiger, and said, “So your family is the Sinclairs- the Sinclair mill, right?”

“Was,” he said. “I mean are. Well, was.”

Mimi laughed when he said this. She looked over his shoulder and away from Emma, who had taken off her cardigan and was twisting it in one hand.

“Both,” Jack said, forcing a laugh. “What I mean is that I’m a Sinclair, but the mill has just recently gone out of business.”

“Oh yes, right, right,” Mimi said. “I do remember reading about in the paper. But I thought that you were just remodeling, you know. Or restructuring. I forget which is which sometimes.”

Jack shook his head and before he could speak Mimi said, “Well that’s just too bad. The whole community hurts when a local business goes under, I’m sure. But enough of that gloom and doom talk, can I get you something to drink? My husband is making cocktails and they’re simply wonderful. Wait right here a second and I’ll get you one.”

Jack turned to his wife and managed a smile. She looked down and studied a fingernail, not smiling back at him.

“I’m sorry about that,” she said. “We never talk about business or anything like that. I don’t know what that was about. Like I said, we don’t have to stay long. I can say the kids are sick or something.”

Jack nodded. This could be the easy way out. At the same time, he knew it could also piss Emma off and put her into one of those passive aggressive streaks where she would hardly talk to him for a week. No, they’d stay long enough so that Emma could

have a good time. If they left now, it would mean letting the situation win, and he couldn't do that. He looked across the room but did not see Mandy.

“We can stay a little while longer, but I might like to call it an early night, if you don't mind,” he said.

“Well,” Emma started, but they were interrupted by their hostesses' return.

“Now tell me if you don't like these and I'll take them away, but I think they are simply divine.”

“What is this again?” Emma asked.

“It's called a Old Fashioned, dear. It's an aperitif—I'm surprised you haven't had one,” Mimi said with the soft satisfaction of knowing something that someone else did not. Jack gripped his cup to keep from going on the defensive. While he wasn't new money, his wife definitely could be considered as such—not that either of them were exactly “money” anymore. Emma grew up over by the mill where her folks had worked for awhile before her dad got a job as a car mechanic and her mom went to night school to become a nurse. Emma was sweet and pretty enough that she fit into Jack's social world alright, but a lot of its elements like aperitifs and old gossip and debutante traditions still eluded her. Even after ten years, she still remained something of an outsider to this world, and although she would smile to cover it up, Jack knew that she hated not knowing things. It wasn't that they were necessarily important to her; he could tell she'd never envied the debutantes or wished that she'd been one. It was just the not knowing aspect that drove her crazy.

He smiled at Emma and Mimi and initiated a toast. “To the start of a lovely summer,” he said. Emma and Mimi returned the toast and they drank the old fashioned. The bitterness of what should have been a sweeter drink surprised Jack, and he stifled a cough. Emma, less subtle, gasped and patted her chest. Jack noticed that Mimi did not look surprised by either of their reactions.

“Excuse me,” Emma said. “I haven’t had one of these before – I hadn’t realized they were so strong.”

“I’m sorry, I should have warned you. Dale is Irish you know, just can’t abide a weak drink,” Mimi said through a sip.

“What’s in it?” Jack asked. He turned and looked at the glass.

“Ohhhh,” Mimi said and tossed her hair back. “That’s Dale’s little secret.” She winked at them and smiled with all her teeth.

“Hmm,” Jack nodded and took another sip. He was pretty sure he’d made this type of drink before, and that it wasn’t supposed to taste like this.

“It’s called an aperitif because it’s supposed to come before the meal and stimulate the appetite.”

“Oh how neat,” Emma said. “Like an appetizer?”

“Mhmmm,” Mimi nodded. Jack wondered if Emma picked up on it, that the women in this circle into which she’d been thrown took so much pleasure in all the things she didn’t know.

“It’s the least I could do,” Mimi said, “to wake up people’s appetites before this meal. I tried to cook. I don’t usually do a thing in the kitchen and I’m worried it may be a bit bad.”

“I’m sure it’ll be fine,” Emma said.

“Mhmm,” Jack murmured and took another sip. He didn’t want to continue the conversation. He needed to get away from Mimi, to get out of this room before Mandy spotted him and mentioned the house in front of Emma. Also, he wanted to walk around the house and just remember, for nostalgia or something like that. Linda wouldn’t be here – and even if she were, it wouldn’t be much of an issue. Emma didn’t know her, though they might have been introduced at a party or two. And Linda had been his girlfriend before Jack had even met Emma. It wasn’t like he’d left her for Emma or that Linda had been the other woman or there had been any sort of overlap. He had no reason to be nervous, he told himself, except for Mandy.

“Jack dear,” Mimi said, “Do you mind if I steal Emma away for a minute? I have some friends I’ve been just dying to introduce her to.”

“Sure,” Jack nodded. He smiled and squeezed Emma lightly on the arm. She gave him a tight-lipped smile before following Mimi, and he noticed that as she walked away, she brushed the place where he squeezed her.

He took another sip from the drink and walked back toward the stairwell. He traced a finger along a sharp edge of a grey railing and remembered how it had felt digging into his skin. He closed his eyes for a moment and then opened them and looked up the stairwell to the landing with the stain glass window. It was up there, he

remembered, that things had gone wrong, or rather, that he should have realized that things had gone wrong.

A hand on his shoulder startled him and he turned around. Jeff McCoy, a wormy man with a weird bald spot on the top of his head stood there, holding one of those terrible drinks to his smarmy grin

“So when’re they bringing out the buffet, Jackie Boy? These aperitifs must be doing the trick. I could eat a whole cow! How’s it going?” He slapped Jack’s palm before shaking his hand, a gesture Jack had always detested for its implied familiarity.

“Man,” Jeff said. “Hell of a party, right? You been to one of these before?”

“No,” Jack shook his head and stepped back toward the main room of the party. Jeff had a reputation for cornering people.

“Well they’re great people, you know, just real great people,” Jeff continued. “I work over at Artac with Dale. Man, what a champ. Say speaking of that, I ran into your Mom at the Publix the other day. Said you were back on the market and looking for a job? I heard about the mill, that’s a shame. Sinclair Mills, what a legacy. Anyway, back to your mom. I told her I’d see if there was anything at Artac and wouldn’t you know it but we’ve got an opening right in my department – we oversee all the actuarial shit, you know, that’s like the statistics that predicts when people are going to die. Pretty grim, but we don’t have to deal with much of that. The job is just an assistant type job, but you could work yourself up, right? Whaddaya say, just pop us over a resume and I bet we could get you in for an interview this week.”

“Huh,” Jack nodded. He loosened the death grip that he’d put on the drink when Jeff had mentioned his mother. Artec. Everytime he drove past that building, the city’s only skyscraper, a thick grey block sticking above the craftsman cottages and fifty year old drugstores, he felt himself tense up. It looked more like a prison than an office. His old office in the mill had been a corner office with a window overlooking the river. There would be no river view in this office, though if he had something up high enough, he’d be able to see the whole town. He had never pictured himself working at Artec, but again, he’d never pictured the mill closing. And this could be the way to save the house. If he got this job, then he could get a temporary loan from his mom. He could make things work. He could actually make things work.

Emma walked back into the living room and made eye contact with Jack. She had a plate of strawberries in her hand, and as he looked up she smiled at him. She really was beautiful. Things had been rough lately and they’d been fighting more, but this new job could make things easier. This was a woman who deserved someone who could make things work. He imagined himself in an office again. He would get a big picture of her and the kids and put it on his desk. They could even get a new picture taken of all of them.

“That sounds great, yeah,” Jack said. “I’d definitely like to look into that.”

“Great,” said Jeff, still looking wormy, but a little more pleasantly so. “Come find me before you leave so I can get you my card. They’re in my car. Man, it sure we be fun to have you on over there! Oh there’s the missus, better get back to her!” He patted Jack on the arm another time and slipped out of the foyer.

As he watched Jeff disappear into the crowd, Jack saw Emma break free from a conversation and walk towards him.

“Sorry about that,” she said. “Mimi’s friends are great, but man can they talk. What were you talking to Jeff McCoy about? I thought you didn’t like him that much. What is it you always call him, the ant?”

“The worm,” Jack said and smiled. “Actually, he might not be so bad after all. I think I may have gotten a lead on a job at Artec.”

“Jack,” she gasped. “That would be great. What kind of a job?”

“Well, he said it was a sort of an assistant job, but I could work my way up.”

“See, I told you you’d find something.” She grinned and kissed him on the cheek, something that Jack scratched up to the strong drinks. She certainly hadn’t been acting this way lately. As she pulled away, Jack thought he saw Mandy moving toward the foyer.

“Why don’t we go see if the buffet’s ready?” he suggested.

“Alright, they’re setting it up in the dining room.”

Jack turned to go through the sitting room and then stopped when Emma didn’t follow him. He turned around.

“Where are you going?” she said.

“To the dining room.”

“How do you know where it is?”

He shrugged. “Lucky guess,” he said as he passed the place where he had once held Linda up against the wall, dress pushed up past her waist, her eyes locked to him in that way that had always made him feel like soon, he would fall in love.

The Colson’s buffet had all the typical summertime fare: fruit in a carved watermelon boat, seafood salad, pesto pasta, fried chicken. True to Mimi’s promise, it didn’t look appetizing. They loaded up their plates, and Emma smiled at Mimi as they passed her.

“Looks great,” Emma said. Mimi rolled her eyes and fluttered her fingers in the air. She had another full glass in her hand, but instead of the pinkish aperitif, she had a glass of wine so red that Jack knew it would be on the carpet before the night was over.

“We’ll just see,” Mimi said. “We’ll just see.”

Emma wanted to go and sit outside, so they went out to the back deck. Jack looked up at the corner balcony, which was off the bathroom of the master bed. Jack knew this because that bathroom was where he and Linda had been caught. Of all the houses, this one had been on the market for the least amount of time. They’d only been using it for a week, yet this was the one where it all had come apart.

They’d been in the bathtub. They’d thought it would be nice to take a bath, but hadn’t realized that the water wouldn’t have been turned on. So they had gone ahead and done it on the cold, dry porcelain.

His back had been to the door so he saw Linda’s eyes go wide and then he heard a woman scream before he turned around and saw the couple standing there. Later on,

Jack and Linda would figure that the couple had probably come over with the same thing in mind. They would learn that the couple had just purchased the house, and that for reasons then unknown, Mr. Kensington kept several keys to the houses he was selling. At that moment though, these people were just intruders in what was supposed to be their private place, their own pretend home.

Jack remembered fumbling around for the clothes that he had thrown at the foot of the tub. Linda just sat there blinking, not even trying to cover herself. The woman stormed into the hall, but the man just stood there shaking his head and not really looking at them. It was not until Jack had pulled on his underwear and buttoned his jeans that Linda slinked from the tub and pulled Jack's shirt over her head. He remembered the way she coyly stepped into her underwear, staring at the man the entire time as though to say, "I dare you to tell my father." It wasn't until later that Jack realized that the stare actually meant to go ahead and tell her father because it didn't matter.

"I think this chicken may be worse than those drinks. What were they called again?" Emma asked.

Jack started to answer when the back door slid open and Mandy came out. Jack quit chewing the piece of melon and swallowed hard.

"Jack," Mandy said. "How great to see you here." She set her plate down at one of the tables and extended a hand to Emma. "And you must be Emma," she continued. "I've heard so much about you. Has Jack shown you the house yet?"

Emma looked at Jack and then at Mandy. “I’m sorry, I don’t…” she started, and Mandy cut her off.

“Oh gosh,” she said, “I’m sorry. I should have introduced myself. I’m Mandy Walsh –Jack’s real estate agent. I’ve been helping him look at houses.”

“Oh,” said Emma. “I see.”

Mandy turned to Jack. “Jack, I don’t want to tie y’all up talking about business and everything, but I think I’ve got a house that you might like to look at.” She turned back to Emma. “I’m sorry the search is going so slow,” she said. “But we’ll find something that you’ll like soon, I promise. Jack said you weren’t too crazy about the pictures he showed you of the last one?”

“Oh,” nodded Emma. “Right.”

Jack took a big gulp of his drink to avoid looking at Emma. Mandy had been nothing but nice to him, but he could just kill her right now.

“Anyway,” Mandy said. “All this talk about business just isn’t right for a party. By the way, those old fashioned were pretty terrible, right?” Emma nodded without looking up from her pesto.

“So Jack,” Mandy continued. “You know Mr. Bradshaw, right? I mean, your family and his family go way back?”

“Yeah,” Jack said. “They’re pretty old family friends.”

And this was why Jack’s mother had been furious when he’d broken up with Linda. She had seen it as a way for two old money families to marry together. It reminded Jack of ancient Europe and betrothals, and it would have been funny if it hadn’t

been him. Jack's mother just didn't get what was wrong with Linda. "That girl is pretty, and smart, and I just don't know that you'll be able to find better, Jack." All he'd said was that it just wasn't meant to be or that it just wasn't there or something like that.

But she didn't know what dinner was like at their house. How Linda's mother sat in the tub all day listening to Joni Mitchell albums and only got out when the maid announced that dinner was served. How her fingers were still pruny as she passed the rolls. How they endured Mr. Bradshaw's monologues about "the real problems in town," until finally Mr. Bradshaw got tired of talking about the lazy blacks and the socialist city government and the conversation faded away and the only sounds were the clicking of silverware and the ticking of the family's enormous antique grandfather clock.

And then there was the thing that had really done it. Toward the end of summer, after Jack and Linda had been caught, they walked in on Mr. Bradshaw with the high school principal. Jack and Linda had a key to a house – a different key and a different house- and they heard the noises as soon as they walked in. Linda said it was probably a burglar, but Jack looked around the corner and saw the moving mass on the living room floor. A car went by and he could still remember the way the headlights had perfectly illuminated Mr. Bradshaw's naked hairy back and the opaque panty hose clinging to Mrs. Kensington's ankle. Jack almost dropped the bottle of liquor in his hand. Linda had turned around and walked out the door.

He wanted to talk them to talk about it. He took her to the Dairy Queen and ordered them milkshakes. They sat out in the car. "Are you ok?" he'd asked. And then, when she didn't say anything, he'd said, "I'm so sorry."

“Don’t worry about, Jackie.” She licked the ice cream off of the cherry. She’d never cried, never even started to tear up.

“Are you telling your mom?” he asked. She shrugged. “I don’t know. What good would it do really?”

They dated for maybe a month after that, but that night was where it had ended. He’d held on for another month to see if she would show some sign of hurting or anguish. He would have even been ok with a drinking streak. But none of those things happened. She just went on as though nothing were wrong. Because to her, he realized, nothing really was wrong. She was just like everybody else in his parent’s world: pretty and perfect but dead inside. She didn’t even cry when he broke up with her. She just said in that tight lipped pinched up voice, “I think you’re making a mistake.”

The back door opened and Mandy’s husband Greg joined them. Greg and Jack had gone to high school together and had both played on the football team. They had never been close then and weren’t close now, but they still maintained the familiarity learned from bus rides and post game celebrations.

“How’s it going there, Jackie?” he said. “Been awhile since I’ve seen you. Sorry to hear about the mill – that’s too bad. But hey, I saw you rise up from some nasty tackles back in the day, so I know you can handle this one.” He tapped his drink to Jack’s and then took a sip. “And now Mandy says she’s helping you look for a new house, boy ain’t that something?”

Emma cleared her throat and bit her lip. Jack could see the muscles in her neck tense, and noticed that she had balled her napkin in her fist.

“Greg,” he said. “I don’t think you’ve met my wife. Emma, this is Greg. We went to high school together ”

“Oh, oh, sorry about that,” Greg said. “I remember hearing you’d gotten married Jack. Damn, it’s really been awhile, we should get together. You bowl? I’m in a bowling league, you should join us some time. But what am I saying? Pleased to meet you Mrs. Sinclair” He took Emma’s hand and shook it so hard that the half drunk old-fashioned in her hand spilled onto her dress.

“Oh,” she said, and tried to blot it with a napkin.

“Greg!” Mandy exclaimed. She touched Emma’s hand. “I am so sorry dear, you can’t give this one a drink without some mishap. Let me go get you a wet cloth or something.” She stood up and went into the house.

“Jesus, I’m a dumbass,” Greg said. “I’m so sorry about that. I hope it ain’t ruined or anything.”

“I’m sure it’ll come out,” Emma said, still looking down at the fabric, her voice soft. Jack tried to put his hand on her knee but she shifted so that he could not reach her.

He heard Mimi’s shrill laugh from inside, and he thought about how much he hated these people and he hated this world, and particularly, how much he hated that woman for inviting them.

“Anyway,” Greg said. “Obviously you know that Mandy’s working for Old Man Bradshaw – you know he and his wife are finally splitting up?”

“No,” Jack said. “That’s surprising.” And it was – couples in their circle didn’t usually divorce, they just held on and on until the end, like rabid foxes.

Greg shrugged. “Anyway, you know what else though? Linda’s engaged. Always thought it was weird that she’d never gotten married. A beautiful girl like her – oh sorry, is that a sore spot?”

Jack shook his head. He didn’t look at Emma, but he could see her turn her head to him.

“Who is Linda?” Emma asked.

Greg took another swig of his beer and set it down on the table. “You know Linda, she used to go with Jack. Oh shit, I guess you didn’t go to high school with us. Where’d you guys meet, anyway?”

“Church,” Emma quickly replied. She took a tiny sip of her drink.

Greg nodded, leaned back and looked across the back yard. “Real swell place,” he said. “I’d like to end up over in this neighborhood, sure. Here’s to dreams, right?” He tapped his glass to Jack’s empty one. “You need a refill?” he asked.

“I’m ok,” Jack said.

“No, no, no.” Greg said. “This is a party. And I’ve seen this boy drink!” He looked at Emma as he said this. “I’ll be right back.” He took Jack’s glass and went into the house.

Emma didn’t say anything, just kept poking the pasta with her fork.

“I’m sorry,” Jack said. “I need to explain.”

“Yes,” she said. “You do.”

“I was going to tell you- well it’s just I haven’t found a job. And the mortgage.”

“You think I hadn’t figured out something was wrong?” she said. “You think I don’t know that we were running low? That’s no excuse.”

“I just thought I could find something,” he said.

She shook her head and crossed her arms and looked away from him. “There’s just so much I don’t know. Like the house, and your friends, and this beautiful old girlfriend.”

“That was nothing,” he said. “That was a long time ago. Greg’s an idiot.”

She shook her head again and closed her eyes and pinched the bridge of her nose. “I don’t even feel like I know you, Jack.”

He put his arm around her back. He wanted to pull her up into a big hug, but there were people in front of the glass door.

“Look, it’s ok,” he said. “All this was before I ran into Jeff and talked to him about Artec. If I can swing that -and honey, I think I can -things are going to be ok.”

She looked at him and smiled a little, but not in the way that made her face light up. “It isn’t the house, Jack. That’s not it.”

The screen door opened and Mandy walked out onto the deck with a wet cloth in her hand. “I’m so sorry – it just took me ages to track down Mimi and find a rag. That woman sure is a social animal.” She handed the cloth to Emma, who half-heartedly dabbed at the dress. “Oh,” Mandy continued, “Greg said he’d be another minute with the drink. Dale insisted on mixing you another one.” She rolled her eyes and shook her head. From inside the house, they heard a loud crash and then laughter. “Oh these parties. But you learn to love them. Want me to see where Dale is with that drink?”

“No,” Jack said and took Emma’s hand. “I think we need to get going, anyway.”

Emma nodded and stood up.

“Well that’s too bad,” Mandy said. “It was nice to see you though, and nice to meet you, Emma. So sorry about the dress.”

“It’s ok,” Emma said.

As they walked through the house, now thick with cigarette smoke and sticky from spilled drink, he overheard a fragment of a conversation and what he thought was a familiar voice saying, “How different this place is than when we were younger. Just not at all how I’d thought it would turn out.” He looked over at the woman to see that she was not Linda, and heard her continue the conversation to realize that she’d been talking about the town and not the house.

Even after realizing his mistake, could not shake off the surge of adrenaline that had clenched his spine. He left in such a fog that they were at the car when he remembered that he needed to get Jeff’s card. Emma said she’d wait outside, so Jack opened the door for her and made sure she locked it.

“I’ll just be a minute,” he said before he headed back in.

Inside the house, Mimi had kicked her shoes off and was dancing on a chair. “Oh that Mimi,” he heard someone say. “What a crazy girl!”

He pushed his way through a group of women comparing their engagement rings, and then through a group of couples who were listing double date ideas. -“Oh honey, and we could go biking up at Calloway – Wouldn’t you just love it?”

He tried not to make eye contact, smiling and nodding so that he would not be roped into a conversation. He listened for Jeff's voice but could only hear the music on the stereo, the low rumble of conversation, and Mimi's laughter, screeching above the crowd.

He found Jeff smoking on the back deck with Dale. As Jack slid the screen door open, Jeff turned and raised his caterpillar eyebrows. He grinned.

"Oh hey there, Jackie," he said. "You've met Dale, right?"

"No, not yet," Jack said and extended his hand. "Jack Sinclair. My wife Emma is friends with Mimi..."

"Right, right." Dale said. "I think Mimi was telling me she'd met her at the club or something? Hard to keep up with all the old lady's friends. You know how that is."

Jack smiled and nodded, and then it hit him. No, he did not know how that was – he did not know at all.

"Jackie's the fellow I was telling you about for that assistant manager job," Jeff said. "You know, the guy who used to manage over at the mill that just closed?"

"Oh, ok," Dale said and smiled in a more relaxed, familiar sort of way. "Yeah, great. Look forward to seeing your resume. Jeff thinks you'd be great to have on down at the office, and if Jeff thinks so, well, I'm sure that means you're the man for the job." He winked and held the cigarette to his lips but then stopped. "You want one?" he said as he held the cigarette out.

“I was actually just on my way out, just stopped by to get Jeff’s card, but this has been quite a party, thanks.”

“Well it’s our pleasure,” Dale said. “Look forward to seeing you at the next one. And hey, you think you can get that resume into us on Monday? It doesn’t need to be much so don’t worry about going over it. Just be sure to have your managerial positions listed. Oh, and your degree, too.”

“Oh,” Jack said. “A degree?”

“Yeah,” Dale said. “You know, where you went to school. You look like a yellow jacket to me – you a Georgia Tech man?”

“Naw,” Jeff said. “You went to Berry, right?”

“Well, not exactly,” Jack started, but Jeff cut him off.

“What do you mean?” he said. “I thought you were up there when my sister was. Yeah, I remember you gave her a ride home once.”

“Yeah, I was up there,” he said. “I didn’t graduate.”

Jeff started laughing and slapped the drink down on the table. Some of it sloshed off of the side and ran onto his fingers. He licked it off and shook his head and laughed.

“That’s a good one Jackie,” he said. “Man, this one, what a joker!”

Dale pulled the cigarette from his lips and exhaled and joined in the laughter. Jack gave a chuckle that felt more like a choke. He smiled at both of them to keep from throwing up.

“So yeah man,” Dale said. “Where did you go?”

Still smiling, Jack shook his head. "I didn't." He cleared his throat and wished he had one of those cigarettes, and then said again, "I didn't graduate."

Jeff bit his lip and looked over at Dale. "Oh jeez Jack," Jeff said. "I think that's gonna be a problem."

Dale nodded. "Yeah," he said. "That's not going to work out. I'm sure you'd be great to have on, I really do. Jeff's said so many good things about you, and I'd hire you on in a minute if it were up to me. It's just that with Artec becoming a big corporation and all, they have certain qualifications that apply regardless of how much experience you have, you know. And it's just that well, you have to have a degree."

"I see," Jack said. He nodded slowly and pressed a hand against his pant leg. "Well," he continued, "that's just the way things work something. Thanks though, I appreciate you looking into it." He waved and nodded another time, then left.

He almost made it to the door before running into Mandy again. "Jack," she said, "I thought you'd gone."

"Just forgot something," he said and tried to smile.

"Again, I'm sorry about Greg and the spill. Your wife seems great."

"She is."

"I'll see you about that new house sometime next week?"

"Sure."

He closed the door and the noises from the party faded but did not go away entirely. Instead, the laughter and the music fought with the noise of the crickets and cicadas. By the time he crossed the lawn to the car, the chirping had taken over entirely.

As he opened the car door and sat down, he apologized to Emma.

“It’s ok,” she said. “Did you get the information?”

“Yes.” He cranked up the car. He could tell her later, something about how they’d had to eliminate the position or to hire a woman or a minority – something. It wouldn’t be a permanent lie, just a holdover. Tonight needed to end ok.

When they got home, the babysitter had put the kids to bed. Emma went to go look in on them while Jack wrote the babysitter a check. He tried to think about how much money he had in the account and if it would bounce, and the babysitter went on about everything that kids had done that night. –“And then Holly Ann read this book and sang to Baby Boo, and Baby Boo didn’t like the carrot baby food but he liked the peaches, which is weird because he usually likes the carrots but I guess baby’s change sometimes. Oh Mr.Sinclair, they are just so precious and wonderful and I just hope my kids are like them and...” He nodded and tried to add up sums and then finally decided that it was fine. He handed her the check and she thanked him and left.

Emma came back downstairs. “They’re sleeping,” she said. “And I’m ready for bed, too.

“I’ll be up in a minute.” He wanted to go balance that checkbook. He should have done that a long time ago.

“I love you,” she said. She did not smile, but he knew that she meant it.

“I love you too.”

As he sat down with the checkbook, he had trouble concentrating, as though the babysitter were still there, prattling on in the background. Emma was beautiful. Emma didn't deserve to have married someone who would fall apart on her. If he had known that he would self-destruct, would he have married her? Or would he have married someone who could take care of herself— even if that someone was not a woman he could ever love. He thought about Linda. Of all the houses for a party, it had to be that one.

The last time he'd seen Linda had been about ten years ago, two years after they'd broken up, at the seasonal debutante ball. He and Emma had been dating for a year though his mother refused to acknowledge it, introducing Emma to everyone as "Jack's friend." Several times that evening he'd looked across the room to see his mother shooting firey look at Emma or looking longingly at Linda. Emma had borrowed a dress from a friend and it had been too big. She looked like a scullery maid dressed up for the ball, or Cinderella gone wrong. Linda had made her coming out that night and wore an enormous white dress – not like the bride on the top of the wedding cake, but like the wedding cake itself. A Cinderella overdrawn.

He had tried to avoid her, had in fact been avoiding her since the break-up four years earlier. The most contact he had was with her cousins, the Robinsons, who would show up every now and then and pee on his truck or leave dead squirrels on the hood. Jack hadn't figured out why they were so mad until the night they drove away, shooting bb pellets into the sky and yelling, "Fuck with our cousin and die!" It came out later that

Linda had contrived a story in which Jack had left her on the side of Macon road the night he'd broken up with her, a story that followed him for many years after.

The Robinson brothers had on their tuxes at evening of Linda's ball, but they still had the same deranged and disgruntled looks on their faces. From time to time Leroy Robinson would catch Jack's eye and then look at Emma and lick his lips, or Bobby Robinson would walk by and kick him in the shins. When Linda finally cornered Jack over by the men's room, he figured that they would show up any minute with their rifles and sling blades.

"So I hear you're here with that girl," Linda said. Emma had run into a friend from church and had separated from him for the first time that night. Jack realized that Linda had been watching him like a homing beacon.

"Yes, I am. How are you Linda?" He tried to be cool, but he knew that any minute Emma or the Robinsons might come walking up, and he didn't know what would be worse.

"Great, can't you tell," she said and tried to swish the skirt with one hand. The material was too stiff to allow for much of a swish, and she looked like she might tear it. Her voice had that same edge but tonight, she had pushed it up a notch.

"That's good." He nodded. A peal of laughter erupted over her shoulder, and he saw Mrs. Bradshaw holding her martini glass at a dangerous angle and talking to some old dowager. "Your mother seems to be doing well," he added, trying to be sincere.

Linda rolled her eyes and looked back at her mother. "What a fool, really," she said. "She's a minute away from lying down in the punch bowl. And dad's probably

already feeling up some girl's skirt. They disgust me." Jack looked down at his shoes. When he looked back up, he could see Emma over by the refreshments. The dress was still big and cheap, but he thought she was the most beautiful girl in the room. Linda followed his eye contact and rolled her eyes not hatefully but more sympathetically, like a sigh.

"I guess I can't blame you for running away from me. I guess you wanted someone you didn't need to take care of, you know someone simpler." And the way she said *simpler* made his ears start to burn and his neck start to sweat and it took all he could not to reach past the layers of cloth and strangle her. All he said though, was that Emma was a nice girl.

Linda nodded again. "I'm sure. We didn't go to high school with her, I guess she's not from around the neighborhood."

"Nope."

Linda paused long enough to take a sip of her champagne and then stared straight up at Jack, just like she'd looked at that man the night they'd been caught.

"I never needed taking care of, Jackie. I'm the most goddamn self sufficient person you know." And it was that look- eyes wide and her mouth so tight it looked like her lips might fall off- the same look she'd given that night they'd been caught when she'd said, "Didn't you figure we'd be caught eventually? It's statistics, or something,"- that he knew she'd known all along about her father. Mr. Bradshaw had been nothing but a pawn. Linda had known about that affair, and it only mattered to her in that she had then been able to blackmail her father. Jack could see in the way that the lines had

already started to form around her mouth that had he stayed with Linda, he would have become that pawn, too. And though they hadn't been dating for even a year, he'd proposed to Emma that night.

“But I don't even have a ring,” he'd said. “I don't have anything. Why would you say yes?”

“Because you will,” she said. “Because I believe in you.”

THE HOUSE THAT JACK BUILT

Jack sat in his car at the bottom of the driveway and looked up at the once blue, now grey house. This is the house that Jack built, he thought. But Jack did not build this house. Being here without the realtor was different, like the minute you turn around in your kindergarten classroom and realize that your mother has left. A November wind blew, and he noticed shingles flapping. It would be a quick fix. Really, it would. He opened the car door to a chorus of pines whining all out of tune and miserable. He looked up into the mesh of leaveless limbs – the last of the pine forests in southern Georgia, dying out not just here but across the entire state.

The mailbox jutted into the ground at an angle, its red flag broken off halfway. He would need to paint their last name on it soon, and the thought sickened him. Over the past few months, he had tired of seeing “Sinclair.” It had been everywhere-on page seventeen of the contract that had just sold away the old house, on page six of the contract that had just bought this one, on business cards, on resumes, and of course in the headline of last month’s Ledger article, “Sinclair Mills To Close After 100 Years.”

Jack climbed the steep driveway, fumbling in his pocket for the key and stepping over potholes. He imagined his wife and kids pulling up this driveway in the old minivan, jolting around like rocks in a can. But there would be a new house soon, and a new job, and a new car, and a new driveway. Maybe they could build a house in one of those subdivisions up north of town. A guy in Sunday School just had - they’d been to a party

out at his place the other week. Emma had never said she liked it, just that the windows lit up the room so nice and that the countertops were lovely, and that the kitchen had so much space. About this new house, their new house, she had said none of these things, just - "Well, we can fix it up. It can be a project."

He turned the key in the lock and felt a metallic crunch. Yes, he thought, a project indeed. The screen door caught in the air and hung behind him until he pulled it to. He smelled mildew and wondered why he hadn't noticed this before. He crossed the room to look out into the backyard. He remembered that he liked the yard – it was big and there was a deck and lots of trees. Today though, it looked smaller than usual. The sunlight filtering through the trees illuminated patches of dead grass, and the deck looked as though it might disintegrate beneath the weight of his two small children. Had he really thought they could have a barbeque out here as a move in party? Had he really thought they would need a party? Jesus.

But Emma had said this house was ok. She had said they would make it work. "And maybe this will be fun, you know, getting to make this place beautiful." Jack flipped the light switch and a weak light struggled to fill the room. He looked up at the fluorescent panel light and realized that it was dim not because a bulb was out, but because it had become a graveyard for about fifty cockroaches. He cut off the light and decided that the kitchen was a completely useless room, anyway.

In the dining room, however, the light straining through the pines in the front yard cast an almost elegant, lace-like shadow. He imagined evening dinners with this light flickering across the room. The light disappeared by the time Jack stepped through the

open doorway though, and all he could notice was that beige carpet. He had never lived in a house with carpet. This carpet, not a sophisticated or refined brown but rather a brown the color of dog shit, hadn't really been a problem until Emma came to look at the house. She fluttered her eyelashes and tightened her lips like she did when the kids were too loud or whenever he had that one extra beer. She looked down at the carpet beneath her loafers, carpet the color of gravy gone bad, nodded, and said, "Well fine, it's a fine house. It's just a year. It'll be ok."

He'd wanted to remind her that he was still providing for her, just not as much as he'd wanted. But that would just be another fight and another night spent on the sofa, and that's when it had crept into his mind for the first time that maybe if things were going to end between them, then this move could actually end up being good. After all, it would be easier to divide the assets on a worthless piece of property. And then he'd gotten so mad at himself for thinking those things that when Holly Ann had asked him to read her a bed-time story, he just shook his head and left the room.

The thought of things ending between them was an unspoken possibility and had been for a while. From the way he sometimes felt Emma tense up when he put his arm around her, he knew that she knew. And it hadn't been the lost job and it hadn't been the second child. It had been a difference in them. Jack couldn't even put a finger on what that difference was or how it had come about; it was just there. A guy on the radio the other day had said marriages break up because each person wants something different. Jack didn't even know what he wanted, let alone what Emma wanted. He didn't even really know what that guy had meant. What kinds of things? New cars? More friends? A

winning lottery ticket? He almost lost himself until he felt the tape measure in his pocket and looked at the naked dining room windows and remembered something Emma wanted.

She wanted yellow curtains in the kitchen, and peach in the dining room, and green in the living room. Jack had hoped that they could just use the curtains they already had, but she had not wanted that.

“New house, new curtains,” she said. Southern Living had had a great article about the aesthetic value of curtains, and didn’t he agree that that was just what the house needed, aesthetic value? And though Emma seldom reminded him of his mother, in this she was almost identical. His mother, though, would have never made her own curtains. She had never sewn an outfit for him or any of his siblings, and he only had one memory of a home cooked meal, a chicken divan casserole so badly charred that it tasted like eating a campfire.

Jack pulled the tape measure out of his pocket and took it to the window facing the driveway. Jack’s mother would have just screamed about that driveway, or the dead trees, or the deck, or the roaches in the light fixture. He could hear her now – “What a mess, merciful heavens!” Jack’s mother would not have sent her husband over to their new house to measure windows, though; she would have hired someone. Actually, she had never moved during Jack’s lifetime, and he imagined she would never move except to the grave. Their home, Holly Oaks, had been in the family since before the Civil War. There had never been any kind of mortgage or worry other than the upkeep, and so even though they’d fallen on hard times the Sinclairs still managed to keep their head above

water. Well, the original Sinclairs. Not the Sinclair family he'd started.

He pulled the tape measure from the pocket of his jeans, and the lip of the tape caught on the cuff of his pocket. As he reached back to untangle the metal from the denim, he noticed a small hole beginning to form in the jeans he hadn't owned for over a month. He had gotten them from the mill. They were supposed to be a nice pair.

He strained to look and could see that the hole was beginning not where the threads fastened the pocket to the jeans, but in a spot just above, where the denim would have worn down from sitting and standing. The fault had not been in the stitching, done in a factory up in Saratoga, New York, but rather in the denim made in his mill. What had been his mill. How many bolts of such faulty denim had been made in the room just below his office? They'd thought they were doing everything right. They bought new machines and researched them, invested in what was supposed to be real fine equipment. But the equipment hadn't been good enough, and they hadn't noticed until it was too late. The whirring and buzzing of the machines had just lulled them into some kind of dream that everything was great. He'd been a manager, someone who should have noticed, and he'd let it all just go to waste.

He wrote down the measurement and ran his hand along a place where the wallpaper bubbled. Water damage? Leak? No, he knew no more about houses than he did about mill machinery. He should have asked his older brother to come out and look at it like his mother had insisted. "Jackie, just call Ed and he'll come out," his mother had said with a laugh that fell flat, someone spilling change all over old linoleum. "You know you don't really know much about that kind of stuff. There's nothing wrong with that."

But of course, there had been everything in the world wrong with that, and his mother, sipping her midmorning mimosa knew that. Although she hadn't said it to be mean, it was the way she felt that he would not understand its meanness that made it so cruel. Like the way she had always said that he was her sweet, "uncomplicated" Jackie. Like the way she'd said that the two years he spent at college were "admirable," but then, when the classes had gotten harder and there was the semester without a passed course, there had been, "Really Jackie dear, with charm like yours, why do you need so much education? You inherited that from me, dear. And everyone likes you. And anyway, I bet Daddy could use some extra help around the mill."

He eyed the window parallel to this one and figured they were about the same but measured it anyway. It would be just his luck to make an oversight on something like that. He had learned better than to assume that things would be ok, that things that seemed like they were fine, his marriage, the mill, his life as he knew it, were really just poised to fall apart. He fit the lip of the tape to one end of the window and pulled out – the same.

He walked into the living room and looked at all the empty space. This wasn't so bad. Emma was right. It would be ok. He rested his hand on the fireplace – a fake fireplace, just for looks- and began planning where furniture would go. A sofa in front of the front window, the TV in the corner, at an angle. For the first time that day, he smiled. They could fix this up, and it would even be charming. His eyes brushed over a place in the corner of the wall where the paint flecked off, and he looked away. All of these, easy fixes. He thought that he heard a noise, some kind of thud or crackle, and he looked out

the window at the pines. A branch must have cracked, he decided. Great. How fitting for a tree to fall and hit the house at this moment. Better for Emma and the kids though, if they could get a lawsuit out of it.

Jack walked into the hall and turned in the first room on the left- the light pink room that would be his daughter's. The sky outside had gone blue with the final stages of evening. Soon, the world would melt into night. Jack knew he should head home, but something about the peace of the empty house in the evening compelled him to stay. He had already found enough good things to count on one hand, and that was something.

But then he saw the roach crawl from one pink corner to another. He checked the windows for cracks and discovered one right in the corner of the frame. Not only was the crack big enough for a roach to crawl in, but it was certainly big enough for something like a mouse to squeeze through, as well. He sat down with his back to the wall and watched as the roach crept all along the room and then went back through the crack. He closed his eyes and clenched them so hard into his skull that millions of fireworks went off between his eye and the lid. Surely, someone had popped a blood vessel like this. How perfect, that he would die in an empty house.

Off in the distance, he could hear the familiar opening chords of Jeopardy. 6 o'clock. His eyes sprung open. He had held his eyes closed long enough for the room to plunge a shade closer to the evening darkness. Outside of one of the windows, a bug zapper glowed. Jack hadn't realized that the house included this extra perk- a bug killing machine right outside his daughter's room. He could picture her waking up from a nightmare late at night just to watch a bug fly into the zapper and explode all over her

window. He closed his eyes again and put his fist in his mouth. He had done this moving thing before. He could handle this. He just needed to breath.

And then, just as he thought he could taste the blood from his knuckles, he heard a loud beeping followed by a crackle like snapping veins, like a blood vessel in his head had indeed exploded, killing him instantly. His eyes flew open – so, not dead, he thought. He thought he could hear the sound coming from the room next door, the room that he and Emma would share. He went into the hallway and noticed that this door was closed. He thought for a moment about the best and most menacing way to wield his only weapons –the tape measure and the notepad -and then he charged into the room.

A fat man in a ratty t-shirt and dickies sat at a card table with his back to Jack, flipping the dials on a ham radio. Of course, Jack thought. Those beeps, why didn't I think of this. Loud static shot through the airways, interspersed with a few Spanish phrases. A stack of paper sat next to the table and loose pages had been scattered across the room.

“Hey,” Jack yelled over the static. “What are you doing here?”

“Shit,” the man said, and he frantically began to gather up his papers. He was short and fat and balding, though Jack judged him to be his own age, about thirty-five. His shirt depicted a large fish jumping into the air, and the lettering above it read “Big Bass Championship 1992.”

“What's the deal - what are you doing here?” Jack repeated, unable to think of anything else to say.

“Jeez, I know man, I’m sorry. I know I’d be pissed to if I was you. Let me just get this stuff together -I can explain.” And then the man lunged around the room, making dramatic sweeping movements with his arms in an effort to collect all the papers, though he only succeeded in scattering them more. If Jack hadn’t been so pissed off, he might have laughed. The man had on huge, very white tennis shoes that he kept tripping over. The ham radio crackled loudly and someone’s voice came across, the only intelligible word – “fiesta!” This startled the man, who jumped back and dropped all the papers back onto the floor. He looked down at them for a moment before dropping to his knees to recollect them.

“Fuck,” he said. “Fuck, fuck, fuck. I knew they’d be sending a contractor over here, but I didn’t know it would be this soon. I guess I just lost track of the days.”

Jack picked up a stray piece of paper that had blown onto his left foot. It was a manuscript of some sort, covered with unintelligible scribbling and loopy cursive handwriting. Jack could make out a few words: “blood,” and “murder,” and then the entire phrase, “it all ends here.” Jack began backing to the door, his eyes searching for weapon shaped bulges in the man’s pants. The man looked up at him and noticed the piece of paper in Jack’s hands.

“Oh jeez,” the man said. “Don’t read that. It ain’t nearly finished. That’s what I’m doing in here, trying to get that finished so I can get it into my publisher. I’m working on a crime novel, see. I think it’s going to be a hit.”

Jack stopped in the doorway. Great, he thought, this guy has a “publisher,” too. At the same time, Jack hadn’t been able to make out any weapons, so repeated himself.

“What are you doing here? You need to get out.” And to show his seriousness in expediting the process, he marched over to the radio and began to pull chords apart, trying to find the ones that would silence it.

“I know, I know,” said the guy. “Let me just get these papers – like I said, I’m trying to get them in to my publisher. I’m late on a deadline already.” He stopped and said, “Hey, I’ve seen your face before. I know you. How do I know you?”

“I don’t know,” said Jack as he tried to unplug the radio.

“You ever go to McGee’s TVs for your repairs? That’s where I used to work.” The ham radio crackled again and interrupted him. “Shit,” he said. “I gotta pack that up to. Do you mind giving me a few minutes?”

“Yep, already on it.” Jack said as he finally pulled a chord that cut the static and plunged the room into silence. “You just need to get out.”

“I don’t know,” the guy said. “Do you know much about ham radios? You might break it.”

Jack put his palm to his forehead and closed his eyes. “I think that that’s beside the point,” he said. “The main thing is, you don’t need to be in my house.”

“Your house?” the guy said. “Shit. You poor bastard.”

“What?”

“Let me explain,” said the man. “Name’s Martin. I used to live here. I made a copy of the key, which is how come I’m back. I know that damn realtor is lazy enough not to ever change out any locks, and they sure won’t be coming by for many repairs!” He started laughing when he said this. “Man,” he continued, “am I glad I don’t live here

anymore. Me and the family got out about a year ago, you know, when I got the advance for this book that I'm putting out. Which is why I'm so worried about getting the papers together. But you ain't interested in all that so anyway- this house is just a real shithole man, you got to get out."

Jack shook his head. "It looks fine to me," he said. "And anyway, if it's such a shithole, what are you still doing in here? You haven't explained that."

"I know, I know," said Martin. "It's just this book. I have to come here to finish it. See, my wife still thinks I work over at the TV repair store where I was working before I had this deal. She just wouldn't understand. Martin, she'd say, writing some murder mystery book ain't no real job. You gotta be out there doing something that'll make us some serious steady income. What she don't understand is that this book could be huge, my publisher says. I found him on the internet, see. He puts out paperbacks – he ain't no big deal yet, but he even thinks I can make a series out of it. Like that Mary Higgins Clark bitch. Now, I'm not going to count my chickens before they hatch, but I think I've really got a chance for us to be rich."

"Ok, well, have you thought about the public library? I hear they're great places for getting things done." He rolled his eyes and shook his head. "Do you want me to carry this to your car?" He looked down at the ham radio set, still mostly in pieces on the floor.

"Now hold on just a minute," Martin said. "I didn't even get your name."

"Jack. Ok, I'm putting this out on the street, then."

“Listen Jack, I know I shouldn’t be in here, and I know you probably think it’s pretty weird and I guess maybe it is, but I think there are some things about this house that you need to hear. Think of it as a favor. Did you even have anyone out to look at this place?” He asked in an incredulous tone, fat arms gesturing wildly in the air. As he did this, the few pages he’d managed to gather flew from his hands and onto the floor. “I mean seriously? They did some real surface work around here, but the floor’s just about to rot out. Everyone around here knows that the houses in this neighborhood were just entirely built wrong. And I don’t mean to insult you when I say this, but what were you thinking?”

“Well I’m not from around here,” Jack said as he got down on the floor and began to pick up all the pages that Martin had spilled. Martin stood up like he was going to stop Jack, but Jack waved him away. “No, I’m getting these up for you,” he said. “I know this house fine. You just need to go.”

“Oh now don’t be getting mad at me,” Martin said. “I didn’t mean anything by it. I really am just trying to help you, you know? You’re not from around here so you didn’t know any better. That’s fine, and I’m sad for you. These realtors sure are sticky fellows.”

Jack kept collecting the papers and didn’t look up. The company he’d used, Bradshaw properties, had been owned by an old friend of the family. Old man Bradshaw hadn’t helped him pick out this house, but the realtor was married to one of Jack’s high school buddies, so he’d trusted her. “This is a really great deal on a cute little house,” she’d said over and over again, until he had shown Emma and she had said ok and they had signed the documents.

“Where are you from, anyway?” Martin asked as he gathered the last odds and ends of the radio into a thin looking cardboard box. “You from Atlanta or something?”

“No, I live in town, just another neighborhood. Peacock Heights.”

Martin nodded slowly and then started laughing his harsh, strident laugh again. “Shit,” He whistled between the gap in his front teeth. “That’s some real pricy property up there,” he continued. “That’s sorta like where I’d like to move, you know, once I really get this book underway. I guess you’re having some bad times, huh?”

Jack stood up and handed Martin some of the papers, then bent down to collect more. Martin flipped through them as though to see whether they were in order and then shuffled them around.

“I’m sorry,” Martin said. “I know I keep getting off track, but I need to tell you about this house and what’s the matter with it. Seriously now, have you had a contractor over to look at it?”

“Of course. I know better than to buy a house without doing that. This isn’t the first house I’ve bought.”

Martin shook his head emphatically. “That’s not what I mean. I mean, have you gotten someone out that isn’t one of the Bradshaw’s cronies?”

Jack stopped picking up the papers and looked out the window into the backyard, where he noticed a massive limb had just fallen. The contractor he had used had not been the guy his brother had recommended, the one his brother had always used and swore by, but rather, someone that Mandy had suggested.

“That’s what I thought,” Martin said and shook his head. “Jesus. I felt bad selling back to them, I really did. But frankly, they’re the only realtors in town crooked enough to make a decent offer on a shit-show like this. And I sure couldn’t sell this myself either, no sir-ee. Back when I bought this, the Bradshaws recommended someone to come out and look at stuff for me. Don’t remember his name, but he seemed nice enough, and like he knew what he was doing. People told me later that that was a stupid mistake, listening to the realtor, but what did I know?”

Jack pushed the papers together and cleared his throat. “So what’s the deal,” he asked. “Other than the floor being rotten. What else is wrong?”

Martin shook his head. “Well, for starters, there are holes all over this place. It’s drafty, poorly insulated, and bugs and stuff are always getting in. But that’s really just minor compared to the floor.”

Jack looked down at the ground he stood on, the fake ground above real ground. He thought about the rats and possums and worse that could be beneath these floor, and he imagined his family falling through the cracks.

“See,” Martin said, “I have this theory. There’re weird things going on in this neighborhood, man. I mean weird. There’s folks down the street got a mold problem, and there’s some other folks had some sort of fire start out, and of course there’s been flooding and rotten floorboards. And guess where the problem is.”

Jack shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “What?”

Martin stood up, motioned for Jack to follow him to a place by the window, and then crouched down to point to a place on the wall. “What would you say is the cause of this crack right here?” he asked Jack.

Jack had not noticed this crack before, and he stepped toward it to get a better look. Sure enough, a line led from the bottom of the window to the floor, starting off thick and tapering to razor thin. Jack shrugged. “I don’t know,” he said. “Doesn’t look good, though.”

Martin coughed onto the wall, spraying droplets of spit across the beige paint. He pressed his grimy fingers onto that place as he pulled himself up. Jack stared at the smudges.

“It’s the air conditioner!” Martin exclaimed, and he swept his arm into a wide gesture. The half of the manuscript in his hands scattered across the floor.

“Shit,” he said as he knelt down to gather it up again. Jack turned away and looked out the window to the air conditioning unit. It looked perfectly normal to him, though he didn’t know that much about these. He looked back down at Martin, who was crawling across the floor, reaching for papers with one hand and pulling his pants up with the other.

“So what’s wrong with it,” Jack asked.

“Just a second,” Martin said as he shuffled through the last of the pages. “I guess I need some kind of a more organized system for this, don’t I? I have some of this saved on a floppy, but I don’t have a computer at home so I can only work on this at the library.

When I get this book published, things are going to be different.” He sat up and slapped the sides of the stack. “Now what were we saying?” he asked.

“The air conditioner.”

“Oh right, right,” he said. “I think that the folks who came down here and made this subdivision were some old Yankees or something like that. Y’know, folks from up north who don’t know the first thing about how to set up an air conditioning unit -one that has to be real high powered, that is. I think they just came and slapped those air conditioners in these houses every which way and bam! You got leaks and rot and mold and just real fucked up shit.”

Jack nodded. He didn’t know that much about houses, but he suspected that Martin was probably wrong. Martin dropped the stack of papers in his bag and began reordering Ham radio pieces that Jack had put away.

“You aren’t a lawyer, are you?” Martin asked Jack.

“Nope.”

“I didn’t think so. I mean you do live over in Hilton Heights, but I bet you wouldn’t have gotten yourself into this mess if you were. Anyway, I was just thinking that that might make some kind of a class action lawsuit.”

He had gotten all of the Ham radio pieces like he liked them and was putting the lid on it as he said this. He stopped and began patting his pocket. “Thing is, there was some lawyer a while back trying to get some information about this house. I only talked to him once before I sold, so I didn’t bother talking to him again. But come to think of it,

he might really be able to help you. Seem to have left my wallet in my car though. Maybe if you wanted to go out there with me, then we could see about that.”

Jack nodded. He was pretty sure that whatever this lawyer was interested in, it wasn't the air conditioning unit idea. Still, it did sound to Jack as though something was going on, and if there were some sort of lawyer he could contact, that would help. “Do you need help getting those to your car?” Jack asked him.

Martin sighed and wiped his brow. “Oh no,” he said. “I mean, I'm sure I'll be fine. I haven't really eaten today and am feeling a little weak, but I'm sure I can make it.” Jack picked up one of the boxes and headed toward the door.

“Actually,” Martin said. “Could you get this box? It's just a little heavier.”

In the kitchen, Martin stopped and looked around the room. “I guess this'll be the last time I see this dump again,” he said. “Good riddance.” Jack pushed the kitchen door open with his elbow. He kicked the screen door and screamed open.

“Shoot,” Martin said, “I keep forgetting not to say things like that. I'm sure you can fix it up, though.” He could not contain himself here, and he burst into a fit of laughter as he followed Jack out the door and into the carport.

“Where is your car?” Jack asked him.

“Oh just halfway down the block,” Martin panted, already red in the face. “It's that station wagon over there.”

The contents of the boxes rattled as they walked down the hill, and Martin kept warning Jack to be careful, that there was some breakable stuff in there. Jack nodded and didn't say anything.

Martin's car was more like two blocks away, and Jack struggled to hold the box, which contained some radio pieces mixed as well as the manuscript. How the hell could this manuscript be heavy, Jack wondered. Behind him, the great novelist prattled on in a wheezing voice about how the neighborhood had seen better days and how he felt like surely, everyone good was moving out.

"The new neighborhood has things like cook-outs and block parties. You know, real family entertainment. This neighborhood, shoot. I think stuff is fixing to get real dangerous, what with some of these types moving in."

Jack turned around to try and get a read on Martin's expression. Maybe this guy was just pulling his leg. The neighborhood had seemed fine. It wasn't as nice as the old one, nowhere near as nice as the old one, actually, but the schools were ok, and Mandy had told him that it was a nice little community. What did this man mean? That a child molester had moved into a neighborhood? That some kind of gang problem had started? He thought about his kids, shut behind doors all day long, watching out the windows and wishing they could play outside again. And as he turned his head to look at Martin, he missed a place where roadwork had ended and the pavement shifted from smooth to rough, and he tripped.

He caught himself before he fell, but he could not prevent a piece of the ham radio from flying out of the box and onto the ground, shattering. Martin gasped, set his box down on the curb, and ran to inspect it.

“Shit,” he said. “It’s ruined. And this is the nicest piece.”

“I’m sorry,” Jack said as he knelt to collect the pieces. “I didn’t see that rough patch in the road – I’m sorry.” He tried to put the pieces back together, but it was clear that they were broken beyond repair.

“Hm,” Martin said. “This wasn’t a cheap piece of equipment – about a hundred dollars.”

“I’m sorry,” Jack said.

Martin turned over the bigger piece in his hand and traced the broken edge with his index finger. He looked up at Jack. “Say uh, seeing as you broke this and all, do you think maybe you could, you know, cover it?”

“What?” Jack said. When he had seen it hit the ground he had actually thought about offering to pay for it, and this thought now infuriated him. What a coward I am, he thought. To not call the cops on this man, to help him get out, to even think about offering to pay for this piece when it isn’t really my fault, and all for some lawyer’s phone number that might not even be worth it. He turned and almost exploded on Martin, asking in an almost yell, “Why the hell would I do that?”

“Well, I mean, you were the one that broke it. And you know, times are tough and I just bought a new house.”

“No,” Jack said. “I mean, no. You shouldn’t have even been in my house to begin with. And besides, you’re doing fine, you have that novel launch.”

“Still gotta finish it man, still gotta finish it. But yeah I guess if you don’t have the money – can’t bleed something without blood, or whatever that saying is.”

Jack scraped all of the pieces up into one hand and dropped them into the box. Martin popped the trunk open, and Jack put the box inside. He looked up to see Martin’s extended hand, so he took it and gave it a sluggish shake. Martin stopped mid-shake, and a look of disgust crossed his face. “Oh,” he said. “That’s right. I know how I know you – you were in the paper, right?”

In the hazy twilight of the neighborhood with the crickets just joining the cicadas and the fireflies dancing in front of the streetlight, Jack had to think for a moment about the newspaper article. He had almost forgotten the picture taken of him and his father and his brother on the last day the mill was open. The heading had been something about the end of a legacy or the loss of an era – he couldn’t remember.

“You mean for the mill?” he said. “Yeah, that was me.”

Martin shook his head and stepped toward the car. “You know,” he said, “I felt sorry for you for a second there. But no. No. Do you know how many people lost their jobs? One of my buddies was a foreman over there – a damn good guy, too. Has two kids, young kids, and he’s just had a hell of a time finding something else.” Martin’s hand had begun to shake, and he grabbed the door handle.

“Mills close,” Jack said. “These things happen sometimes. It’s not always peoples fault.” He looked down into the trunk. The mill had not been his fault. A lot of things in

his life had gone wrong and a lot of things had been his fault, but this was not one of them.

Just before the mill had gone under they'd invested in some of the best equipment, real state of the art stuff that was supposed to make the cloth come out so clean that it would be more like silk than denim. They'd done it without even having to change the price, too. Cost efficiency with good quality his father had said. But they'd been cut off from their contract, anyway. The folks in Atlanta had said it could be done cheaper in India or Bangladesh or some place where Jack pictured half naked kids running the machines. His family hadn't done anything, and they hadn't mismanaged anything. They just hadn't kept up with the times.

"People like you disgust me," Martin continued. "You're the ones who just fuck other people's lives up. And here I was feeling bad about you having to move into this house. No, you know what, I'm not giving you that lawyer's information. It's the least I could do for those poor folks over at the mill. You're getting exactly what you deserve." He shook his head another time, opened the car door, and got inside.

Before he closed the trunk, Jack grabbed the stack of paper – the novel manuscript-and held it down by his side as Martin drove away. What's there to miss anyway, Jack thought, and he pulled a lid off of a trashcan. As he was about to throw it inside, he noticed a piece of paper that was thicker than the others and pulled it out.

It was a letter from his publisher –an actual official looking letter on letterhead nicer than Jack had ever had at the mill. A seal with a magnifying glass and a bloodhound had been pressed into the corner, and Jack even thought he recognized the company name

underneath. Words like “success” and “wonderful” and “honored” jumped off of the page. Jack crumpled the paper in his fist and wished he could explode the whole manuscript, that bastard.

It was dark now, and the neighborhood looked distinctively seedier under the streetlamps. Jack passed three houses in a row. They were different colors and different designs but they all had the same sad expression: emptiness. Empty yards, empty windows, empty doorsteps. The only things full were the garages, piled high with neat stacks of boxes. So neat that the owners could swoop down and gather up all those boxes in a single afternoon. And Jack knew if he got any closer to them he’d be able to run his fingers through a film of dust. All these houses had fallen under the same illness of being the house before the real home was bought.

But that guy, that Martin, he’d gotten out. He’d written a fucking novel, and even though Jack had just thrown it away, he felt sure Martin somehow find a way to replicate that success. Sometimes the losers just have that kind of luck and the good guys don’t. And Jack was a good guy. A good guy with a crappy life and a crappy house, but a good guy. And wasn’t that what he’d always been told was the only thing that mattered?

He stopped in front of his house and looked up at it. The carport was empty at the moment, but it would soon be full of those same boxes, and they would soon be covered with that same dust. The dust of we’ll be getting out of here soon, of this is just temporary, of we can do better. But he could see that this was what he deserved. He’d lost the mill, he’d probably been duped on this house, and he’d even let that crazy guy

stay longer than he should have. And all out of the same weakness. No, Jack could see exactly why this had to be his home.

But what he didn't get was Emma and the kids. They didn't deserve this, to be punished for his inability. And he wanted to find a solution or a reason or a sign. But all he had in front of him was that stupid house with its stupid under contract sign.

In a month, his kids would be running up that driveway. They would be playing and tripping and skinning their knees on those potholes. They would cry for that fleeting moment when the world had gone bad and seemed like it would never be right again. They would come running into the kitchen screaming and Emma would hold them and kiss them while Jack, off at some new job, if there ever was that new job, would be saved from telling them the age old lie.

THE WONDEROUS SECRET

Let me tell you one thing: my Alabama cousins are bad. Seems like Granddaddy Pierce is always yelling at those two and telling them that he's going to have to sell them away to someone. Just last week we were driving them back home to Alabama and Granddaddy Pierce had to pull over and say, "Silly is just too silly. If you do not sit down and shut up, I am going to take you boys over to the Lee County Flea Market and sell you to that fella with the boiled peanuts." And even that did not make them behave. Chew, who is older and meaner, kept tickling Crith and pulling my hair all the way to Loachapoka. Aunt Charles whooped him right there on the porch and told him if he did one more thing she'd send him to the Lyman-Ward Military Academy, but he still stuck his tongue out at me while I rode away. He loves to tease me, and is even teaching my two-year-old brother to call me names like rat face. That's why it would serve Chew right if one of my daddy's gators came out of that craw space and swallowed him whole.

You see, we moved to this shaky new house with the beat up yard because of those gators, which Daddy said to keep a secret from Momma and Baby Boo, I suppose because he figures Momma would not be too happy with having gators up under her house, though I don't know. Momma used to say that she and Daddy were best friends and I know that best friends tell each other everything, at least that's what I always do

with my best friends. What I want to know is does this mean that they are not best friends anymore, and if so, what does that mean.

At any rate, Daddy said that it would be ok as long as we all stay away from that craw space. We've never had a craw space before, just a basement. I was trying to go up under there the other day to see was it like that old basement, but Daddy he had stopped me and said, "No no Holly Anne. You mustn't go up under there. I wasn't going to tell you, but seeing as you're a big girl and gonna be nine this August then I might as well. Under there is where I keep my alligators. Soon as I get enough money, I'm gonna open up a barbeque restaurant, but for Gators. Jack's Gator-Q."

And that explains it- I mean why he doesn't work at the mill much any more, or why I heard Momma telling someone he's getting his own place. Of course he has to get his own place - we can't have a gator-q in our house, now can we? I have to pretend to Momma like I don't know about the gator-q, cause daddy says so. All she says about the craw space is that there's rats and possums and the like down there, and besides this house might just fall apart, so I just nod and say yes Momma. I can't wait to have some of that gator-q.

Probably, Momma would not believe me if I told her about the gators anyway, because I guess it does sound kind of silly and not very true. I'm not going to tell her though, because Daddy said not to. Besides it's just got to be true because I think it sounds so wonderful. Everyone would be happy, and not only that but think about how that gator-q would taste! Maybe you've had gator before but not with my daddy's barbeque sauce. Mmm-delicious.

My stupid, mean, bad cousins are not getting any though and I will see to that, especially after today. I knew trouble was coming when I heard Aunt Charles' Grand-Am come up the driveway this morning. I was in the house, but I could already hear her yelling at Chew about how he should not be trying to pierce his ears with her earrings. Chrith had started crying and Aunt Charles yelled at him to quit but he didn't listen. He never listens, not even when we tell him that his name is Chris and not Chrith. Momma says that's cause he's only five, but I say it's cause he's dumb. Chew knows how to say his own name but he couldn't always. When he was over at the kindergarten in Loachapoka, they asked him what was his name. After his Momma looked at him real sharp cause she thought he was going to tell them that his name was Kimberly like he'd been calling himself for awhile, he looked at them and said "Matt-Chew." So now, we all just call him Chew. I could say my own name when I was a baby. Holly Anne Sinclair. I guess that's cause my family is just more proper than Chew's family, what with them living over in Alabama. Georgia folks are just more sophisticated than Alabama folks, and that's a fact.

But like I said, you can't tell that to Chew and them, you just can't. Believe me, I've tried. Chew thinks he knows everything better than any of us because he's eleven and got to sit at the grown up table last Thanksgiving, which everyone knows is because the country cousins call him names like nerd or pansy if he sits with them. You try explaining that to him though and he won't listen one bit. Momma says that's cause he's obstinate and it's gonna get him in a world of hurt. All I know is if he knew what was good for him, he'd stop acting like he knows everything.

Well take today for an example. When they got here, the first thing that Chew did was to go and fool with the refrigerator. “Where are the snacks,” he said to me soon as Momma had left the room. “I don’t know,” I told him, “but you’d better not mess with the fridge cause Momma keeps saying it’s on its last legs.” And anyway, we don’t have any good food – just crackers.

And so then, Momma told us we could go play in the backyard but absolutely not the front yard. So what happened soon as we got in the backyard? Chew started acting like he was going to go in the front yard! He just walked right around the side of the house and looked out that front gate. “Chew!” I said to him, “You know Momma said that we are not supposed to be going over there. And I know you do not want to get into trouble.” He just kept looking out that fence at the front yard (which doesn’t even look fun at all, let me tell you. It isn’t nearly as big as my old front yard and the grass is mostly dead, so there’s just a lot of dirt and holes to trip you up and mess up your new shoes.)

“Well, this back yard is crummy,” he said to me, and stuck a finger out of the holes in the fence, like he would get just a little bit of himself in the front yard and that would show me.

“I think it’s just fine,” I said. But it wasn’t really true. I miss our old backyard and our old house. We even had a swing set there. We tried to take it with us when we moved but one of the movers broke it and besides, the backyard here is so small I just don’t know where it would have gone. To tell you the truth, I don’t really know why we had to move. Momma said it was because they wanted something different but I don’t know

about that. If you ask me, something real fishy is going on. Like the way Momma and Daddy don't talk much anymore. And when they do, it's just whispers, like they're telling secrets. I don't understand why he can tell her some secrets but not the secret about the gators. Sometimes, I think that grown-ups don't know nearly what all they act like they know. Well like Chew. He is more grown up than me, but he just doesn't know anything, like how he should not go up in that front yard.

He didn't try to go up there, though what he did was worse. "Holly Ann," he said and then turned around and looked at me just like he had turned around and looked at me when he was sitting up at the grown-up table, "Do you know why we aren't supposed to play up there?" And I knew that this was just more of his tricks, so I did not play along. All I said to him was that well Momma said not to, so that's good enough for me. I sure do not want to get on her bad side these days, because she's worse than all the old ladies down at the church – even the one who takes the money at Wednesday Night Supper and yells at you if you get too many rolls.

"Well" said Chew, and I even noticed he had one hand on the latch. "I just thought you might know, seeing as you're about to be nine and what not, but I guess just no one has told you."

"What are you talking about?" I asked him.

"If your Momma ain't told you, maybe she don't want you to know, and maybe I shouldn't say nothing. Like you said, I don't want to get in trouble."

"You tell me," I said to him, "or I'm gonna tell Momma and she'll boxilate you."

One time we had all been over at the Sears and Chew and Chrith had knocked

over a lawnmower display by playing war and then pushing over one of the lawnmowers as some kind of weapon. What they didn't know was that all those lawnmowers were piled up one on top of another so they all came tumbling down. All Momma had had in her hand was a Kleenex box, but she said she was gonna boxilate each and every one of us and let me tell you we did not have a good time.

So when I told Chew she'd boxilate him, this scared him real good. "Well," he said to me, "my momma told me that there's bad stuff going on in your neighborhood. She said that a little girl was murdered right over by that creek where we used to play, which is why we can't go there anymore." Chrith had walked up to Chew and he chirped up, "That's right! Said this neighborhood is bad news!"

"Oh and is that all?" I asked them and rolled my eyes real big. "For one thing, this neighborhood is better than crummy Loachapoka. And for another thing, that girl wasn't murdered neither. Was the gators that did it." I nodded my head like I do in school when I'm pretending like I studied my multiplication tables. Chew was right, I hadn't heard about that girl, but I did know something was up from the way Momma makes me leave the room when she talks on the phone, and the way she won't let me play outside too much. "What are you talking about?" Chew asked. Chrith looked all scared, and I knew I had them. I stopped right in front of the door to the craw-space and turned around. "Chew, Christopher," I said in my most grown up tone. "I have a wondrous secret for you!" Chrith looked like he was about to wet himself but Chew didn't look that impressed yet, so I tried again. "It is a secret that will defy all secrets!"

Chew pretended to yawn and cut his eyes over at Chrith. “Cut out these childish dramatics,” he said to me. “You’re just fixing to make up some story, anyway.”

“Well,” I said to them, “you’ll believe me if you know what’s good for you. You recall how my daddy said we were not to play down in that crawl-space? Well, he had told me that’s where he keeps his alligators.” Chrith started walking away from the door, but Chew looked at me sideways, and then at that door, and then back at me, and then at the door again. “Liar,” he finally said. To which I said, “Am not.”

“Naw,” he said to me. “I ain’t talkin about you. Some child such as yourself would probably believe such foolishness. Your daddy had just made that whole thing up, that’s all. My momma says can’t no one believe a word that comes out of his mouth. Ain’t that right Chrith.”

“Yep, that’s what she done said. Said he’s got a story for every day of the week.”

“You take that back, you liar, Chew, you dumb baby Chrith,” I yelled and made fists.

“Won’t take it back neither,” Chew said, and walked right over to that crawl-space door. He put his hand on the latch and looked at me like he was just about to open that thing. Chrith though, he didn’t go near it.

Well! How do you like that! Here I was letting Chew and Chrith in on my most magnificent of secrets, and this is what they did! I declare. What they said about my daddy and stories is just wrong. What they really meant is that my daddy is funny and at least more entertaining than their daddy, Uncle Gary, who works over for this funeral home in Alabama. Everyone knows that he’s just about the most boring person that ever

lived. I heard Momma say so one time when she was talking to Uncle Levon. Said he belonged in the funeral business cause he looked like someone already been dead for ages.

“Chew and Chrith,” I said to them, “it is so true about that little girl. Just think about it.” Because it made perfect sense to me. Why would a person want to kill a little girl when she hasn’t done nothing to them? Gators don’t even care about that kind of thing. They just go for what looks tasty. Chew looked at me with his hand still on that latch and shook his head. “Holly Ann, you are just dumb. Everyone knows your daddy’s a liar. I hear my Momma on the phone to your Momma all the time, and you know what she says?” And then Chrith had stopped shaking and looked over at me and smiled like a weasel and said, “He’s just a big fat liar.”

“Now you just stop saying that foolishness right now! What would my daddy have to lie about, anyway? What good would it do to make up about the gators?”

Chew rolled his eyes and sat down, perfectly blocking me from getting to that crawl-space. Crith, all brave now, sat next to him. Chew said, “Aw hell Holly Ann, I don’t know why he does it, I just know that he does it. Like all them stories he made up about how come he doesn’t work for the mill anymore.”

Well that was a lie too. Daddy still works for the mill, they just haven’t needed him around so much. He used to take me and Chew over to the mill all the time when we were little, to watch the river from a big window in his office, or to watch the denim being made from the other big window. I know for sure that he does still work there, because he had told me just the other morning that they’d made all the jeans that the

world needed for a while now, and that he wouldn't have to go back until people started wearing out their clothes. Soon as he gets that gator-q running though, he won't have to go back to the mill anymore.

"So what," I said to Chew. "So my daddy doesn't go to the mill much. Least he doesn't spend all his days messing around with dead folks like your daddy does." And then Chew stood up like he wanted to fight me, but all I had to do was show him my fists and he knew not to start. Before he could sit back in front of the craw-space door, I jumped and sat down right where he had been sitting and I shoved Chrith so that he fell into the dirt and started sniffing.

Chew started like he was going to push me out of the way but then he just sighed and said, "Well, I would punch you, but it's just not right to hit a girl. Besides, we're supposed to be nice to you since your Daddy is moving out."

I quit making mean faces at Chrith and looked up at Chew. "What are you talking about? Another one of your stories, I suppose."

"Ain't no story," he said. "My momma had told me that. She said that Uncle Jack is getting his own place and moving out, so you better be nice to your cousins. That's why I ain't been pulling your hair today, or why I ain't pushed you and gotten into that craw-space."

I shook my head. That Chew is sure an idiot. He was wrong again, just like about the grown-up's table. I stood up and put my hands on my hips. The place in front of the craw space was a little higher, so we were just eye to eye. "You're wrong, and that's what I been trying to tell you. He's looking for his own place so he can have a restaurant for

these gators. Don't you know my daddy makes good barbeque? Better than your daddy's barbeque at least. Your daddy's barbeque tastes like dead people. I don't know how your Momma kisses him, all those dead people on his breath. You think it's my parents about to split up, well you're wrong. I'm gonna go in there and tell your Momma what you said, and then she's going to pack you off to Lyman Ward."

And then his eyes got big like they did the other day with Granddaddy Pierce and he shook his head. And he should be scared, too, because those folks at Lyman Ward do not mess around. A kid down the street went there and came back so scared that he looks about to cry whenever he sees you. Chrith sucked in his breath sharp and I looked at him so he knew he'd be next.

"No Holly Ann," Chew said, "I take it all back, I'll do whatever you say, just don't do that." I keep looking at him without changing my face. I know all about what happens when daddies leave. It happened to my best friend in the first grade, and she and her momma had to go down to Cairo to live with her grandmother who smells like mothballs. She only sees her daddy a few times a year.

But my momma and daddy aren't like that. My daddy would never leave me, and that's how I knew Chew was wrong.

"Say you lied," I told him, and he didn't look at me but he said that yes he lied and yes he was sorry and he made Chrith say the same. And I said ok.

And then from out of nowhere, like the angel of the lord, we heard Momma's voice. "Holly Ann, Chew, Christopher, where are you?" And she sounded annoyed so we all ran out to see her. She had her hair all done up and Baby Boo under one arm like a

fish. He smells bad and doesn't talk much except to say "light" or "car" and why he would want to say these things I do not know. He's got a big head and he's always making weird faces or blowing nasty snot bubbles. I do not like to hold him because he pulls my hair and gets his boogery fingers all in it.

"Y'all listen now," said Momma. She looked a little sleepy, and her make-up was not done as good as usual. "The fridge just broke and I'm headed next door to Miss Jane's to see if I can't put some stuff in hers, least till we can get a new one." She sighed, but I didn't know why she was surprised about that. The fridge in this house had been making loud, scary noises ever since we moved in. Like someone screaming. Like a ghost in the freezer.

I was about to ask Momma could I go over and visit with Miss Jane too because she has this dog named Winston that I think is real sweet, but Momma said, "Now Holly Anne and Chew, will you please watch Baby Boo? I will just be next door." As usual Baby Boo had to mess everything up. She set him down on the bottom step and he just sat there looking at me with that dopey smile. "Well I guess I can watch him," I told her, "Long as he doesn't pull my hair!"

"He's not going to pull your hair. I'll be just next door, won't be gone five minutes." She started to head out and then stopped at the door. "And don't go down in that craw space, you hear me? Holly Ann? Chew? Chris? I saw y'all playing around there just now. Ain't nothing down there but rats that crawl out of that nasty city creek over yonder. Those things are the size of damn dogs now, and they wouldn't think twice before biting you arm clean off."

I looked up at Momma in her cute little skirt and her fluffy blond hair. Most days, I'd say she looks awful pretty. In fact, I'd say she's the prettiest of all the Mommas I know, even Aunt Charles. Lately though, Momma just has that sleepy look that Baby Boo gets when he's been sitting in front of the TV all day and needs to be put down for a nap. And I wish Momma would take a nap, you know, if that's what would make her happy. That's why we take naps in school, my teacher said, cause we're better when we're rested and happy. Trouble is, I don't think naps are what make grown-ups happy. In fact, I don't even know what makes grown ups happy. But I wish that Momma would be happy. Cause when she has that tired look on her face, it's just about the worst thing in the world.

And then she took her sleepy-eyed face, and went away. The three of us stood at the bottom of the steps and looked at Baby Boo. Sometimes, his face reminds me of a Mr. Potato Head.

"What do we do with him?" Chew asked.

I shrugged. "Nothing, I guess. What else can you do with a dumb baby?"

"LIGHT!" yelled Boo, and he pulled himself up.

"We could play with the Light Bright." Chrith said.

"Shut *up*, Chrith!" Chew rolled his eyes big. "No one wants to play with the stupid Light Bright, and besides I'm gonna prove there ain't no gators."

I thought he had forgotten about that. "No you are not. Besides, Momma said there was rats down there, and I know you are scared of them." But deep down I knew

that she was wrong. She didn't know about the gators cause if she did, she'd know how things were going to be ok.

Chew crossed his arms and made his eyes tiny like a snake about to eat up a mouse. "I ain't scared of rats, and I'm fixin to show you how you're wrong about those gators." And he took off running towards that craw space. All I could think about was the Gator-Q and never being able to eat any of it. I thought about how I had imagined it to look and how proud my Daddy would be out in front of it with an apron and maybe a baseball cap that had "Jack's Gator Q" written across it in red. I thought about how he would stand and shake everyone's hands while they told him how much they liked that delicious Gator-Q and that they had never even tasted anything so good! I could help him out and take lemonade to people and Momma could make pies and biscuits and we could all be together. And maybe that's what would make them happy.

I told Chrith to watch Baby Boo and he just nodded with those eyes like moons. He probably had wet himself already. And yes, I thought, this is your fault because you did not believe me and you called me a liar when you really knew that I was right. You are too and you are too and you are too as bad as Chew and we'll see who ends up at Lyman-Ward. But I ran.

By the time I got to the door, Chew had his hand on the latch. I tried to push him off but he didn't budge. His feet stuck tight into that ground. I hung onto his shirt. He did not let go.

"Chew don't you dare, don't you dare! You are going to ruin everything and my daddy has plans and my daddy is..." And then there came Baby Boo around the corner

with Crith close behind. Chrith had started crying again and didn't say anything, just shook his curly head. Chew was still struggling and I knew that probably he would win, but I just kept holding on.

Baby Boo started running towards us. His feet barely stayed on the ground but he didn't fall. Plod, plod, plod and he grabbed Chew's right leg and started yelling "No!" I knew that he did not know what was going on but he wanted to help me. Chew tried to shake him off but Boo held on. And for just two seconds, I thought maybe we could win.

But then Boo went down. Hard. His little hand scraped against a rock and there was red.

"Chew you hurt him!" I yelled, but Chew didn't let go. Boo started to cry. He wanted me to hold him. He needed me. Chew would not stop. I could not make him stop. I knew what would happen. I would let him go and he would let the door open and the gators would come out and maybe they would kill us or maybe they wouldn't but either way my little brother was hurt and I had to help him. I took one last look up at Chew and his eyes like a snake and then I let go.

I grabbed Boo and said "shhh shhh." Through his tears, he smiled at me so sweet that I thought I knew what it meant to be grown up, and why they can't be happy. Crith started to cry. Chew stopped and for a minute I thought maybe he would not do anything but then I saw those eyes when he looked at us and I knew. He put his hand to that latch slow, so slow that I thought time had maybe stopped. He pushed the door with one finger and it creaked open. We stared into the black and looked for the yellow eyes, the white teeth, and the flick of a long tail.

THE DARK OF THE MOON

The damn possums were fucking in the walls of their house, and on the night before Christmas Eve, too. All is calm, all is bright my ass, Emma thought. If she didn't get them out soon, them with their lascivious carrying-ons, they would surely drive her to an early grave. Surely, surely.

She stuck her ear to the thin, shaky walls in the den and listened to them, their claws scrambling to grip onto something before the orgasm (and did possums orgasm, you know, like humans?) the heavy wheezing like an asthmatic baby, and then the way they slumped and fell. And all she could think of was cartoon stick figures running around and around in the blueprint maze of their house.

She knew people who had had animals crawl in their walls – mostly squirrels and rats and the like - but not one had talked about such as this. She wondered what it was about their house that made possums go crazy horny, and why the house didn't have the same affect on humans. She couldn't remember the last time she and Jack had actually had sex, and envying the possum's sex life really pissed her off.

And of course she had some bigger fish to fry, sex far from being the only problem. In her experience, mating had only meant one damn thing and she sure wasn't ready to be dealing with possum babies in addition to her own kids. And of course there was Jack, who was becoming more like the kids each day, sitting around the house, not

looking for a job, not going out, not really doing much of anything. He hadn't even thought up a plan about the possums since that shit had started, except to say that well he guessed poisoning them wouldn't be a good idea. If they did that, he said, the animals would just crawl back in the walls and die.

Emma was serious about this though. Not one more thing was going to have to depend on her, and she was going to be sure of that.

She had tried to research it over at the public library earlier that day when the library lady was doing story time. The research librarian helped her find the section on wildlife but Emma didn't find much, just some country methods of how to hunt and prepare possums. It added that if she were planning to serve the possum, she should catch it alive and leave it in a cage, feeding it only milk for a week in order to clean out its digestive system. Another book, simply titled "Lore" gave more applicable but inefficient advice, saying that one must only talk of a killing a possum and it would die. Emma didn't want them to die. She felt a little sorry for them. And besides if they did die, they would stink to high heaven.

She didn't find out much about possum sex, just that a long time ago, people had thought that possums mated through the lady possum's nose. This turned out to be a myth, though she did find out that that myth got started because of the daddy possum's forked genitalia. Gross, she thought, and awkward. The only thing she did find out was that possums give birth thirteen days after mating – the shortest time of any North American mammal. She paced around outside story-time until the library lady wrapped up the Christmas book marathon. Any second while that lady was going on and on about

damn Frosty coming alive, those baby possums could start bursting out of the momma, just like in that movie, *Alien*.

And of course she hadn't heard so much as a peep outta them that day – no, they only got their business on at night. Over the past two weeks those possums had been up in those walls, Emma had gotten used to sleeping in just those blue early morning hours. Jack slept all through the night, like a rock. Like something petrified.

That night in particular, the possums were louder than usual, just putting on a real show. When the scratching started, Emma and Jack were sitting in the living room, waiting for the kids to fall asleep so that they could get to work on wrapping presents. The scratching was so loud that she could picture a possum Olympics in her walls. “Goddamnit Jack,” she said. “Do you really want a family of possums cohabitating with us?”

He shrugged and scratched his stomach and kept watching *It's a Wonderful Life* on the TV. “As long as they aren't getting in the house, does it really matter? Noises don't bother me.”

“Well why don't you try explaining that to the kids?” she asked him. “I've just plain run out of excuses to tell them.” And then as if on cue, Holly Ann called out in that mousy voice, “There's that noise again.” Emma could hear Baby Boo, the three year old, start up whimpering.

Emma walked over to the hallway and yelled back, “I told y'all last week that that's just elves.”

“Elves?” Jack said. He looked away from the TV for the first time since he’d sat down. “What’d I tell you about making up stories for them? Won’t do any good.”

Jack had started on this thing about how they shouldn’t be lying to the kids, though Emma knew it really depended on what the lie was and who was telling it. Seemed like Jack could make up whatever cockamamie excuse popped into his head to explain his behavior of late – “I slept til noon cause I had a bad nightmare, kept me up near about all night” or “Momma and I weren’t fighting, just discussing.” To lie outright was just not ok. They were living on euphemisms, though Emma had found herself slipping more and more into fairy tale solutions. Like the way they made wishes on eyelashes that Daddy would find a new job soon. The trouble with fairy tales, though, was that they invoked a sort of hope.

“It doesn’t matter what I tell them,” she said to Jack. “I think they have it figured out, anyway. I caught them just this morning playing with tools that someone had left out in the laundry room.” She cut Jack a nasty look but he just kept on watching that TV like it was going to do a damn trick. She continued, “And when I asked them what they were doing in there with all those tools, you know what they said to me? They said that they were making a possum trap. Holly Ann said she heard one of us talking about it one day. Jack, I’m just out of ideas. This is going to ruin their Christmas.”

“Well and I guess that’s why you shouldn’t be lying to them,” he said. “And there are worse things than having possums in the wall on Christmas. I reckon we should just be happy that we’re having Christmas at all.”

And Emma pushed her head into her dry hands like that might make everything stop for a minute. “I guess that’s not the point, Jack,” she said through calloused fingers. The point is, we haven’t done a blessed thing – we need to do something. What if they’re lost up in there? What if they die? They aren’t that smart. Then think about the smell, Jack. Pounds of rotting flesh, inches away from our bed.”

“Well so what are we going to do? Call a possum hunter or something.”

“Wouldn’t that be expensive?” she asked. “We don’t exactly have that kind of money. I was thinking we could just use a trap.”

Jack scowled and shook his head. “I’m looking to get the kids a puppy for Christmas. What if it gets caught in the trap?”

“Well do you have a suggestion? Because I just can’t take it.”

Something rustled in the wall over by the TV. Emma took Jack’s hand and led him to the spot and they stood against the wall for a few minutes, listening to the horny possums bumping around and creating baby possums. As she watched Jack’s pupils go all wide like that, she realized that she hadn’t looked in his eyes like this in so, so long – since before the move, at least.

“Are they doing what I think they’re doing?” he asked. She nodded and her cheek rubbed against the wall.

“Yes.”

He set to a big laugh, an overflowing laugh, a volcanic laugh, and startled the possums. They thumped and thudded until they hit bottom with a couple of nail on the

blackboard screeches. Jack stared at the wall and scratched his stomach while Emma walked away and started putting up damn toys.

Suddenly, Jack yelled, “We’re doing it!” and slapped the wall. The possums chirped and squealed back there behind that sheetrock.

“You’re going to wake the kids,” Emma said, but Jack, he didn’t answer. He walked into the kitchen and came back with the phone book. She had meant it when she said they didn’t need to be calling those folks- they were pricey. It had been near about a year since the mill where Jack had been working closed down, and he had not found work, not to this very day. She opened her mouth to say how much of a bad idea this was, but Jack slapped the phone book down and exclaimed, “Here! This guy specializes in possums and raccoons. All we have to do is call him up, and hallelujah but there goes the possum problem.”

Emma sat for a moment, staring at the Hershey’s silver bells commercial on the muted television. It isn’t fair she thought. This is what Christmas should be, magical candy and whatnot, not possum exterminators. “But Jack, won’t that be expensive? Those traps are free down at the city government center.” And she’d just as soon the possums not die. She just didn’t see any sense in all that.

But Jack said, “I think you’re right. If they’re lost and can’t get out, what good will the traps do? Anyway, Bootsy Mulins asked me to do some work for him, so we got the money. I’ll call tomorrow, before I go over to Bootsy’s. Right now I’m going to bed.”

Well, Emma’s eyebrows shot right up to the middle of her forehead. This was the first she’d heard about this. Emma had always thought Bootsy was a lazy jerk who only

just managed because his daddy was richer than sin. If he could get Jack some kind of steady employment though, she might just consider liking him. It would be a break from usual, at least. These days, Jack usually slept until noon, got up and made himself a bowl of Tuna Helper, and then got back in the bed. He would then spend the next few hours eating it– his favorite was the Mexican version, “Tuna Ole!”

He also read the paper, alternating between the comics and help wanted ads. He enjoyed reading any story that involved a stupid criminal.

“Listen to this. These two guys in Arkansas thought that it would be smart to rob – get this – a *surveillance camera store!* And get this – the store also specialized in *alarms!* Police caught em within five minutes.” And then he would laugh and almost choke on the gluey tuna noodles.

Well ok, she thought. We’ll have one of those pest men out. Maybe Jack is right. But I’m not gonna let them kill those possums. No, that just won’t do.

Jack was gone when she woke the next morning. A note by the coffee maker said: “Exterminator here at 1:30.” Emma put the note in her pocket and poured the few drops of coffee Jack had left her. The kids shuffled into the room rubbing their eyes and stretching. Holly Ann, the oldest, got a bowl out of the cabinet and poured herself Cheerios without asking Baby Boo if he wanted any.

“Get your brother a bowl,” Emma told her.

“Those noises were back,” Holly Ann said as she shuffled through the cabinet.

“Those are just elves,” Emma said, “working on your Christmas surprise. Except I guess it won’t be that much of a surprise now, will it?”

Emma looked at Baby Boo who smiled in his three tooth way. Holly Ann frowned into her cereal bowl. “I wish they’d make us a new house. This place is the pits.”

“Don’t say that, Holly Ann,” Emma warned her. “If you say that, then they might hear you and leave.” She looked at Holly Ann sideways- a look that usually shut her up but these days hadn’t been working so good. But maybe since it was Christmas time and Holly Ann was afraid that Santa wouldn’t bring her anything at all, she just rolled her eyes and said, “Well fine. But meanwhile, I can’t sleep. Those elves better hurry up.” And She drank the last of her cereal milk straight from the bowl. Baby Boo looked at her and said in his mouse voice, “Don’t say that Holly Ann.”

Emma waited for the kids to hurry up and finish breakfast. She needed to send them to play with the kids next door – no sense in them witnessing the great possum massacre. She also wanted to tidy up- seemed like it had been ages since she’d had company. Maybe it would be nice, as a matter of fact, to have someone over. But what kind of person worked at killing possums on Christmas Eve anyway, she wanted to know. It made absolutely no sense to her. But things hadn’t made sense around the house in awhile.

The doorbell rang around noon. Emma had been expecting a man, but she opened her door to find a skinny woman with scraggly grayish hair peeking out from underneath a Braves baseball cap. She had on an oversized sweater and acid washed jeans and

carried a bright orange tackle box in one hand and what looked to be a slingshot in the other. It took her a moment to realize that Emma had opened the door, but when she did she looked up and said, “Oh, hey, you the lady needs the critters out of here?”

Emma nodded and stepped back so the woman could enter, which she did without looking at Emma and slowly, kind of like a zombie. She walked past Emma and to the coffee table, where she plunked down the box. She tossed her arms in big circles like some kind of aerobics and then turned around.

“Sorry I’m early,” she said. “Christmas Eve is a pretty slow day in this business. Where the possums?” Emma looked at the walls and started to say something but the lady cut her off. “I know they’re up in your walls, but where about do you mostly hear them?”

Emma shrugged. “All over,” she said. “We hear them a lot in this room, though.”

The woman nodded and looked around. “Yeah, I can tell,” she said. Emma couldn’t hear anything, so she put her ear to the wall.

“No, I can’t hear them or nothing. It’s just a sense. There’s a lot of chaos up in this room, yep, a lot of chaos.”

Emma looked at the toys that the children had left about the room– the broken doll and the toppled choo choo and over by the coffee table, a half eaten Oreo. She should have spent more time picking up. No wonder she never had company.

“Naw,” the woman said. “I know what you’re thinking. Ain’t that. I can just sense shit. Picked it up from my great-grandmother on my dad’s side. She was Cherokee or something like that. Round about when I was seven or eight my momma had taken me down to this farm where she was working and me and the cows got on so well that I

could tell the farmer exactly what he needed to do in order to get them milking just right. And he did and it worked and I guess the rest is history. Well, cept most folks want to know how I come to be in this business, which is that I married Leroy, you know Leroy's Squash-a-Bug. He just deals with the termites and stuff like that. The big stuff, he leaves to me."

Emma nodded slowly and finally got that lady to look her in the eye. "I didn't catch your name," Emma said.

"Oh yeah," she said. "I'm Bev."

"I'm Emma," Emma said. She stuck her hand out but Bev, but Bev had already placed a palm on the wall and closed her eyes. She mumbled and shook her head back and forth and then look up at the ceiling.

"Poor babies," she said. "They're scared. Y'all been having any kind of disturbances around here? I mean I don't know, like, do you got any relatives come around that hit the bottle too much?"

Excuse me?" Emma said. She took a step back like to keep from slapping this woman and said, "I'm sorry, but I don't know what that has to do with possums. And anyway no one around her drinks We have kids." Shit, she thought. Jack must have been drunk when he called her up. Or he must have sounded some kind of crazy. And speaking of some kind of crazy, this woman better have come at a discount.

Bev just nodded with an I don't believe you but anyway look and said, "Yeah, ok. Sorry if I sounded to be interfering. I didn't mean a thing by it – it's just that sometimes animals react to stuff like that. I was just out in Waverly Hall last week where this

woman had this nasty bat problem, and it turned out to be all on account of her lazy ass son who was always drinking whiskey and bringing trampy women back to the house. A lot of the time, them's the things you got to fix, not the animals.

“Well,” Emma said sharp as she could. “We don't have any problems of that description. We just need for you to get rid of these possums. Do you think you can do that?”

Bev cocked her head to the side and looked up at the ceiling out of the corner of her eye, like a little kid stumped on a spelling test.

“Can't be too certain,” she said. “These things usually take time. What we usually do is go set up something.”

“Like a trap?” Emma said. “Like you kill them? No. I don't want that.”

“Naw,” Bev said. “I don't ever kill critters. Not good for the spirit or something, What I usually do is go and set up a bait and then I taps around the walls and then I sing to em kinda, and they usually just pop right on out after a week or two.”

“A week or two?” Emma said. “That long?”

Bev nodded. “Yep, you can't rush these things. When folks do that, they usually end up fucking stuff up. Now how about you showing me where these possums got in.”

Emma took her out to the laundry room where she'd seen the possums enter one cold afternoon about two weeks back. She pointed out the dog door that led to the backyard, and then shined a flashlight behind the washer and pointed out the hole that Jack's lazy ass had failed to patch. Bev nodded and said, “Cool.”

Emma watched as she unpacked her orange tackle box and pulled out a ziploc baggie of sardines (“critter bait,” Bev told her). When she pulled them out of the baggie, Emma realized that they must have been left out in the sun for something like ten days, because they smelled like satan’s ass. She stepped out of the laundry room. “I’m going to go back in the house, if you don’t mind,” she said. Bev just nodded and didn’t look up.

When Bev came back in the house about ten minutes later, she did just like she’d promised and walked around tapping all the walls with that slingshot type stick she’d brought up into the house. “This is my critter tapping stick,” she told Emma, who nodded and bit her lip until it about bled. Bev didn’t look up, just kept tapping. She said, “Can’t promise this’ll help. I mean, it’s not scientific or nothing like that. Just something that usually works. And let me warn y’all not to go tapping on these walls. After all the work I done, it’ll most likely confuse them.”

Emma nodded and told herself that she’d better get used to living in a possum infested house. She gave up on trying to figure out Bev’s system and went back to the kid’s room to look for their Christmas outfits.

About an hour later, Bev stuck her head in the room and said, “All done.” And “That’ll be fifty dollars.”

Emma scrunched up her lips as she filled out a check, balancing the amount to the checkbook. When she looked back up, Bev was rubbing on the wall with her hand.

“You know,” she said. “My granny always told me that if you wanted to catch a possum, you have to sneak up behind him on the dark of the moon. If you do that, then they can’t see you.” She shrugged, took the check, and tucked it into her pocket. “I don’t

know if that works – I never tried it. What she always said though.” And then she and that orange tackle box were gone.

Emma spent the whole rest of the afternoon trying to figure that out. The dark of the moon – but how do you get to that? You can’t, she thought. It’s something humans can’t do. It means you can’t kill a possum.

The kids didn’t come back for another hour, so Emma was alone in the house. For all the woman’s craziness, she almost wished she’d asked her to stay for lunch or something. It was nice at least, having some kind of talking or noise in this house other than the squeal of fighting children or the constant drone of cartoon network. She cleaned in the quiet house, checking the clock near about every five minutes to see would the kids be home soon.

The kids did not want to wear the Christmas sweaters Jack’s mother bought for them. “You are going to wear these,” Emma told them, but they pushed their hands onto their hips and shook their heads. Baby Boo thought his was too scratchy. Holly Ann thought hers was just ugly. “This is a very nice brand,” Emma said. She tried to read the label but couldn’t pronounce it. It was something French and was embroidered with all kinds of crazy twists and turns in the letters so Emma wasn’t sure what exactly to call it. Holly Ann shrugged and said that it was still ugly, and Baby Boo asked if he could wear the Santa t-shirt he’d made at the pre-school. Emma pulled the sweaters over their necks and forced their arms in, like when she’d been little and dressed up her cat. The kids sat on the sofa and didn’t move but to poke each other in the side. “You both look so nice,”

Emma told them, but they wrinkled their noses and looked around her at the dancing snowman on TV.

It was 5:30 and they needed to be at the church in an hour to get a spot by Jack's mother, always the same pew in the back by the stain glass window with the picture of the lamb. Jack was not home. What kind of work was he doing on Christmas Eve anyway? Whatever it was, Jack would have to clean up, and that would take forever. They had been late the year before and had had to sit up in the balcony. Jack's mother had brought it up something like three times during Christmas dinner the next day, how nice it would have been to sit next to Holly Ann and Baby Boo and hear them sing the Christmas carols. Emma sat down with a magazine and flipped through it, looking up every time she heard a car on the road outside

At 6:15, a car door slammed and Emma looked out the window. Jack stood outside the car and kept looking back and forth between it and the house. He caught Emma's eye and motioned for her to come out. Even from inside the house, she could see his eyes sparkling, and she thought that Jack's happiness and lateness could only mean one thing on this Christmas Eve. She felt like she were in either a Hallmark or a Swanson broth commercial – laid off husband finds job on Christmas Eve and arrives home with a lovely surprise for his downtrodden but still fresh-faced wife and kids. Usually, this surprise would include a gift box with a set of keys and then in the final scene, the family in front of a new house. She slipped on her jacket and walked outside.

Jack stood next to car and tapped at one of the windows as soon as Emma walked out. He had no keys or ribbons in his hands, just a yellow nylon rope.

“What is it?” she wanted to know.

“Are the kids looking?” And because he looked like he might kiss her, she stepped back. “No, why?”

“It’s their Christmas surprise,” he said and Emma heard a whining like brakes on slick road. She looked in the car.

On the front seat sat a big, ugly black dog that was built like it should weigh a hundred pounds but had clearly wasted away to saggy skin and protruding ribs. It had a graying muzzle and a torn ear. The only things still in shape were its teeth, yellow and sharp. It growled at her, and she could see its gums, black like tar. So here you are, she thought, the mythic dog of Jack’s broken promises finally come to fruition. The only promise that man could keep. The window muffled the dog’s raspy barks.

“So whaddaya think? I got the kids a puppy!”

“That’s not a puppy, Jack.” She shook her head as the dog lunged at the seat and yellow stuffing poured out. “What the hell are we going to do with a dog, Jack? Where are we keeping it?”

“Well the backyard, of course. We have that dog door, don’t we?”

“You don’t need to tell me about the damn dog door – if we’d nailed it up we wouldn’t have had the possum problem. Which we also need to talk about. I don’t think that exterminator lady knew what she was doing. She seemed kinda kookie.”

“Jesus Emma, I got the kids a present. Can’t you just be happy about things for once? And you mean the lady didn’t get those things out?” Emma shook her head and

Jack sighed and wiped an open palm down his sweaty face. “Shit,” he said, and then, “Well I hope you didn’t pay her.”

Emma shrugged. “She came, didn’t she? And besides, she said it’d take time.”

“Great, just great,” Jack knocked on the car with his knuckle. “Can’t trust you with a damn thing.”

Emma looked up at the front window and could see the kids looking out. They had taken their Christmas sweaters off. Back in the car, the dog had removed the top of the headrest, and bits of leather and fabric hung from its teeth.

“I’m not the one who brought home the fucking hound of the Baskervilles.”

“I had to, Em. It was just wandering around the storage units at Bootsy’s. They were going to take it to the pound. It looks just like this little fella that used to live next door when I was growing up. I always wanted a dog like that, but momma would never let me have one.”

The storage units, of course. This had been no good job at all. The pants that Jack had worn to work, the nice ones he’d gotten from his momma two year ago, the ones that he had worn to work when he’d been manager over at the mill -they been torn at the knee and there was dirt around the hem. Jack smelled of dog and mildew and alcohol. She shook her head and said, “Put it in the backyard. I’ll keep the kids busy.”

And she did. She kept their backs to the window and she pulled the sweaters back over their heads, telling them how Santa had seen and would not be happy and they were lucky that it was Christmas so their wouldn’t wear them out. It was 6:30- the balcony again. As she straightened up Baby Boo’s collar, she watched Jack struggle to get the

nylon rope around the dog's neck. She could not tell what frightened her more: the way the dog bit Jack's arm or the way that Jack kept smiling even after the dog bit his arm.

After they got back from the church and finished their dinner and packed the kids off to bed, Jack set about looking for a ribbon to put around the dog's neck. "That dog doesn't seem very friendly, Jack," Emma said, but he just kept rustling through a box of wrapping paper and gift bags.

"He'll be fine. He just needs some love. That's all knocked down creatures need, you know. Love."

And then she heard the scratching at the wall, that terrible scratching, the claws ready to pierce that sheetrock and burrow into their house. "They're at it again, Jack. Forget about the dog for a second. What about them?" Jack looked up at her and frowned. "Well I reckon that dog could take some possums." Emma sighed and pressed her head into her hands. The possums began to screech and they kept getting louder and louder like to say let us in we want a home to, we want to be warm.

From down the hall, Holly Ann called out that she wished the elves would keep it down. Overhead, something thumped onto the rafters and Emma could hear a rustle of crumbling insulation and sheetrock. Holly Ann squealed and Emma walked to the open doorway. "They're just putting the finishing touches on it," she called. When she turned back around, Jack had left the room.

She found him in the kitchen, looking at the dog as it danced and growled and snapped at invisible menaces. “I think there’s something wrong with that dog,” Jack said. “I don’t know what to do to get it to calm down.”

“There’s nothing you can do, I don’t think.” She walked over to the drying rack and put dishes away. As she did this, the cabinet doors above her head began to rattle and inside, clawed feet scampered back and forth. Jack jumped back against the door, startling the dog into a fit. “Goddamn dog is gonna wake the kids and ruin the surprise,” he muttered. He went out the side door and emerged a few minutes later with his toolbox and a hammer. Emma finished the dishes and looked up at the rattling cabinets. Inside them, the glasses that had been given to them as wedding presents made pinging sounds. She felt certain that any second, the doors would fly open and those glasses would shatter on the counter.

Jack dragged a step stool over to the cabinets and began hammering the doors shut. “What are you doing?” Emma asked him. “You’re going to wake the kids.” He did not respond, just kept hammering at those doors. And then she remembered about the possum lady and said, “Jack, don’t do that. Please don’t do that. That possum lady said to quit banging on the walls. She had this system with tapping, and she said banging would mess with it, please don’t.”

But Jack just kept going with that hammer. “No,” he said. “Besides, you said it didn’t work. She didn’t get them out. And don’t give me any of this hocus pocus about it might work later. You’re just trying to save face because you fucked up and paid her and

it didn't work." And then they heard Holly Ann's voice saying "Daddy," and they turned around.

Holly Ann and Baby Boo stood there both looking scared to death as they stared up at Jack with his hammer. Jack looked at them and went back to hammering the door shut. This was it. The man she'd married, the man she'd promised to love forever, the man she'd trusted with her whole life, was hammering their house apart. Emma crouched down and gritted her teeth so hard she thought they'd break. She said, "Daddy's just working on something for the elves."

"Quit it with those elves," Jack said. "There are no elves. Daddy's hammering these doors shut so those possums don't break into our house!"

Baby Boo commenced to wailing and Holly Ann's mouth hung open and her eyes went all big. Emma picked up Boo and grabbed Holly Ann's arm and walked them down the hall to their rooms. "Those possums just want a home," she said. "It's cold outside and they don't have anywhere to go and they thought our house might look like a nice place to spend Christmas. And besides, how would Santa visit them if they aren't in a house with a fireplace?"

"But our fireplace isn't even real," Holly Ann said. "It's just for decoration."

"Well Santa makes it work the same way," she said.

But she knew that in a way, what Holly Ann was saying was right: if the possums wanted a home, why didn't they just go find a real home? This sure as hell wasn't one. And in the midst of this, she realized that fairytale she had created about the possum was true. That's the only thing the possums were guilty of –needing a home. They hadn't

done a damn thing but crawl into those walls and try to find a nice, warm place to have their babies. And for this, Jack and Emma had tried to hunt them down and kill them. But if those possums just needed a home, if they just wanted a place to stay, well, she could understand that. She would tell Jack. She would tell Jack, and surely that was something he would understand too and somehow, that would make everything better. She tucked her children into bed and told them how it would be ok.

In the living room, she put her ear up to the wall and heard nothing. And then it occurred to her that it actually felt lonely to be in this room and not to hear the noises. Those possums had become the heartbeat of the house.

She whispered Jack's name as she rounded the corner into the kitchen, but the room was empty and the side door open. Maybe, she thought, that banging has driven the possums out and he's waiting to patch the hole. But she had to stop him because oh those possums would be so cold and they would need to crawl back inside. She had to protect them; she had to do right by someone's family if not by her own. She slipped out the screen door, pausing only to hold it so that it would not slam.

She opened the door to the laundry room seconds before the hammer fell onto the possum's head. Had she gotten there earlier, had the children not gotten up, had she not stopped in the living room to listen for the possums, had she not realized how badly oh how badly she needed them to still be alive, then she might have gotten there in time to tell Jack to stop and that it wasn't necessary.

Instead, she watched the possum die. She opened the door to see Jack standing there, hammer raised, the possum struggling and making the most terrible noises. She

screamed something like no or don't or stop. The possum went limp and a thin line of blood trickled from its mouth and onto the floor. Jack used the hammer to flip the possum off of the step stool. It landed on the ground with a soft thud, like a water balloon. Emma leaned toward the possum and noticed the swollen belly and the raised nipples.

Jack though, he just held the hammer and smiled, actually smiled at her. "See?" he said, "Problem solved." She looked down onto the step stool, the step stool that her mother had used when she was a child, now covered with possum piss and blood. She stared at it because looking anywhere else in the room would mean looking either at her husband or the dead possum. The dog set to scratching at the dog door and stuck a paw through. Jack kicked the door and they could hear the dog whimper and then back off. Emma shook her head. "It just wanted a fucking home," she said.

"We gave it one, didn't we?"

"I meant the possum," she said. "I meant the possum."

He didn't wake her up when he got into bed that night. She wouldn't have even known he'd slept beside her except that the sheets were wrinkled. No dreams that night—sleeping felt like a blink.

The children had woken up before Emma did and had opened their presents.. Holly Ann sat by the tree playing with a cheap looking doll Jack had gotten for her. "Do you like the doll bed Santa brought you?" Emma asked her and she shrugged.

"It's ok."

“Ok? Uh oh, I hope that doesn’t hurt the elves feelings.” Emma knelt by the doll bed and smoothed out the comforter that she had sewn. She looked over at Holly Ann, who rolled her eyes. “Well if that’s what all that noise was for, then maybe they deserve it. It’s crummy.”

“You know, Holly Ann,” Jack said through sips of coffee Emma figured was laced with something, “I bet there are some little girls who’d be glad to have a doll bed like that. We could give it to them.” Holly Ann shook her head. “No,” she said, “I still want it, I just don’t think those elves needed to be spending so much time on it, that’s all.”

Emma sat down on the sofa next to Jack and tried to catch his eye. She had expected to see that dog under the Christmas tree, tangled in the wrapping paper and lunging for the children’s necks. She wondered if Jack had given up. She rested her hand on his knee and nodded. In a minute, she thought, I’ll get up and make pancakes and bacon and maybe eggs if we have enough, but right now, we are going to just be.

Jack nodded back at her, stood up, and adjusted his robe. He ran a hand through his greasy hair. “I have another surprise for y’all,” he said, winking at Emma before he left the room.

Jack did not come back with the dog. Instead, they heard him yelling, “Shit! Shit! Shit!” He was quiet for a minute before he burst out laughing and then yelled, “Well, goddam!” The kids ran into the kitchen and immediately began shrieking.

When Emma joined them, she saw the dog pacing on the deck, staring down two dead possums. Baby Boo grabbed Emma’s leg, looked up at her and asked if it was a

monster. She shook her head. Holly Ann stood, palms pressed up to that window, looking out into the backyard.

“The puppy’s the present, kids. Not the possums,” Jack told them.

“That isn’t a puppy,” Holly Ann said.

“Sure it is,” Jack nodded. “Why don’t we go out and play catch?”

Holly Ann shook her head. “I’m not going out with those two possums. No way, Jose.”

Looking at the possums made Emma sick. The tattered remains of a garbage bag clung to the rail of the deck and from the dried blood, Emma figured that this must have been how Jack tried to get rid of that possum. The other possum must have come out to save this one and been attacked by the dog. She gripped Boo tighter and hated herself for complaining about the possums and for calling that exterminator. For this peace, she would have endured a million sleepless night of scratching. But it was already done. Like everything else, she would just have to live with it and go on. It was just what women did – or what she did. She couldn’t tell the difference anymore.

“Why don’t you go clean that up, Jack, and I’ll get breakfast on the table.”

“No. I’m taking the kids to play with their new puppy,” he said and plied Boo from her arms. She opened her mouth to say something but Jack shook his head. “C’mon Holly Ann, those possums are dead. They can’t get you. Go get your coats” He set Boo down, and the kids fished their coats off of the rack near the carport door. Holly Ann slipped her arms into the sleeves and snapped the buttons all the way to her chin. She

looked back at Emma like to say Momma talk some sense to him, but Emma just stared over her head.

The dog bit Jack as he stepped onto the back deck and Emma could hear him cursing at the dog as she looked for pancake mix. It didn't seem to bother the children though, and she even saw it lower its head to let Holly Ann pet it. Probably, it had been abused by some mean man. She thought that this was hopeful, at least, because it meant that the dog might be nice to her and the children. She set to work mixing the pancake batter and decided that they had enough eggs and this was good. Maybe Christmas would be ok.

She spooned the pancake batter onto the skillet and listened to children in the back yard and even heard an occasional giggle or squeal. Well, she thought, That's that. Jack has saved Christmas and maybe that's good. Maybe this means that things will work out. Well, not work out. Just, we'll stay together.

As she was peeling a piece of bacon from the package, she heard one of the children squeal, "Snow!" She looked up and saw a few white specks drifting down from the sky, light as cotton and white as the sun in midsummer. She watched out the window, dropping bacon blindly onto the skillet, her fingers remembering how to do it all. She wiped her hands down her apron as she walked to the door to watch the snow.

She thought again about what Bev had said about the dark of the moon. Of course, what an idiot she'd been. There was no dark of the moon. You can't hunt a possum because there is no dark of the moon. They always see you, and they always know. That was all that saying meant, that it was impossible to hunt a possum. But either

Bev had been wrong, or somewhere in that terrible night she and Jack had discovered a dark of the moon that no one knew about, because those possums were dead out there on the deck, and she could see that from where she stood.

She looked out across the yard. Her children played ball with her husband and the new dog and the snow fell. She could never walk away from any of this, and why would she? But even so. She could smell the bacon beginning to burn and she was about to turn to it when she saw something out of the corner of her eye. The smaller possum, the one that Jack had conked on the head the night before shook a little and opened its eyes.

And then, while it thought no one was watching, while Jack and the kids and the dog were still distracted with their game, the small possum rose, stretched its front paw, and turned its face toward the sky. Of course, Emma thought. The one possum myth she'd forgotten – playing possum. The possum looked down at the bigger one, sniffed, and walked away. Emma did not know if possums could tell whether or not other possums were dead or merely playing.