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The purpose of this thesis was to explore the human condition at the different stages of these characters' lives. Viewed mainly from the perspective of women of color, defined not only by the color of their skin but the various trials and tribulations that they are forced to overcome. This is also an exploration into the various uses of time in fiction writing from the storyline movement to the physical placement of the words on the page.

LIFE STAGES

by

Selena J. Wolf

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Approved by

Committee Chair

To my mother... we truly ARE cosmic.

To my father... I love you.

To my brothers... my heart.

And to the 7 year-old version of me... look what “kffjfejem iwneifniszodi” turned into!

APPROVAL PAGE

This thesis has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

Committee Chair _____
Craig Nova

Committee Members _____
Michael Parker

Holly Jones

Date of Acceptance by Committee

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SINKHOLES.

Two months ago, Alice found out she was pregnant. It was the same day the sinkhole had appeared in Cooper's Mill Park. It was such an oddity that people were stopping by the park just to look down into it. Like looking into a giant wound. Noah had called Alice to go check it out. She thought it would be as good a time as any to tell him that their lives were ruined.

Once they were at the park, they slushed through the tall grass, hand in hand. There was a circle of yellow warning tape set up on posts around the perimeter, but that didn't stop people from standing close to the edge. The few kids standing around were throwing rocks down into it watching them bounce off the sides and splash down into the water. It was huge; the edges had been perfectly cut away to reveal all the layers of the Earth's crust. Something about the jagged edges of Earth and the way people were standing around gawking at it made Alice change her mind about telling Noah. She would wait for a better moment to come up. If that moment would come.

* * *

"I'm pregnant," Alice said as she kicked the ground beneath the swing. It was two weeks after the sinkhole had first appeared. Alice could see the yellow circle of tape not too far away from the playground where she and Noah were sitting. Noah clasped his hands and put them to his forehead. They looked rough and grey, too old to belong to a sixteen year old kid.

"Need a minute?" Alice knew she was being a smart-ass at the wrong time.

He shot her a look that said ‘*not now*’. His piercing blue eyes telling of his emotions.

She knew what he was thinking: *How am I going to explain this to my mother?* His mother did not approve of his relationship with Alice. In her words, it was an abomination to mix races: *You can date ‘em, you just can’t marry ‘em, or get ‘em knocked up, she’d say.*

“So what do you want to do?” The comment had rung in her head. *What do I want to do? I wanna go back to the night you said, don’t worry you’re on the pill.*

“I don’t know,” she said.

“Did you tell your mom?” Noah asked.

“She already knew.” The positive pregnancy test she mistakenly left in her bathroom.

“What’d she say?”

“Well, Noah, let me put it this way, you’re no longer top of her list of favorite people.”

“Right. Can’t say I wasn’t expecting that,” Noah said. “Whatever you want to do, I’m here.”

Somehow that didn’t hold much comfort for her. They were both young, Noah’s most lucrative job this past summer had been picking blueberries at \$5 a basket, and she knew his parents really wished she were white or at least Puerto Rican, anything but the “tar-baby” their son brought home.

The ride back to her house was quiet. His Cutlass Supreme rattled and punched down the road. Alice was angry at his lack of comfort, even though she didn't know what she wanted him to say. Part of her wanted him to say, *let's runaway together, get married, and raise our child*, but she knew they were too young for that. They were always too young for those things, life like adults. But that's what they played at in the backseat of his Cutlass. Their bodies wrapped in a yin yang formation.

She wanted it to go away, everything to go away. She was angry at the way she would catch her hand resting on her abdomen, protecting and feeling for any signs of life growing. She knew he would leave her, even if it were eventually. As the green street signs of her neighborhood filed by she thought about how she could lie. Claim miscarriage and then he'd never have to tell his mom and they could move on with their lives as if nothing ever happened.

It was an overcast day, the Jersey sky was an ill gray-blue. Alice fingered a piece of paper in the pocket of her sweatshirt, a receipt from buying the pregnancy test.

"Have you thought about an abortion?" Noah asked.

The words hit her hard. She had, in fact, thought about it. It was actually her plan, but somehow, once he said it, she was offended. Offended by how quickly he wrote her off and their child.

"I need time to think about it." She looked out the window and sunk down into the bucket seat. The car turned into her driveway lined with tall thick evergreens.

"Whatever you want to do, I'm here for you. Will you call me tomorrow?" Noah asked.

“Sure... tomorrow,” she said as she opened the heavy car door and slid out.

* * *

As she and her mom drove up to the parking garage, Alice felt her stomach writhe a bit and then bubble up a little into her mouth. She swallowed hard, the bitter taste of vomit scrunching her face. On the side of the clinic was an elaborate mural of smartly dressed white rabbits at a tea party—all the rabbits smiled gaily except the two serving the tea, which didn’t have mouths at all. Alice couldn’t take her eyes off the one rabbit with it’s head cocked back in what she decided could be either elation or terror.

“Did you get to see the sinkhole at Cooper’s Mill?” Her mom asked as they pulled into the parking garage next to the clinic.

“Yeah,” said Alice. “Noah and I checked it out a few weeks ago. That’s where I told him.”

“They say they won’t be able to fill it in,” her mom said. “As if this town don’t already got enough holes to worry about.”

Alice knew she was referring to the amount of potholes on the streets. Something her mother complained about often. She hated driving over them, fearing they would mess up her brand new Beamer. There were countless times when Alice remembers riding in the car and her mom swerving out of the way of oncoming traffic, simply to avoid running over a pothole.

Alice’s mom held the passenger side door open as Alice stepped out of the car. The parking garage smelled like damp concrete and urine, revamping Alice’s already nauseous stomach. They walked down the sidewalk and around to the front entrance,

hands clasped. The street was pretty busy, the sickening sweet smell of garbage juice wafting between the buildings. Being Atlantic City and so close to the Shore, Alice wondered where the smell of the ocean had gone. There was a crowd of people outside the clinic entrance—a welcome wagon. Alice gripped her mom’s hand tighter.

“It’s ok. They’re harmless,” her mom reassured her. The people were all dressed in dull gray clothes. The women wore full length skirts with long sleeved turtle necks while the men wore slacks and three-button blazers—they all had shiny black shoes. They stared at Alice as she came down the sidewalk. One of the gray clad women grabbed her by the arm with a hot smooth hand. She put her lips next to the young girl’s ear, “There is no salvation through that door. As a mother you must save your child.”

Alice’s mother pushed the woman off and Alice felt proud of her mother. She tried to ignore the shouts from the crowd, but the woman’s words echoed: *as a mother, as a mother.*

Alice knew what they were trying to do. They claimed “truth” and spouted off things about “thou shalt not kill” and “a mother’s love.” She saw them offering her what they had offered her mother when she was pregnant with her: section 8 housing, WIC coupons, and welfare with prudent hands—what more could a single mother want? They’d shout to the rooftops, accusing her of being negligent, malnourished, and lazy. The crowd had words, lots and lots of words that they passed around like a collection plate. Some even smiled at her, trying to coax her in with kindness: *Don’t worry, we’ll help you*, their smiles seemed to say. They were shouting their word and waving leather bound books with crosses and eternal plans. While some of the crowd thumped bibles,

others sang with hands hid behind their backs, Alice saw dripping with good scarlet intentions. She couldn't see their faces anymore, just gaping mouths and teeth, grinning then yelling. She and her mom pushed through the crowd and the crowd pushed back. Finally, they broke through to the heavy, glass door.

Inside the lobby, it was dark and opened to a dimly lit hallway with a set of stairs. Alice followed her mother up to the main waiting room of the clinic. At the receptionist desk sat a sallow-faced woman, expressionless, eyes fixed on a Vogue magazine.

“Are you here for a procedure?” The receptionist asked, not breaking her gaze from the magazine.

“Yes,” replied Alice’s mother. “For my daughter.”

“Is she under eighteen?” The receptionist asked.

“Yes,” her mother said.

“Then you’ll have to sign for her.” The receptionist placed a yellow form and a pen in front of Alice’s mother. “That’ll be \$400.”

Alice’s mother skimmed over the form and signed the bottom, then handed the pen to Alice.

“Sign here, baby,” her mother said. After Alice had signed, the nurse put the paper on a stack of other yellow papers.

“Has the patient had anything to drink or eat since midnight?” The receptionist annunciated each word as if she were speaking to a child or slow-person.

“No,” her mother replied.

“Good. Once you’ve paid, you can take a seat over there until your name is called.”

After paying, Alice and her mother waited. Waited for her name to be called, waited for the decision to be made, waited for the feeling of sick to have a face. Finally, a door opened and a nurse dressed in hospital whites leaned out with her clipboard.

“Mason,” she called. “Alice Mason.”

Her face was kinder than the receptionist’s but the florescent lights were still unforgiving to her complexion. Everyone looked green.

Alice let go of her mother’s hand. “I’ll be right here,” her mother said.

Alice smiled, not looking at her mother but the floor. She could feel her mother’s eyes watching her cross the waiting room to follow the nurse through the swinging door. The nurse took her to a room down a long hallway and told her to undress and put on the hospital smock. The nurse left and Alice sat on the table and closed her eyes. A deep-set feeling of alone trickled into her stomach and cramped her abdomen. The room smelled of alcohol and disinfectant. The wallpaper was decorated with sailboats and seagulls in mid flight. Alice put the smock on and tried to wrap it around her back with little avail. A few moments later there was a light knock on the door.

“Come in,” Alice said.

A short blond white woman with a tray and a clipboard entered.

“Hi,” the nurse said, her teeth a gleaming white. “I need to take some blood before your procedure.”

“Ok,” Alice said. Other than those few words, the nurse didn’t speak until she was done; the silence only being broken by the snap of the nurse’s latex gloves.

“Ok,” the nurse said. “You’ll be taken for an ultrasound shortly. Shouldn’t be more than a few minutes.” The nurse smiled again and left.

Alice poked at the small ball of cotton stuck to her arm and pulled it up slightly to peek at the tiny hole. She thought of how little there was between the world and her veins, something she had thought about often in Biology when Mr. Garrison talked about the circulatory system. Just then, another soft knock. This time it was a tall, thin black woman in light blue scrubs.

“If you’ll just follow me,” the nurse said. “We’ll get your ultrasound out of the way.”

Alice followed her down the hall, holding the back of her gown shut. She fe

The ultrasound room was a warm shade of peach with no fluorescent lights but a small standing house lamp in the corner. It was eerily homey. Alice sat on the table and the nurse gave her a blanket to put over her legs. She pulled up her smock to expose her stomach and the nurse squirt a cold blue gel on her abdomen.

“Oh, sorry,” the nurse said. “It’s a little chilly.”

Alice smiled. She felt odd having an ultrasound for a baby she would never see. She thought of how happy couples seemed on TV getting an ultrasound. The blessed moment of finally seeing their child. The nurse turned the monitor away from Alice so she couldn’t see the screen.

“Just lay back and relax,” the nurse said. “Shouldn’t take more than a moment.”

The nurse swirled the small ultrasound wand around on Alice's abdomen and studied the screen. She pushed and swirled, pushed and swirled, and the more she pushed and swirled, the more Alice realized how much she had to pee. The nurse searched the screen. Alice leaned forward as if to look but the nurse shot her a look as if to say, *you don't wanna see this*. She was right, Alice didn't want to see "it." That would make it too real, too hard. The decision was made but part of Alice wanted to jump up and run.

The nurse handed Alice a thick paper towel and wrapped

"I'm your anesthesiologist. Let me know if you experience any discomfort." He poked a needle into her hand and wiggled it a bit but it fell out. "You have unusually thin skin."

Alice tried not to move her hand or hit the guy in the face.

"Sorry. Maybe the arm will be easier." Alice gritted her teeth as he went for the arm, missed the vein, and went for the arm again. Shortly after, the room swirled, darkened and fell into black.

* * *

Alice awoke in a cold sweat and her heart racing. Her body felt like it filled the whole room. She writhed around the bed trying to wake up. She was disoriented and the gown she was wearing twisted around her body like a snake. Nothing was where it was supposed to be.

Where am I? I need to go home. What did I do? Why am I so cold? Did someone just say 'pie dysfunction'?

The room was cold and echoed with the sound of a prescription drug commercial on a nearby TV. There was a wet spot on the bed and she could feel something stuffed between her legs. She wanted someone to explain what had happened to her and wrap her in a blanket; she wanted her mom.

Her eyes came into focus just in time for her to notice that six other women were also in the room with her—they were in various stages of sleep and looked just as confused as she was. She rolled onto her side mortified, hoping she hadn't said anything out loud. Her body ached and the needle prick in her hand was throbbing. A short round nurse with dark hair and a clipboard came in.

“You can go ahead and get dressed and leave when you're ready, but you'll want to leave the pad on for the next two to three hours.” The nurse handed Alice a new thick, mouse-mattress pad and pointed to the restroom. Alice slid her legs off the side of the bed and onto the floor. She took a step and felt something inside her drop. Luckily the restroom was close; she walked into one of the stalls and peeled the pad, thick and heavy with blood from between her thighs. She folded it and wrapped it in toilet paper then threw it in the small silver trashcan attached to the stall wall. There were other wrapped up pads stuffed into the trashcan, each one bleeding through the toilet paper they were wrapped in. The lid snapped shut and Alice sat back on the toilet. Her head felt heavy and unbalanced; tiny silver flies buzzed around her. She closed her eyes and leaned her head against the wall until they stopped. She got dressed slowly. Her clothes felt cold and stretched out. She pulled on her white panties and placed the new mouse-mattress like pad in the crotch.

Its done, Alice thought. She finished dressing and pushed the stall door open. Stepping to the sink—her eyes avoiding the mirror—she could feel something like regret or relief rolling around in the pit of her stomach. She thought she heard something whine softly just on the other side of the wall; *probably a passing car*, she thought. Alice washed her hands, rolling them over each other under the warm water. Then she walked back to her bed and threw her gown over the red spot.

Another blond perky white nurse with a basket of crackers offered Alice a stack of crackers and a juice box. The woman also gave her a prescription and a pamphlet on after-surgery care. She put the crackers and the juice box in the front pocket of her sweatshirt as the woman led her to the back door.

“Ok, take care now,” the nurse said. “There’s a number on the back of that pamphlet I gave you if you have any questions or concerns. Alright?” Alice nodded. The nurse smiled and shut the door behind Alice.

She waited in another dimly lit hallway that opened onto another set of stairs leading down. Alice leaned against the wall and waited for her mother. She stared at the floor, fumbling with the crackers in her pocket. She held one of the packets of crackers in her hand and slowly crushed it; each wafer cracking and disintegrating into powder inside its plastic wrapper.

Her mother entered through the door the nurse had let Alice through. The worried look on her mother’s brow melted away as she approached her daughter. Alice had wanted to say something but her eyes kept welling-up and the words got stuck in her throat. She didn’t want to say she regretted her decision but part of her had, if only for

some instinctual connection with what would've been her child. She knew it would've been a disaster having a child at her age. Her and Noah would end up living in the trailer next door to his parents who, undoubtedly, would make it their mission to make her life hell. No, this was for the best, but the feeling of betraying her womanhood would be something she'd have to work through over time. It all would just take time.

Her mother stood in front of her and for the first time all day, Alice looked her in the eyes. She could tell that her mother had been crying, her eyes red and puffy around the edges. She started to say something but instead cradled her daughter's face in her hands and kissed her forehead. Then looking her in the eyes, her mother broke the silence:

"I know, baby," she said, her voice soft and low. "I know how this feels. You are not alone. You... are not... alone."

Alice nodded, the tears streaming from her still half-dazed eyes.

The two left walked through the parking garage in silence, hand in hand. Her mother disarmed the alarm on her Beamer with the button on her keys, a bright chirp echoing off the cement walls. As they pulled out of the garage, Alice looked back at the front entrance of the clinic. The mob of gray people had dispersed and was replaced by a homeless man pulling long drags off a cigarette. *Like it never happened*, Alice thought.

She stared out of the window of the car as they left Atlantic City. They drove over the bridge connecting the island to the mainland. Her mother pulled a CD case from the pocket of the door and slid the disc into the player. As the CD spun to play, a slow

honeyed rasp of a woman's voice broke the silence: *Birds flying high, you know how I feel*. Alice heard each word as if they were being sung for the first time... *Sun in the sky, you know how I feel*. She had heard this song countless times. It was Nina Simone, one of her mother's favorite recordings, but Alice had written it off as "old people music," not the same happy pop lyrics that she and her friends liked to listen to as they danced around their bedrooms in socked feet. But she could feel the lyrics resonating in her chest... *Breeze driftin' on by, you know how I feel... It's a new dawn, it's a new day, it's a new life for me*. Growing up, Alice had heard every Nina Simone song in her mother's collection. She played them all the time but in this moment, as the street signs filed past, the sun warm on her face, the blood soaked pad between her legs, Nina became her voice. She sang of pain so deep, it felt good.

As they hit the city limits of Vineland and home, they wound their way past fields of various greens and blueberries, drove past sub shops where laughing teens were leaving with deli bags full of subs and chips, past Newberry's Outlet where mothers pulled screaming children behind them, past the mall, the movie theater, and finally past Cooper's Mill Park with the sinkhole in the distance, the yellow warning tape broken away from the posts and snapping in the wind as if it were waving back at Alice.

LADYBUG, LADYBUG

A sliver of orange yellow morning slipped through the curtains and woke Carina. She had overslept, she would need to call the diner and let them know she'd be late. She reached across her snoring boyfriend, Amar, to get to her cellphone. Amar slept like a rock and often for most of the day; the wonders of unemployment. Carina was young, 22, with coco brown skin and long dark hair. Her eyes were black and dagger sharp. People often mistook her for being older, mostly because she never smiled. She liked having that sort of ambiguity. Being an open book was dangerous. Carina had been supporting herself and Amar with her diner money these past six years since Amar was released from prison. She could still recall the day she picked him up from the downtown lock-up. He passed through the gate with the same familiar swagger and grin as if he had never been away, the only thing missing were the long dreadlocks he'd been growing since he was 15. Amar was tall with deep dark brown skin, broad shoulders and a crooked nose he'd gotten while boxing in high school. When he walked up to kiss her he smelled like baby powder and Ivory soap. Carina had hoped something would change in him after being in prison. That he would be the reformed man that prison systems everywhere supposedly strive for, but that didn't seem to be the case with Amar.

The first thing he had wanted to the day he was released was, not go back to the house and make love to Carina, but to go see his boy, Treme, off 6th St to see the next hustle he could get in on. He never smoked weed but he ran it all over Philly, that was how he'd gotten locked-up in the first place. That day, Carina dropped him off at the

corner of 6th and Lombard, he kissed her cheek and said he'd call her in a few. She knew that meant she'd be lucky to hear from him later that night. As he got out of the car, he tossed the prison-issued plastic bag of his belongings in the backseat. It had landed with a thud that made Carina jump.

Now, back in the bedroom Carina had furnished he was still just as comfortable as the day he walked out of jail, if not more so. Mouth wide and roaring with the rattle of sleep, locks almost as long as the day he went in, still on the grind; little had changed.

She dialed the number for work. Dwayne, the cook, answered.

“Diamond Diner,” he said. “Dwayne speaking.”

“Hey, Dwayne, its Carina.”

“Oh, hey, miss lady, how you doing?”

“Fine,” Carina said. “Could you let Phyllis know that I'm running a little late this morning, but I'll be there in a few?”

“Certianly, darlin,” Dwayne replied. “Get here when you can. Hey, Carina?”

“Yeah, Dwayne.”

“Is everything okay?”

“Yeah, Dwayne,” said Carina. “I'm fine. See you in a few.”

She flipped the phone shut and put it back on the nightstand. Amar snorted and groaned, then reached around Carina's waist.

“I gotta get up, baby,” she whispered in Amar's ear. He groaned and squeezed her hips close against his body.

“Not yet,” he said in a gruff voice and rubbed his face against the curve of her neck. She could feel the rough brush of his dreadlocks against her back. He usually tied them up before going to bed but by the morning they had fallen down.

“Baby, I can’t,” Carina said and pulled his hand off her hip.

“Why you gotta be like that?” Amar said and rolled over to grab his pack of Newports off the nightstand.

“I just gotta go to work, babe,” she said. “If I could stay up in this bed with you all day, you know I would.”

“Uh huh,” he said grinning while he took a long drag. “So you say.”

Carina playfully pushed him and climbed out of bed.

“Mmm,” Amar said. “Hate to see you go, love to watch you leave.”

On a cigarette break, Phyllis and Carina stood outside the diner. Phyllis tapped the ash off her cigarette. “Are you pregnant?” She asked Carina.

Carina searched the pocket of her apron for a lighter.

“I sure as hell hope not,” Carina said as she found her lighter and lit her cigarette, the flame catching the end of it on fire. She blew it out and took a long drag.

Phyllis leaned against the brick wall of the diner and pulled her maroon jacket tighter around her thin, aging frame, her dark mahogany face not giving away her age at all. Even her shortly cropped gray hair made her look youthful.

“Well,” Phyllis said. “Women don’t vomit like that for no reason. There’s a logical list we can go by: you either A.) got a stomach virus, but you ain’t feverish so that rules that out, B.) ate the chili Dwayne made today, but I know you ain’t dumb enough to do that so that leaves C.) you, baby girl, is pregnant.” She flicked her cigarette into the street.

Carina knew it was a possibility. She and Amar hadn’t been as careful as they were when they first started dating. Condoms became more of an after-thought in the heat of things. Now, the thought of bringing a life into their one bedroom apartment above the 24 hr pawnshop they lived in was almost as disheartening as the thought of being permanently attached to Amar with a baby. She loved him but knew he would split if it were true, if she were pregnant. He definitely wasn’t the “daddy” type.

“You know,” Carina said. “Nobody’s called me ‘Baby Girl’ since I was little.” She crushed the end of her cigarette against the brick wall and threw the butt into the street.

* * * * *

Up until Carina was about 7 years old, she spent the summers with her grandparents in the North Carolina countryside. Every evening, she would sit at the kitchen table, kicking her little saddle-shoed foot against the leg of her chair while her grandmother, Mama Cohill, made dinner. This was always the best time for her to ask important questions about life like: how are Twinkies made, where do we go when we

die, and why does Dad Cohill always watch TV in his underwear? On her 7th birthday she asked:

“Does it hurt having babies?” She hot-potatoed biscuits from a baking sheet into a basket.

Mama Cohill replied, “About the worst pain you can think of.” She stirred the pot of cabbage greens on the stove. “But women are made extra special so they can just about stand anything. Someday you and SuPop’ll get married and have babies of your own. Then you’ll see.” Mama Cohill set a big mixing bowl in the sink and ran water in it.

“Eww, I don’t even like SuPop anymore and I sure don’t want no baby with him.” Baby Girl set the basket of biscuits on the kitchen table. “Where’s Auntie Moll’s baby gonna come out at when its done?” She brought Mama Cohill dough-covered wooden spoons from the counter.

“Well,” Mama Cohill paused holding a spoon just above the hot water, “the same place it went in.” She tossed the spoons into the sink with a plop, fluffing some of the soap bubbles into the air. “Now go tell your grandfather dinner’s ready and go on up to wash your hands.” Baby Girl popped the bubbles on the counter with the palm of her hand and went into the living room.

She wasn’t sure what Mama Cohill meant about babies coming out where they went in, her mind began to fill in the blanks. She imagined a small baby with a bowler hat and a briefcase knocking on Auntie Moll’s great round belly. *That’s silly*, she thought. But then again, maybe that’s why the belly button pops out, like a doorbell. Then she

imagined a tiny SuPop with the same hat and briefcase, knocking on her belly. *Oh uh-uh*, she thought.

Just then there was a knock on the screen door. It was SuPop.

“Can Baby Girl come out to play?” He asked.

Baby Girl whispered, “Please, Mama Cohill, please.”

“No,” Mama Cohill said. “Dinner’s gonna be ready in less than 15 minutes. You can see him after.”

“Please! We’ll be right outside and I promise not to leave the yard,” Baby Girl begged as though this was the last chance she’d have to play outside ever.

“Fine,” Mama Cohill surrendered. “Go play.”

Baby Girl jumped up and down in a happy dance and then headed for the door.

“But you stay close to the house and listen for me to call you in,” said Mama Cohill.

“I will, I promise,” Baby Girl said and disappeared.

“And no going into those woods,” Mama Cohill said through a slamming screen door.

Baby Girl ran outside to meet the boys. They all stood in the side yard, pushing each other around and wrestling each other to the ground. Simmie had Reggie Jr. in a headlock when Baby Girl approached. They all stopped what they were doing and stared at Baby Girl.

“Why we gotta play with Baby Girl? She’s just gonna cry like a baby,” Simmie mimicked a crying baby and pushed his lens-less black-framed glasses up on his nose.

“Who you calling a baby, ya big baby?” Baby Girl said with her hands on her hips. She hated the fact that her nickname was Baby Girl, she imagined someday using a grown-up name, not Carina, but more like Sheera or Lamborghini. Something respectable.

SuPop stepped between Simmie and Baby Girl, “Come on y’all, stop being stupid. Let’s just play. Besides, I got something I wanna show Baby Girl, since it’s her birthday and all. But we all gotta go by the shed.”

“This better be good,” Simmie said.

They headed toward the shed, checking over their shoulders to make sure Mama Cohill didn’t spot them. Baby Girl was hoping it would be like the time SuPop had to show her the baby birds that fell out of their nest at Auntie Moll’s house. They were pink and wriggling in the grass like tiny fragile pink balloons. Either way, birds or no, she was happy to be hanging out with the older boys instead of being stuck in the kitchen with the old folks.

The shed was about 100-ft away from the house and secluded by oak trees. There was a short overhang that barely protected the riding-lawnmower Dad Cohill often used to keep the side yard from becoming a field. The sun was still pretty bright when they reached the shed but sat heavy in the sky and the orange glow of dusk was beginning to rise. As they all rounded the corner, SuPop reached into the pocket of his overalls and pulled out a red book of matches. It was rather unimpressive to Baby Girl. She saw books

of matches all the time but was never allowed to touch them. Mama Cohill always yelled at Dad Cohill for leaving them out on the counter after lighting his pipe. “Don’t leave these out wear the youngin can get them,” she’d say.

SuPop leaned towards Baby Girl, “Now, look,” he said. “You can’t tell no one about this. This is for big kids only and since your seven and all now, you can be one of us.”

Simmie huffed and crossed his arms. Baby Girl stuck her tongue out at him.

“So how do they work?” Baby Girl asked.

SuPop winked and pulled one of the sticks from the book. He ran it along the black strip on the back of the book and the tiny stick sparked, igniting in front of Baby Girl’s eyes. She watched the flame come from nowhere and slowly burn toward SuPop’s fingers just before he shook it, extinguishing it to a small whisp of smoke.

“I wanna try,” Baby Girl said, eyes wide.

SuPop handed her the matches, a sense of danger and power passed along with the small cardboard square. Baby Girl tore one of the small sticks from the book and tried to run it along the black strip like SuPop had done but there was only a quick flash, no flame. SuPop held her hand and helped her strike the next, adding more pressure and a quicker stroke. It lit in a small burst and pop. Baby Girl, caught off guard, shook her hand and dropped the lit match in the grass. The boys rushed to stomp on top of it in a dance of tennis shoes and muddy boots.

“That’s how Simmie set them woods on fire that time,” SuPop laughed, catching his breath. “You gotta make sure you put it out first. Before you drop it.”

Baby Girl handed the book of matches back to SuPop.

“Nah, you keep ‘em,” SuPop said. “Happy Birthday. Just don’t burn nothing down. And DON’T tell Mama Cohill.”

Baby Girl put the matches in her overall pocket and hugged SuPop, sneaking a kiss on his cheek. The other boys made noises like they were being sick and dramatically grabbed at their throats as if they were being killed by invisible girl cooties.

“GROSS!” They all shouted.

“Shut up!” SuPop said.

“BABY GIRL!” Mama Cohill shouted through the screen door. “Dinner’s ready!”

“Gotta go!” And Baby Girl took off toward the house.

She stopped on the porch and watched the boys take off back across the field towards Auntie Moll’s house. SuPop stopped in the middle of the field, a wide grin on his soft brown face, and waved back at Baby Girl, then disappeared into the field after the other boys.

* * * * *

Amar slid into one of the stools at the counter. “Where’s she at?” he said, leaning over the edge.

Phyllis gestured toward a table where Carina was stacking dirty dishes and coffee cups.

“She’ll be done in a minute,” Phyllis said.

“Aight,” Amar said. He pulled his long dreadlocks back and wrapped a lock around them to keep them up off his neck.

Carina could tell something was up because he never visited her at work unless he needed something. She made her way behind the counter and dropped a stack of dishes into the sink.

“Amar, what are you doing here?” she said.

“I need to use the car,” he said.

“For what?” she asked.

“I gotta drive out to Camden. Pick up my cousin,” He grabbed one of the toothpicks from the dispenser next to the register.

“Well, how am I supposed to get home?” Carina asked. “You gonna pick me up?”

“I might not be back in time,” Amar said. To Carina, that meant she might not see him until tomorrow or possibly the next day. He slid a ten-dollar bill across the counter toward Carina.

“Its Philly, take the bus,” he flipped the toothpick around in his mouth with his tongue. “Besides it ain’t that far.”

“Right,” Carina said, stuffing the money into her apron and putting her hands on her hips. “So, when will you be home?”

“Probably late,” Amar said.

“Right. Real late,” Phyllis interjected, pretending not to eavesdrop.

Carina got the car keys out of her jacket pocket and handed them to him. She knew not to ask a lot of questions. It often led to a fight about her being in his business.

Amar leaned over the counter and kissed Carina's cheek. She didn't move, only looked at him with disapproving eyes. She could smell Black & Milds mixed with her apricot shower gel wash. He had just showered. But there was something else on the collar of his hoodie, something that smelled like vanilla perfume, something not belonging to Carina.

"Love you, girl," Amar said as he headed out the door, the brass bell hanging from it, ringing in agreement.

* * * * *

Baby Girl stood on a stool in front of the sink and made faces in the mirror. Her round brown face, smudged with dirt, her hair no longer in the ponytail her mother had put it in that morning. She ran the water to luke warm and used a washcloth to scrub the dirt off her face. Then she washed her hands, making sure to get the backs and fingernails. Baby Girl dried her hands and then made more faces in the mirror. She stretched her mouth and widened her eyes, making herself laugh. The corner of the matches peeked out of the top of her overalls.

Maybe just one, she thought. She pulled off one of the sticks and ran it down the black strip on the back. It lit with a small burst and pop. Ready for it this time, she held it close to her face and watched the orange-red flame creep down the match toward her fingers. Before it got too close, she shook it until the flame turned to a whisp of smoke. She struck another and another, letting each one burn closer and closer to her small fingers and throwing the dead matches into the trashcan. The very last match, she let it burn all the way to her fingers. Too close, she dropped it. The lit match bounced off the

edge of the sink and into the trashcan. She stomped on top of it, tissue paper flying out of the can until she was satisfied that the match had gone out.

“BABY GIRL!” Mama Cohill yelled up the stairs. “Quit playing in the sink and come eat your dinner.”

Baby Girl stuffed the escaped tissue paper back into the trashcan, being sure to hide the skeleton of the matchbook underneath a pile of trash. She hopped down the stairs, skipping every other one.

* * * * *

Carina put on her jacket and grabbed her purse off the hook on the wall. Phyllis flipped the lights off in the diner and made sure the front door was locked.

“Carina, let me give you a ride home,” Phyllis said. “I don’t want you riding the bus in your condition.” She laughed.

“Real funny,” Carina said. “For that, you will take me home.”

The two ladies walked through the kitchen out of the backdoor into the alley. The back alley of the diner was a daunting place at night and usually home to numerous street rats that wouldn’t budge even at the approach of people. Carina had heard stories of rats running across people’s feet while they walked through the alley, a thought that terrified her. She scanned along the edges of the walls in search of tiny glinting eyes. She saw a set of three next to the dumpster and picked up her pace to catch up with Phyllis.

“So are you late?” Phyllis asked.

“Only a few weeks,” Carina said. “Could be stress.”

“Yeah, the stress of new life!” Phyllis joked. “Take a test when you get home. He ain’t gonna be around for a while.”

“I guess,” Carina said. Part of her didn’t want to know, the truth could be scarier than the possibility.

* * * * *

Baby Girl watched the house crackle and pop in the flames. A choir of cicadas screeched through the valley like a thousand wound tin soldiers. The crackling of burning wood echoed off the surrounding trees. A sea of heat rippled off the flames. Great billows of black smoke darkened the dusky Carolina blue sky. Off in the distance, faint sirens wailed. Crouching silent under an oak tree across the road, Baby Girl, her soft brown cheeks damp with tears, she clung to her singed teddy bear—its soft white fur mangled by the flames, stuck melted to its plush body, one dark eye clouded blue and cracked, its green bowtie askew.

The wind changed. Flames twisted and bent towards the tool shed. Its roof caught fire and was quickly engulfed by flames. Across the road, a wall of smoke headed toward Baby Girl. Too scared to move, she buried her face in her teddy bear and cried. Her arm was throbbing with pain, where a fiery ceiling-beam had grazed her. The smell of smoke was suffocating. From behind the tree, a familiar voice. Her Uncle Carl, who had just gotten home from work shortly before the blaze erupted. He scooped her up and put a

dampened handkerchief over her nose and mouth. It smelled of well water and soot. Baby Girl took short breaths as Uncle Carl carried her towards Auntie Moll's house about a quarter mile down the dirt road. He passed her off to Auntie Moll, who set her down in a rocking chair and rushed inside for bandages and burn salve. She also brought her a glass of iced tea, which Baby Girl tried to sip despite how it stung her dry throat.

The sun was setting. Auntie Moll dabbed burn salve and layered bandages over the little girl's arm. Baby Girl didn't look at Auntie Moll but instead watched a line of black ants run across the railings of the porch.

"Everything's gonna be alright, sweetheart," Auntie Moll whispered as she stroked Baby Girl's hair. "Just try to relax and take deep breaths."

Auntie Moll sat in a rocking chair next to Baby Girl and set a basket of knitting at her feet. Baby Girl peered at her from the corner of her eye and watched as Auntie Moll placed a half done baby sweater on her pregnant belly then searched for another knitting needle in her basket.

The sirens were getting close. Baby Girl could see the blaze from Auntie Moll's porch. Uncle Carl, the boys, and Auntie Moll's husband, Reggie, ran back and forth with buckets of water from the pump across the road to the engulfed farmhouse. Laying in the grass near the pump, Dad Cohill, his legs writhing in pain while a hurt Mama Cohill dabbed his face with a wet rag and tried to keep him still. The backs of her legs were burned from pushing against the burning ceiling beam that had trapped Baby Girl under the kitchen table.

Baby Girl couldn't take her eyes off Mama Cohill's face, even when the air became stuck with hundreds of fireflies. Baby Girl usually spent most nights catching them in jars and smearing their luminescent bodies on her arms and face like war paint, but not tonight. Tonight she watched Mama Cohill's face, watched for her eyes and for the familiar look that said, "I love you, no matter what."

* * * * *

The light from the pawn shop went out as Carina walked up the stairs to her apartment. The plastic drugstore bag tucked in her purse.

The apartment was dark. She could still smell Amar's Black & Mild cigar. She set the bag on the toilet in the bathroom and decided to change clothes before taking the test. She would need to be comfortable for this news.

Once in her sweat pants and Penn State hoodie, Carina sat on the toilet and unwrapped the short white plastic test. She popped the protective covering off the end, not caring where it landed. She had taken pregnancy tests before but this one felt heavier, more real. The other times she had taken them were after being late a few days and just being precautionous but this had been weeks, this had been possible. She did her best to aim the strip in the stream of her pee but still managed to pee on her hand a little. *Great*, she thought.

She set the finished test on the back of the toilet and tried not to look at it. Instead she re-read the instructions to make sure that she knew what she was looking at. *Two-lines, yes. One-line, no*, she whispered to herself. She checked the clock and then shut the door to the bathroom so she wouldn't be tempted to look. Carina distracted herself by

putting away dishes in the kitchen, all the while looking at the clock to hit the three-minute mark. When it did, she slowly opened the bathroom door as if something frightening could leap out and attack her. Something so small and seemingly harmless, weighted to decide her future. She leaned over the test and counted two very clear lines.

“Ah, hell,” she said to herself in the mirror. She sat on the toilet, suddenly the bathroom felt like the most uncomfortable room in the apartment, but she just couldn’t leave.

* * * * *

Baby Girl, exhausted from crying and feeling afraid, turned her attention to Auntie Moll’s belly. She squeezed her teddy bear with her good arm and rubbed her nose in its matted fur.

“Hey,” Auntie Moll said. “You wanna feel? She’s kickin up a storm right now.”

Baby Girl nodded and set her bear down on the rocking chair. She put a hand on Auntie Moll’s belly. It felt hollow but full, like a watermelon. Baby Girl knocked gently, waiting for the familiar thunk, but heard nothing. Auntie Moll smiled and flattened Baby Girl’s hand against the side of her belly. Baby Girl felt a tiny foot push against her hand.

“Is that her movin’ around in there?” Baby Girl asked.

“Sure is. She can’t wait to come out and meet you,” Auntie Moll said.

“We’re gonna do lots of things together,” Baby Girl said. “Lots of things.”

“Where’s your mama been?” Auntie Moll asked. “Has anyone called her about the fire?”

Baby Girl took her hand off Auntie Moll's belly.

"I don't know. She's workin' until eleven, last I heard," Baby Girl said. "I wish she'd come get me."

"I'll give her a call," Auntie Moll said. "Wait here. Fire trucks will be here soon."

The sky began to turn orange sherbet and purple fluff as smoke clouds signal throughout the valley. As Auntie Moll headed back into the house she stopped next to Baby Girl and gently picked something off her singed sleeve.

"Look," Auntie Moll said. "You got a friend." She held her finger up to Baby Girl's face as a tiny red and black ladybug frantically crawled around. As it reached her fingertip, it opened its tiny wings and took off.

"Ladybugs are lucky, you know," said Auntie Moll. "Gotta be a good sign."

Baby girl nodded.

"Baby Girl?" Auntie asked.

"Yeah," Baby Girl said.

"Do you know how the fire started?"

Baby Girl turned her head toward the direction of the ladybug's flight. Her stomach spun uneasy as she watched the tiny bug disappear into the trees.

"Ladybug, ladybug, fly away home," whispered Baby Girl as she closed her eyes, the rumble and whirl of fire trucks making its way over the hill and toward the burning house.

* * * * *

Carina had shut the door to bathroom behind her and locked the door. She balanced her cellphone between her cheek and her shoulder.

“What would your mama think?” Phyllis asked on the other end.

“I don’t know,” Carina fiddled with the lighter in her pocket. “I haven’t talked to her since Amar got out of prison. She wanted me to leave him.”

“She was just looking out for her little girl,” Phyllis said.

“It have been nice if she had stuck around instead of cutting me off,” Carina said.

“True,” Phyllis said. “But sometimes it’s hardest to say the things you need, to the people you love.”

“I need my mom,” Carina said.

“Well, call her,” Phyllis said.

Carina kicked the pregnancy test box across the floor of the bathroom.

“You gonna tell Amar?” Phyllis asked.

“I don’t know what I’m gonna do,” Carina said. “I don’t think I can do this with him.”

* * * * *

Inside the burning farmhouse, flames consume room after room, wall after wall. Flames lap through the screen door; it twists and bends through the heat. The linoleum floor dots with pools of melted black and silver, the edges curl revealing more wood to burn. The last of the bedroom windows explodes upstairs, blowing ashes of lace curtains and mattress fluff into the front yard. Flames ripple along the ceiling in a sea of hot

orange ribbons. A great pinwheel of flames, the ceiling fan in the living room spins slowly. A guitar in a closet *tinks* and *thunks* in a disheartened serenade. Ashen heat creeps across the wooden slats of the house, curling paint and wallpaper alike. White smoke pushes through the chimney and attic windows desperately escaping towards twilight. A horse-tack box filled with quilts and a wedding dress falls through the attic floor landing on a half collapsed bed. The whine of steaming wood snaps under the roar of the inferno. Glass pops in picture frames as smiling portraits bubble and crack. Misshapen plastic bowls bend as wax fruit melts over the mantle and drips onto a burning easy chair. Metal springs moan and pop in the couch and chairs, slicing through foam and upholstery. A ghostly ring comes from the brown phone hung next to the blackened refrigerator. The ceiling of the kitchen caves in crushing half the stove and landing on the kitchen table, catapulting plates of half eaten food and a basket with a red checker towel into a flaming laundry pile. In the bathroom, the mirror above the sink clouds and sighs as the cardboard backing crinkles to ash. Three melting toothbrushes drip red, yellow, and green into the smoke stained porcelain sink. A small purple toothbrush set on the edge of the sink slides half melted into a fiery trashcan. Ash petals from a burnt book of matches float up from the trashcan, out the open window, and in to the night sky.

* * * * *

Carina wrapped the test and the box in the drugstore plastic bag. She put on her jacket and slid on her tennis shoes. Her cellphone in her pocket, she unlocked the front door. Carina looked down both ends of the hallway to make sure that no one was coming

and tucked the plastic bag inside her jacket. She headed toward the back door that opened onto the alley behind the building where the dumpster was.

As she climbed down the stairs she saw two small dark figures, lit by the streetlight, scitter toward the dumpster. *Damn rats*, she thought.

As she approached the dumpster, she pulled the plastic bag from her jacket. Lifting the lid, she tossed the bag in and let the lid slam shut. She stood in the dark alley, staring at the dumpster. The echo from the slamming lid, bouncing between the brick walls. The wind wafted the sickening sweet smell of garbage up from the dumpster and swirled it around Carina. She knew the rats were close, watching from underneath their dark hiding place, but the thought of rats running over her feet was somehow less daunting than what she was preparing to face.

She flipped open her cellphone and scrolled through her contacts to her mother's phone number. She pushed the "call" button and waited for the ring. It rang five times before it went to her voicemail, each ring resonating in Carina's chest. She waited for the beep and then snapped her phone shut.

Carina leaned against the wall of the alley and slid to sit on the ground. She put her hands inside her sleeve and felt along the bumpy scar on the back of her left arm. *Still there*, she thought. She found the lighter in her pocket and held it in front of her face. She flicked it to light, the tiny orange-red flame inches from her nose, then she blew it out. She did it again, this time looking past the flame, she saw under the dumpster, a pair of tiny glinting eyes, staring back at her, watching her from the darkness.

“Its not your’s,” Carina said to Amar. After she had told him she was pregnant, he sat on their couch with his head in his hands. He flipped his head back so his locks swished over his head and down his back.

“Whatchu mean *not mine*,” he said, glaring at Carina. “Who you been creeping with?”

“None of your business,” Carina said. “The only thing you need to know is that it’s not YOURS.”

“Girl, I swear to God...” Amar started.

“Don’t bring him into this,” she said. “You’ve been messing around on me for years and I never said a thing. Just took it. So I found a real man, who’s gonna treat me how I deserve to be treated.”

“I don’t have to listen to this crap,” Amar said as he began to stand up.

“SIT DOWN,” Carina demanded. “I’ve been taking your bullshit all this time. You have some nerve. Through the lies, prison, the women, the “grind”... I’ve been with you but I cain’t do it no more, Amar. I’m done.”

Amar lit a cigarette and tossed the lighter on the coffee table. He leaned against the couch and stretched his arms across the back as if reclining in a throne.

“So that’s it then,” he said. “We through. After nine years. We through?”

Carina took the dishtowel off her shoulder and wiped her hands on it. Usually, in arguments they had in the past this would be the point she’d breakdown and forgive him. He would kiss her neck and she would melt back into his arms as he would softly sing “Carina, Carina” into her ear, but she was not budging this time, there was something else

fueling her stand. A last act of desperation to get her life back on track not just for herself but for her child and she knew Amar could not be apart of it. He had to go.

“It is what it is, baby,” Carina said, surprised at her frankness. “I can’t do this anymore. And now I got my child to think about.”

“What if I don’t believe you,” Amar said.

“Believe what you want,” Carina said. “It don’t matter. I don’t love you anymore.”

“Right,” Amar said as he stood up and grabbed his jacket off the back of couch. “You never loved me. You just wanted a thug to throw down on you. Whatever, man, I don’t need this shit no more anyhow. You ain’t the only broad looking for some deep dickin’.”

Carina slapped his face. Amar grinned and rubbed his jaw. “Get... the fuck... OUT,” she said.

“Gladly, bitch,” Amar said. “Good luck with your bastard child.”

Amar headed for the door, stuffing his cigarettes in his pocket.

“Good luck with your bastard LIFE!” Carina shouted after him as he slammed the door.

Once Amar was gone, the apartment looked different. The dim light from the street lamp out front etched long, lean, sharp shadows on the far wall from the fern Carina had hung in the window. Something she had never noticed before. She smoothed her hand over her abdomen and felt for any sign of life; a wiggle, a gurgle, a pinch, anything. There was nothing, just the soft curve of her stomach and sharp shadows on her

wall. The uncomfortable silence of her apartment was broken by the vibrating buzz of her cell phone on the coffee table. On the caller ID Carina read “Mom.” She flipped her phone open, unsure of what to say. Six years of silence rushed to block her voice.

“Hello,” Carina managed to say.

“Baby Girl?” Her mother said.

Carina closed her eyes, an uneasiness settled in her stomach. Her mother’s voice repeated, *baby girl... baby girl... baby girl.*

RITUAL MATING

Sadie left the bar as it closed. She wanted nothing more than to go home and crash on her new velvet-covered bed. She bought the comforter because it was purple velvet and reminded her of something from *Arabian Nights*. She even got tasseled gold accent pillows to add to the illusion. It was an impulse buy and something she normally wouldn't be caught dead walking out of the store with but there was something about the way the velvety soft fibers brushed along her hand when she ran it across the display model in the store. She had stood there for ten minutes brushing the deep purple back and forth from light to dark and back again. It would be more appropriate in the bedroom of some sex-vixen or at least a woman having sex at all, not like Sadie. She hadn't had sex since her last serious boyfriend in high school three years ago; college was proving to be harder ground to crack in that department. She briefly dated a guy she met in her Biology class for two months, but he had some weird thing with not eating bacon or driving at night. Trivial but huge when one night she had craved a bacon cheeseburger from Wendy's after going out drinking and having fun, then her boyfriend looked at her funny and demanded to be chauffeured back to his place—talk about complicated. They had barely kissed, let alone made it to her bed, but she was actually a little relieved—who knows what kind of crazy he could've been hiding.

She stepped out of the orange, smoky haze of the bar and into the crisp moist night. The chilled air beacons thoughts of her soft, warm bed. It was the first time Sadie had ever bought something so domestically inclined. Everything else in her apartment

had been hand-me-downs from friends and family or leftovers from roommates, but the velvet comforter was all her's. Once she had gotten home with it, she immediately rolled up her old comforter, the one with pink daisies on it that she'd had on her bed since she was twelve, and tossed it in her closet. She pulled the purple mass of velvet from its plastic bag and ran her hand along one more time. As she laid it out on her bed and smoothed the fibers all in the same direction, she felt the atmosphere of her bedroom change. She arranged the small gold accent pillows the same way she had seen it done on the display model and then she took a step back. This was now a grown-up bed.

Sadie headed toward her apartment, her arms tucked around her tight, thinking only of the velvety-soft comforter that waited for her at home. Lost in thought, she rounded the corner and ran head long into a young man with short, spiky dreadlocks and headphones on. She vaguely knew him from a house party she had gone to about a month ago. When she met him she thought he was an asshole, a Neo-soul wannabe spouting off about how mainstream hip-hop was the decline of our generation's youth. He said this while standing in the middle of a group of blond-haired blue-eyed freshman girls, all very interested in what this "authentic" black man was telling them. Sadie rolled her eyes a lot that evening. Even the dreadlocks he had looked forced. As if the hair knew he was full of shit and purposefully screwed itself up as a warning to the world that he was fake. Now she was forced to talk to him again.

"Oh, excuse me," she said, avoiding eye contact.

"Its all good," he said. "Hey, Sadie, right?"

She was caught. The comforting thoughts of her warm bed were now replaced with thoughts of how to get out of this conversation, but she was impressed that he had remembered her name. She, however, could not remember his. She knew it was something odd like 'P' or 'D' or 'E', some letter.

“Oh, hey,” she replied. “I’m real sorry but I’m terrible with names.”

“DP,” he said.

“Right,” she said. “I remember you from Naveen’s house party a few months back. How have you been?”

“Doing alright,” he said. “Trying to get into this music thing, you know.” He pulled the headphones off his head.

“Really,” she said. “Like rapping or what?”

“DJing,” he said. “I’ve done a couple house parties for some kids over on the Westside. They seem to like it.”

The Westside was notorious for being the rich white suburban end of town where neighborhoods had gates and landscapers.

“Must be an interesting gig,” she said.

“Not really,” he joked. “A bunch of spoiled white kids bouncing around to NWA like they think they’re from Compton or some shit, but the money’s right so I’m up for the hustle.”

Sadie felt something inside her soften for him. Perhaps she had jumped too quickly in her judgment of him.

“So where are you off to,” he asked.

“Home,” she said.

“Would you maybe wanna hang out for a little while or something? No pressure, seriously,” he said.

Sadie knew that “hanging out” was often boy-code for “wanna do it?” She searched through her purse for her pack of cigarettes. Maybe the sensual power of the velvet comforter had worn off on her. She admittedly felt more confident in the idea of bringing someone back to her place with her newly created grown-up bed laying in wait. She pulled out a cigarette and DP lit it for her. She blew out a curl of smoke and scanned DP. He was dressed in baggy jeans and an old fatigue jacket.

“Sure,” she said. “I lived about nine blocks up the road.”

DP grinned and the two walked side-by-side into the night.

Sadie was never one of those girls who considered herself promiscuous or even a flirt. She hated those girls who always seemed to drape themselves over every available (or not available) man in the bar. They always seemed to go home with someone but the guy was never sober and often looked pathetic. There was even more resentment if the flirty girls had long blond hair that they tossed around and flipped in the faces of their unsuspecting victims. Sadie was neither blond, nor had the kind of hair to be flipped in men’s faces. She was a skinny black girl from Santee, SC. Her hair simply could not flirt.

“Well, what you wanna do?” Sadie flicked the end of her cigarette, the ashes floated over to land on DP’s jeans. He brushed off the ash and shoved his hands in his pockets.

“Sorry about that,” she said.

“Its aight,” he said. “Adds to my edge.”

Sadie laughed.

“I don’t know. What do you wanna do?” he asked. “We can get a sub or something and watch a movie?”

“Alright then,” she flicked her cigarette in to the street and they walked into the sub shop, conveniently open until 3. Nothing like a sub on a stomach full of beer, Sadie thought. DP bought their subs and they continued to Sadie’s place.

Once they got to Sadie’s place, DP immediately asked to use her bathroom. She wondered about how drunk he was and if that was why he had asked to “hang out” with her. Maybe he just didn’t want to make the long trek back to his place, so he’d detour and maybe get laid. Sadie shuffled some mail and magazines off her coffee table and unwrapped her sub. A few moments later, DP dropped down onto the couch next to her and reached for his sub.

They sat in silence eating their subs and watching “Futurama.” Sadie offered him a beer though she suspected he didn’t need one. Neither did she but no one likes to drink alone. She had three Yuenglings and a PBR in the back of her fridge, leftovers from a dinner with friends last week. She handed DP a beer. He cracked it open and went back to eating. She hated watching guys eat. They all stuff food in their mouths like somebody is going to steal it.

“So what’s your deal?” Sadie asked. “Every time I’ve seen you around, you’re usually with white girls. I didn’t think you’d be into someone like me.”

“What?” DP choked on a mouthful of his sub. “What is that supposed to mean? I just thought you were cute.”

“You never talked to me before,” she could sense the angry-black-woman accusation in his eyes. “I mean, I just thought maybe you had a preference. Just curious. No big deal.”

“I don’t know. They’re just always around these bars and parties, I guess,” DP stopped eating his sub and set it on the coffee table. “I never really thought about it.”

“I just don’t want to be some kind of experiment or some bullshit.”

“Well, damn, Angela Davis. I just came over cuz you seemed nice and I wanted to get to know you. I didn’t think I’d have to be representing my race or nuthin.” DP stood up next to the couch. “I’m not trying to get caught up, just have a goodtime. You want me to go?”

“No,” Sadie changed the channel to HBO, a documentary on the Waorani tribes of Ecuador was starting. “I was just curious, I guess. Don’t worry about it. You want another beer?”

“Sure,” DP sat back down. On the TV, two tribal chiefs sat opposite each other, a healthy bonfire between them, a white anthropologist standing off to the side. The two tribesmen clicked and clucked in a language not written in books. One of the chiefs with a bone spike piercing through his chin passed a package wrapped in a banana leaf to the anthropologist. The subtitle read *sacred meat of the hunt*. The anthropologist displayed the “meat” to the camera, a bright red lump of flesh the size of a fist rested in the center of the leaf, the heart of a jungle boar. Each of the men used a large knife to slice a piece

of the heart and ate it raw, and then they began to negotiate about a potential marriage between the tribes.

Sadie went to the kitchen passing by her bedroom on the way, her velvety purple bed dimly lit by the small desk lamp on her nightstand—a warm nest of pillows and velvet. She noticed one of the pillows had fallen out of place and part of her had wanted to run in a fix it but instead she continued to the kitchen and pulled two beers from the fridge. When she shut the door DP was leaning against the door jam, his eyes scanning her. She handed him a beer, he opened it and took a sip and then set it on the counter.

“The truth is, black women can be intimidating to a brotha like me,” he said. “You walk around with your guard up like somebody’s always out to get you. Makes it hard to know if you’re really feeling a brotha or not.”

Sadie opened her beer, took a sip, and curled the cold can against her chest.

“Its four hundred years of conditioning,” she said. “Gotta keep my guard up to keep the bullshit out.”

DP nodded. “Likewise,” he replied. “That’s why I had to talk to you tonight. I’ve had my eye on you for a while.”

“Really?” Sadie was shocked.

“I was scoping you at Naveen’s,” DP said. “I was spittin’ some of my best philosophical shit to try and get you to pay attention to me, but no matter what I said you wouldn’t give me the time of day. Every time I looked over at you, you were rolling your eyes or walking away. I thought you was stuck up or something.”

“STUCK UP?” Sadie asked, offended that her social anxiety could be misconstrued as being ‘stuck up.’ Admittedly she had rolled her eyes at DP’s ‘game’ but stuck up? Not her.

“I’ve never been called, ‘stuck up’ before,” she said. “For real?”

“Well,” DP said. “I just calls it likes I see it, lady.”

“Just because a girl likes to keep to herself,” she began.

“And roll her eyes,” he interjected.

“Oh, right,” she said. “I mean, you sounded so full of yourself talking to those freshmen.”

“And you,” he said. “Sounded like a bitch.”

He said this jokingly but the word still struck a nerve in Sadie.

“Ouch, playa,” Sadie said. “Easy with labels.”

“Labels come in all sorts of packages, girl,” DP said. “Words, gestures... glances.”

“Touché,” Sadie said.

On the TV in the background, the Waorani tribeswomen were performing a bridal right of passage where the women of the tribe wash and dress the young woman then each female elder presented her with something useful for her new home. One tribeswoman gave the bride a set of leather straps to help in hauling firewood, another gave a metal bowl that had been pounded out by hand, and lastly the bride received a wool blanket to line the ritual wedding hammock. The bride was very grateful and hugged each woman with respectful enthusiasm.

Sadie set her beer down and leaned on the opposite side of the door jam.

“So what made you talk to me tonight?” she asked.

“You don’t remember do you?” DP asked. “ At the party, I tripped on the rug in the kitchen. I didn’t fall or anything but you were standing nearby and quickly was like ‘you ok?’ You weren’t looking at my face or anything but it was the way you reacted so fast. Most people would’ve ignored something like that or laughed, I guess. It was like your kindness was an instinct, despite the obvious fact that you didn’t like me.”

“I don’t remember that,” Sadie said.

“Well, that’s how it happened,” he said. “So I figured, what’s the worst that could happen, I talk to her and she’ll politely tell me to ‘fuck off’ but if she let’s me walk her home... who knows.”

DP said this while leaning towards Sadie, making the move. She leaned back without any hesitation, but then she stopped.

“How do you feel about bacon?” she asked.

“You kidding me? Put it on everything,” he grinned and then kissed her.

“I wanna show you something,” she said and led him down the hallway to her bedroom.

“Hm,” DP said.”

“What?” Sadie asked. She thought maybe he didn’t fully appreciate the splendor of the purple velvet the same way she did. Maybe she had judged his character too quickly, once again. She waited for him to say something hurtful.

“That’s the gaudiest thing I’ve ever seen,” he replied.

Sadie was hurt. Great time to show your jerk-colors, she thought.

“But you have to feel it,” she said as she rubbed the fibers back and forth, light to dark.

“Alright, I’ll try anything once,” he said, then smoothed a hand over the velvet. He closed his eyes. Sadie watched his face. He stopped mid swipe and opened his eyes.

“I’m sold. Its like a giant purple Chinchilla,” he said.

“I know, right!” she replied. “Its so soft!”

Sadie sat on the edge of the bed and DP plopped down next to her.

“Can I kiss you again?” he asked.

Sadie nodded.

“Who knew,” DP said as he caressed Sadie’s cheek and leaned in for a kiss.

On the TV in the living room, the chief of the Waorani tribe and his followers performed a marriage ceremony. Surrounded by the tribe’s people and countless gift offerings, the bride and groom circled the fire in the middle of the tent, and then the young bride unfurled the wool blanket and spread it across a hammock. The groom laid down first and the hammock bowed and swayed under his weight. Meanwhile the tribe chanted. Next the bride climbed in the hammock, snuggled tightly against the groom. The hammock bowed and swayed even more, almost as if to break. The chief pulled the edges of the blanket around the couple to create a cocoon as the tribe chanted, “You must not leave this man ever. You must be like two birds in a nest.”

SINNERS, SAINTS, AND STORMS

Oak Lynn Baptist's church steeple hadn't been repaired since last summer's tornado that nearly tore off the roof. It was mostly intact except for the three foot tall cross that had snapped in half during the storm and was found about a mile down the road, stuck in the side of Harry Reynold's tool shed. After the storm had passed, Harry pried the cross from the shed and walked it up the road, back to Oak Lynn, tucked under his arm, wrapped in burlap. Because no one had the means or the money to pay to replace the cross, the preacher thought it an acceptable memorial to plant the broken cross next to the walkway in front of the church. The parishioners agreed. To this day, there's a jagged piece of wood about a foot tall, sticking out the top of the steeple, stabbing at the sky.

That day there was not a cloud in the sky for miles. There was a warm dampness in the air, foreboding one of Fayetteville's notorious afternoon storms, but right then, cloudless. Folks were dressed in their finest. Women wore hats flourished with feathers and flowers in colors never found in nature. Men wore the only suits they owned outside of their factory overalls and work khakis. They dabbed sweat from their brows with handkerchiefs as they greeted and chatted with each other as family, a church family. Most had been coming to Oak Lynn Baptist since they were small and they've watched each other grow with family and girth. They've prayed over the world and each other every Sunday and some on Wednesdays for night services.

The choir filed out into the yard. No longer wearing their robes, a few choir members lingered inside clapping and singing, "If you wanna help me Jesus, its alright!"

Their voices boomed bright, resonating through the church hallway and out into the yard. Preacher Hill and his wife, Ester, stood next to each other by the doorway of the church talking with the parishioners as they leave. Sick family members, children off to college, broken down trucks, and two-timing men, dominate the conversations. The kind of talk that goes between folks who spend every Sunday praying for the tainted souls of the world's sinners and Tessa's Aunt Nettie's hip surgery. The same folks who take in each other's children during vacations and weeknights when parents take on the third shifts. Some were once old flames either in high school or last spring but are now married to other members of the congregation. It was a perfect Sunday afternoon and though the service is over, there is always a dinner served so parishioners are in for the long haul.

On a long table, platters of food and stacks of napkins and paper plates are set. It wasn't long before everyone loaded up their plates with Marcel's chicken and dumplings, Tiffany's turnip greens, Edna's macaroni and cheese, TJ's turkey meatballs, and Nettie's butter biscuits. Ester fixed a plate for her husband. She paid little attention to keeping the food separate on the plate; the chicken and dumplings bled into the macaroni and cheese, soaking the bottom the biscuits into a soggy, doughy mass. Her cousin, Tammy, was in line behind her, fixing her husband, Eddie's, plate. Tammy was petite and round with the kind of face that only smiled when her baby niece grabbed her nose and cooed.

"These men are useless without us." Tammy plopped a spoonful of Reggie's potato salad in the middle of the plate.

“Don’t I know.” Ester stabs a fork into the mashed potatoes on her plate. “The other night he asked me where he had left his planner. As if it is my job to keep track of all his things.”

She had, in fact, known where he left his planner but felt it was the principle of the thing to let him figure it out for himself. That night, James tore apart his office looking for his planner and eventually found it underneath the passenger seat of his car. When he returned home, Ester had asked him if he found it. James did not reply.

Tammy fumbled with the tongs for TJ’s turkey meatballs. “Well, at least James is faithful to you. Ever since Eddie cheated on me with that two-bit hooker, Charlene, last summer, we just haven’t been the same.” She flicked a speck of potato salad off her hand. “You know, I heard she gave one those boys down at Fort Bragg the Clap. And I knows its true. Lord knows, I made Eddie get one of those tests before I let him back in the house.” Her laugh

“Right.” Ester said, she rolled her eyes. “James may be a preacher but he ain’t no saint.”

“Ha,” Tammy laughed. “Ain’t none of them saints, girl. You remember Malvinia’s fiancé, Pierre, from Barbados or some island like that?” She gestured toward the young woman in a purple hat with a great green plume.

Ester nodded.

“She almost left the church, she was so tore up over him.” She put a biscuit on the edge of her plate. “She caught him with her best friend in their own bed.”

“Nicole?” Ester asked.

“Yes ma’am. I heard she went after them with a butcher’s knife. Cut the girl’s face up.”

“Good Lord. I wondered what happened to that girl.”

“Her mama sent her to stay with her aunt in Brooklyn, last I heard.”

“What are we doing to ourselves, Tammy?”

Tammy shook her head. “So you think James is cheating on you?”

“I don’t know. I just know he’s been acting strange. Staying out late. Last week he strolled in after one in the morning. Said he was working late.”

“Was he out drinking?”

“Not that I could tell. But I did find a note in his jacket from an Elise that said ‘thank you for the other night.’ What do you suppose that means?” Ester asked, but not really. She grabbed more napkins than she needed.

James met Ester at the end of the line. She handed him his plate and the stack of napkins. For a minute their eyes met and a deep silence passed between them. Tammy ducked out of line and headed toward Eddie across the yard.

“I think we need to talk.” James supported Ester’s elbow as they walked away from the table and toward an oak tree at the edge of the driveway. By then, parishioners were whispering and glancing over at the couple.

“Is there something you want to ask me?”

Ester shifted her weight to one hip and crossed her arms. “Just talking to my cousin, why? Does that bother you?”

“It does if you’re spreading lies about me. If you got something to ask. Ask. But don’t go running your mouth to Tammy, of all people. The woman spreads gossip like peanut butter.”

“Who says they’re lies, James?” She pinned emphasis on his name.

“I honestly don’t know what’s gotten into you. Why can’t you just trust me? Let’s talk about this inside. People are staring at us.” He reached for her arm but Ester pulled it away.

“Who’s Elise?”

“What? Are you still on that? I told you she was a friend of Marcel’s who wanted some advice about her relationship. I’m a preacher. Its my job.”

“But why does your job require her to meet you at all hours of the night. On a weekday?”

“Ester. She was in crisis and I was trying to help.”

“I bet you were. How many young girls do you help out of crisis, James?” She pinned again.

James turned away and then back. “What were you doing leaving that bar with Reggie last Thursday?”

Ester looked stunned. She and Reggie fooled around in high school while she was dating James. Reggie was a thug who hustled at the local pool hall after school. The kind of boy that fascinated Ester but only for a fling. Reggie joined the army just before Ester realized she was pregnant, but by then she had already agreed to marry James. She knew there was a chance Reggie was the father but it was a chance she was willing to ignore

for the security of marrying a preacher's son. Now, Reggie was back and old habits die hard, but it was just a drink or two. Nothing serious but she liked to see this jealous streak in James. It was the most attention he had given her in months. Now she knew why.

“He was in crisis, too.” She said as she slowly rolled her hips to one side.

James sucked his teeth. He shoved Ester away from him. She stumbled backwards, tripped on a branch and landed on her butt in the mud. A few people nearby gasped and a general chatter began to rise from the crowd. *What just happened? Did he hit her? He pushed her? My Lord! Is she ok? I never would've thought! Preacher Hill hit her! Preacher Hill hit her!*

* * *

James recoiled to his office on the second floor of the church. The voices of the congregation chattering outside his window picked at his soul. He slammed it shut and watched as Tammy and a few other women comforted a kneeling Ester, her light blue skirt dinged brown from the ground. He knew they were talking about him. Wondering what had happened and how he could do such a thing. They didn't understand. She had questioned his faithfulness—not to God, but to her.

He sat down in his office chair, the crick and crack of his knees mocked by the popping springs. He leaned back and closed his eyes. The cold fluorescent glow of the overhead lights seeped in through his eyelids. The image of his wife retreating from his hands and falling to the ground and how her eyes went from the deep, soft melting brown that he had been seduced by the first time they met to the hard, cold obsidian of a woman humiliated was etched in his mind. It was a look he had never seen from his wife, though

recently the soft, melting brown had begun to take on a muted sense of boredom. He noticed but didn't have the words to fix things. He could usually smooth things over with an offer to wash the dishes or bringing her favorite food from Regina's Kitchen: fried okra, catfish, and key lime pie. Most of the time he thought it best to just stay out of her way when she got into one of her moods, but now this. This could never be smoothed over with clean dishes and catfish.

He'd been preaching at this church for longer than he could remember, even before he had married Ester—it was the family business. As a teenager, James spent almost everyday after school at his father's church. His father had passed away almost 15 years ago and in his will James was listed as the sole beneficiary of his worldly belongings: a '76 Cadillac Seville, 10-acres of land out in the middle of Cumberland County, and coincidentally, this church, through the ceremony of a church vote. He had even inherited his father's sermon notes, which James referred to regularly when he found himself short on prep time for Sunday mornings. Having to uproot would not only be impossible but he knew this would follow him, like a sick dog.

He hadn't heard her sass like that since they were in high school. Motherhood and the church life had worn down her spirit since her wild days of cutting class to cross the tracks and go dancing. Back when she would beg him to go with her and he would refuse; bible study and a father with a wrought iron fist. She would shimmy through the hallway, out the back door of the school and into the daylight. Once, she came back from one of those trips and told James about how her and her friends drove all the way to the ocean where she was the only one who dared to dive off the Devil's Peak. James had imagined

her stepping barefoot onto the jagged rocks, her friends begging her not to go. She stood at the edge of the cliff, her heart pounding, the waves below frothy white, egging her on. Arms spread, she leaned forward, eyes closed, surrendering to gravity and the soft sun on her face. Her slender, dark body wrapped in her white school dress, she falls effortlessly, like a strange bird knocked from a heavenly nest—the edges of her skirt flapping in the wind, a wide grin on her angelic face just before she breaks through the surface of the water. He envied that—her ability to fall, let go, and let God. But, now... now she didn't even dance anymore, let alone dive off cliffs. Something had changed in Ester after they were married. Less than a year after the wedding, their son, James Jr., was born and their lives had suddenly spiraled into domesticity and that muted brown that was now Ester's eyes.

James flipped open his big black planner with gold trim. The pages were damp and heavy with humidity. The small boxes of the month were each filled with scrawling black and red ink: marriage-counseling appointments, church dinners, soup kitchen nights, choir practices, various other church events. On Tuesday, August 25th, written in pencil was “Happy Birthday, Honey!” in Ester's looping familiar script. She loved birthdays and always made a big deal about his and the kids'.

Two years ago, for James' birthday, Ester planned a party for him at the church. The entire congregation was there. The spread of food alone took four days of planning and three days of cooking. Ester bossed people about decorations, where to set the food, and what the choir would sing. He loved to watch her run things—it was when her spirit most reminded him of how she was back in high school. They had taken a picture that

day of everyone gathered in front of the church—the congregation, the kids, he and Ester—grinning like fools, James the only one wearing a ridiculous birthday hat. The picture hung on the wall of his office next to the door. He looked at it every day, the hat, mostly, that ridiculous hat, but also Ester’s face, squished against his chest and smiling.

Now, in two weeks and three days—he’d be 56 and probably alone. *I hit her... I hit her... damnit, I hit her.*

The idea of facing the crowd of gawkers outside made his stomach flip. *How do I fix this? Please, Lord, help me.* Just then there was a soft knock on the door. James hesitated, thinking perhaps they would think he had left after the incident.

“Preacher Hill?” It was Tammy. The wood door muffled her voice, strikingly similar to Ester’s, if not for Tammy’s Southern twang. “Ester wanted me to tell you that she... she’s gone home and thinks you should stay here, at the church, tonight.”

As James leaned forward in his chair it creaked slow and long, the sound of springs about to snap. “Thank you, Tammy.” Outside his window, cars started up and pulled out of the parking lot, grinding the gravel of the driveway. “Has everyone else gone?”

“Yes, I believe that is the last of them.” She still hadn’t opened the door and James was just fine with that. “Are you going to be ok here tonight? I could have Eddie bring you some things from the house.”

“No, thank you. I’ll be just fine.” James expected an answer but instead he heard the shuffle and click of Tammy’s heels as she headed down the hallway. He flipped on his small desk lamp with the green glass shade. It glowed an emerald warmth that muted

the glare of the overhead lights. He pulled a gray T-Shirt and navy blue sweatpants he had left after one of the church Field Days from the bottom drawer of his desk and set them in his lap. There was nothing left to do but try to make the best of his night.

James flipped on the light in the church kitchen. The fluorescent bulbs buzzed and snapped as they warmed to glow ill green-white light. The kitchen smelled of the earlier day's cooking and the slight must of damp emanating from the cement walls. The fridge was larger than most average home fridges and covered in pictures of church events. He opened its door to find leftovers from last night's soup kitchen—beef stew and some stale dinner rolls—and from this afternoon's dinner. The date was written on the tops of each container in Ester's handwriting. He grabbed a few of the containers and set them on the counter next to the massive gas range. He set a small saucepan on one of the eight burners and turned the range knob until it clicked and a bright blue flame erupted around the tiny pan. He spooned some of the cold stew into the pan, being sure to get some decent chunks of beef. The pan was too small for the large burner so James had to be careful not to tip it when he stirred.

As the stew began to bubble, a flash of lightning made the overhead light flicker. *Would serve me right to be stuck in here in the dark.* He set the pan of stew on a hot pad and searched for a bottle of water in the fridge. James made his way back to his office, pan of stew, stale rolls, and bottle of water, all precariously balanced between his hands. He passed through the dark main hall of the church. The pews, a rippling of dark wood tipped with the reflection of light coming from the hallway. He sat down in one of the

back pews and set the pan of stew next to him. The lacquer of the wood, tacky with humidity. He leaned against the pew in front of him and thought about Elise.

She had come to him a few weeks ago after service, wanting to talk to him about her boyfriend. They had gone into his office after Ester headed home. She was young, about 25, with all the soft honey brown curves of youth and a life yet lived. She was wearing a cream colored dress with a neckline that crossed right at the curve of her cleavage. Even as a preacher it was difficult for James to ignore. He initially agreed to meet her with the full intention of giving her advice about her relationship, but somehow his mind began to wander to thoughts of touching her. Just being in the same room as her, made him feel younger. At one point she took out a tube of lipgloss and rubbed it on her lips. A gentle whisp of strawberry caught his nose.

“So what seems to be the trouble, Elise.” He had asked, redirecting his attention to shuffling papers on his desk.

“I think my boyfriend, Albert, has a drinking problem and I’m not sure what to do about it.”

“Does he go to church?”

“No. I’ve tried to get him to come but he says church just ain’t for him.”

“Do you think he’d come in to just talk to me?”

“I don’t know. I guess I could ask him, but I don’t know if he’d go for it.”

“Well, see if he’ll just come by. It doesn’t have to be on Sunday. Just let me know what would work best for him.”

About a week later, James got a call in his office late one night. It was Elise crying on the phone. She said Albert had gotten drunk and hit her and could she come see him. James agreed, then called Ester to tell him that he'd be home late. When Elise arrived she was wrapped in a long trench coat, her face visibly swollen on one side and her hair wrapped in a blue silk kerchief. James made her some tea and got her blanket. She curled up on the couch in his office and they talked about her options.

“Do you have any family that you could go stay with?” James had asked.

“My mama lives in Lexington, but I don't want to leave church. Its my only place to escape.”

“I know, but let me call a friend of mine. He's a preacher at Christ's Holy Light Baptist there in Lexington. I'm sure they would welcome you with open arms. Its just til you work out what to do. You'll always be welcome here.”

They had talked for hours about Albert, about Christ, and about high school. James let Elise sleep there for the night and by the time he got home to Ester it was well after one in the morning. He crept into their bedroom and slid in to bed next to his wife. He could tell by her breathing that she was awake but neither of them said anything. He feel asleep that night with the thought of Elise's soft hands caressing his face, the hint of strawberry lulling him to sleep.

James was startled by a flash of lightning. The dark church echoed with thunder. Rain clattered against the windowpanes, a symphony of tinkling glass.

“I’m sorry, James.” A familiar voice broke from the other side of the church, in a pew across the aisle from his. It was Ester.

“Jesus, Ester. You about gave me a heart attack.”

Ester stood up and walked across the aisle to sit next to him. He could smell the light scent of fabric softener and her Dudley’s hair crème as she leaned her head on his shoulder. She reached for his hand and James reached back. The two sat silent, watching the bright white flashes of lightening dance off the images of the saints that lined the church.

“I’m sorry, too, baby,” James whispered.

“What are we doing, old man?” Ester asked.

“Getting old,” James laughed. “And crazy.”

“You’re my best friend. I don’t want there to be secrets between us.”

“Me neither, but we’ve got to be able to trust each other. Above all else.” James squeezed his wife’s hand.

“It’ll be a process, James,” she said. “But I want to trust you again and I want you to trust me. How did we get here after all these years?”

“Life’s messy, babe,” James said. “If it ain’t, you aren’t doing it right.”

A deafening rush of raindrops clattered against the windows followed by a flash of lightening. James put his arm around Ester and pulled her close. She had always fit snug against his side but there was something slightly uncomfortable about the way her elbow was positioned against his ribs that made him loosen his grip.

“I’ve never seen the church at night like this before,” Ester said. “It’s creepy but peaceful.”

“A shelter from the storm,” James said.

“I wonder when this rain will quit,” Ester asked. “Its been raining for hours.”

“Well, it can’t last forever,” James said. “We’ll be alright in here. Safe and sound.”

Ester kissed his cheek. “Safe and sound,” she repeated.

The two sat in the dark church. Hands clasped, stew cooling at their side. A rippling sea of dark wood pews stretched before them, the tops lit by the dim light of the hallway and the occasional white flash of lightning.

EVELYN'S DOWRY

Cassia worked by herself at *Matilda's Book Nook*—a tiny bookstore in a North Carolina college town. There was an old barstool behind the counter that Cassia had stapled a towel to the top of for comfort: this was her station. She spent more time on that stool than in any other seat in her life: the tiny wooden stool in front of her drawing easel at college, the office chair in front of her writing desk at home, even her couch. When she wasn't shelving books she was reading them, dreaming about writing them, or getting free coffee from the Fresh Market next door.

She wasn't entirely alone in the store. The owner was usually around. 'Matilda' was, more or less, Phil, who lacked all the whimsical attraction that the name of the store required. He was overweight, persistently annoyed, and had a salt and pepper beard that made Grizzly Adams' look like peach-fuzz. He spent most of his time in the back of the store; going through inventory lists, attempting to organize month-old receipts, and watching Judge Judy on an 8-inch black and white TV.

The store sold mostly books from Phil's private collection: books he'd bought at yard sales or thrift stores, even some he'd inherited from dead relatives. It was quite an impressive collection but was impractical for the one bedroom apartment he now lived in as a divorced man. The store acted as both a storage space and a source of income, although a poor source. Phil had also started acquiring used books from Amazon.com and EBay to keep the inventory fresh. Sometimes a customer would want to order a book and either Cassia or Phil would try to oblige. Since there were so few customers to begin

with, they rarely ordered specific titles. One of the only times they ordered a book was when a woman wanted a copy of a rare true crime, *White Christmas, Bloody Christmas*; a story of a local NC man murdering his entire family on Christmas Day. The woman said the story held sentimental value because she had grown-up in the area where it happened and knew a cousin of a cousin. Cassia had listened to the woman ramble on about her connection to the gruesome tale for a good 20 minutes, before finally stopping her.

“Look, lady,” she had said. “Sounds fascinating but according to this website, this book is gonna run you at least \$300. Its out of print”

“Seriously?” the woman asked.

“Seriously,” Cassia replied.

“I think I’ll see what I can find at Borders first,” the woman replied in a snide voice, almost sounding like she was accusing Cassia of taking her for a ride.

“Well, good luck,” Cassia said as she hung up on the woman. “Latte book whore,” she mumbled under her breath.

“Damn straight,” Phil had hollered from the back room.

“How the hell did you hear me?” she asked.

“Great minds, Cass, great minds,” he said.

Cassia knew that most of the customers they did have considered Phil a book-Nazi but she liked that about him. He knew books and he loved what he knew. Cassia’s job was to run the front counter and answer the phone. When she had first approached Phil about getting a job he made a noise that could be equated with the snort of a walrus. That was until they started talking about books.

“You know, everyone goes on and on about *Naked Lunch* being the greatest book ever written,” she said. “But honestly, I think its crap.”

Phil had set down his coffee cup. “Girlie, you’re hired.”

After that moment, the two became an odd couple powerhouse in the used book world. Their days were spent rustling through people’s junk boxes and garage sales in search of rare and collectable books. There were countless times when Phil had finagled an expensive book out of some little old couples hands for fifty cents, he was ruthless when he was on the hunt.

Besides the occasional stray customer looking for a copy of Jodi Picoult’s latest for their book-club, the only regulars were Charlie and Dr. Lawson, who were also old friends of Phil’s. Charlie was a poet who was also married to a poet. His wife had gained some local fame by getting a local publishing house to take on her collection. The only thing she had to promise to do was stop calling.

“She got published through persistence,” Charlie had said.

“No,” said Phil. “She got published through bugging the crap out of those poor people so much that they’d rather publish her junk before hearing her voice ever again. That’s what I call guerilla publishing.”

The books that Charlie liked to browse were philosophy—mostly Eastern, with the occasional Russian or German philosopher thrown in, never Nietzsche, he considered him ‘full of shit.’ He also liked history books about post-modern architecture, the stranger the better.

Dr. Lawson was an ex-law professor who resigned after a student admitted they had been having an affair. His favorite books to browse were on ancient weapons and graphic novels with scantily clad anime school-girls.

“How can you read this crap, Lawson?” Phill had asked one day. “They’re cartoon children for Christ’s sake.”

“In Japanese culture it is perfectly acceptable to admire the youthful form,” Dr. Lawson had replied.

“Right,” Phil said. “Is that what the tu-tu is for? Admiration?”

The store was in the middle of a shopping mall called Fanta City. It consisted of a GNC for the health conscious muscle buff, an Indu Convenient store that sold authentic chai tea and pomegranate seeds, a Mexican insurance provider, an all-night computer lounge with its windows blackened out, and the crowning glory—a Fresh Market. *Matilda’s* sat between Fresh Market and the GNC. All the signs in the shopping mall overpowered *Matilda’s* small hand-painted sign that hung on the door—Cassia had made it in her Sculpture 323 class for a project and when she presented it to Phil, he scratched his beard and said, “Looks like it could draw the rich folks in.”

Phil was never the creative type—the name of the store came from his ex-wife who had left him for a rodeo-clown in Texas. The most creative thing he’d done was to hire Cassia.

“Cassia—like the cinnamon?” he had asked during her interview.

“Yeah, my mom had a thing for spices—you should meet my brother, Nutmeg.”

“Sense of humor. I like it. When can you start?”

She had skipped her Drawing 202 class to work that day and three years later she was still working for Phil.

Cassia was from an affluent Atlanta family and moved to North Carolina under the pretense of going to art school in Asheville. She was an ex-debutante on the lamb and the only connection she had to her family was her cell phone, which her mother regularly called to check up on her. When she decided to drop out her junior year at the University, Phil made her position fulltime and finagled a way to get her full coverage health insurance. Cassia's parents still thought she was taking classes part-time so graduation would be postponed until further notice—she'd ride that wave as long as she could. Besides her parents still send her \$500 dollars a month in spending money.

One Friday, Cassia was running late to work. She had tried calling Phil to let him know, but he didn't answer the phone. It wasn't odd that she was running late, she often ran a little behind the time on most days. She pulled into the parking lot about a quarter after nine, only fifteen minutes late.

It had been raining off and on for most of the morning. Everything smelled like wet hot asphalt and a hint of something metallic. Cassia's tan suede loafers crunched the wet, gritty asphalt as she made her way across the parking lot.

Sitting outside the shop was a young man, probably about 25. He had jet-black hair and features that suggested he was Indian. He was sipping a cup of Fresh Market coffee, a cigarette teetering between two fingers. His jean jacket was reminiscent of some long lost punk rebellion in his teenage years—a feature that made Cassia roll her eyes.

She noticed the open sign wasn't flipped around and the lights for the front of the store weren't on. Cassia rattled her oversized canvas purse in search of her store keys. As she approached the door the young man put out his cigarette and stood up, dusting off the back of his jeans. His black leather boots slid across the grit of the sidewalk as he moved out of Cassia's way.

"The sign says you're open at nine," the punk-wanna-be said.

"Usually we do," she said. "I was running late. My boss should've opened the store. Don't know what happened." She pushed open the door, the humidity made it stick a little. Cassia flipped on the lights and turned the sign around. The smell of old paper and dust was pungent in the damp air.

"Phil?" she called into the back office. There was no answer. She set her purse down behind the counter and tossed her cardigan over the stool.

The young man looked around at the stacks of books and the precarious formation of bookshelves made from plywood and old Canada Dry crates.

"What kind of books do you guys have?"

"What are you looking for?" Cassia was preoccupied as she searched the cluttered office for Phil's home number. She thought he might have slept through his alarm though it was unlike him to be late. He had once bragged about his impeccable internal clock that woke him promptly at 6:30 every morning.

The young man pulled a tattered copy of *The Sun Also Rises* off a shelf and flopped it open, almost spilling his coffee.

“I need a book for a class I’m taking this summer at the community college: Intro to Lit. A friend of mine told me you guys sell cheap books... I mean, he said your books are cheap, not to imply that the books themselves were cheaply made... you know what I mean,” he set the book back on the shelf and put his hand in his pocket. “Anyway, I need a copy of *The Sun Also Rises*.”

“You mean the book you just had in your hands?” Cassia said as she poked her head out of the office door.

“Right,” the young man stalled. “But you got a new one or at least one not so beat up?”

“We prefer the term ‘well-loved,’” Cassia had found the list of phone numbers under a stack of invoices. On the list was her cell number, Phil’s ex-mother-in-law’s number at the old-folks home, the number for the sub shop across the street, the accountant’s cell and home number, Sheehan Properties’ main office number, and Phil’s home number, the only one hand written in blue ball point pen. Cassia heard the young man knock over a stack of books and curse.

“My name’s Avi, by the way,” she heard him shout towards the office.

“Well, Avi,” she propped the phone between her ear and shoulder as she dialed.

“Feel free to look around. Let me know if you need any help.”

“Sure thing,” he said.

Cassia waited for the familiar gruff voice of her boss to interrupt the ringing, but it never happened. As she was about to give up she noticed the front of the store

becoming shadowed by a truck backing up to the door. She heard the truck's door open, then Phil, Charlie, and Dr. Lawson's voice.

"Thanks for helping me out, fellas," Phil said. "This is gonna be a pain in the ass to unload."

"No problem," said Charlie. "I was gonna be here anyway since Elizabeth's away on another reading and the house is so quiet."

"Charlie," Phil said grabbing something off the front seat of the cab. "You're here everyday whether Elizabeth is home or not."

"True," said Charlie as he caught the sweatshirt Phil tossed at him.

"At least your wife leaves you alone," Dr. Lawson said. "Melanie calls me every five minutes to see where I am. I'm considering having a GPS tracker shoved up my ass so she'll be happy."

"Well," said Phil smacking Dr. Lawson on the back. "That's pretty much how my marriage felt, you see how that worked out."

As the three headed into the shop, Phil unwrapped the honeybun in his hand and took a bite. Cassia was still standing at the window staring at the truck.

"What's the deal with the truck?" Cassia asked Phil.

"An estate donation," Phil said his mouth full of honeybun.

"Books from a dead person?" she asked. "Who?"

"It was that old lady who was found hunched over her bathtub in her wedding dress a month ago. Papers said 'suicide'. Old people suicides usually mean an estate auction. Did some checking. Turns out I was right. Got the whole lot for sixty bucks,"

Phil took another bite. “Who the hell are you?” He eyed Avi who had moved to the far end of the shop and was unconvincingly browsing the cookbooks.

Startled by Phil’s question Avi dropped the book he was holding.

“Avi, sir,” he said putting *The Joy of Cooking* back on the shelf. “I’m looking for a school book.”

“Right,” Phil shot Cassia a look that said *dumbshit* . “Wanna make five bucks? Help us unload this truck.”

Before Avi could answer, Phil had finished off his honeybun and tossed the wrapper in the trashcan as he headed out the door. Avi shrugged his shoulders and followed Phil to the truck.

“Phil,” Cassia called. “This is a dead person’s things.”

“What’s your point,” Phil said as he slid the back of the truck open. “They aren’t using it anymore.”

Cassia knew this was probably going to be a disaster, like the time Phil ordered fifty copies of what he thought was ‘Monster’ by Walter Dean Myers but ended up being fifty copies of the DVD movie, ‘Monster’ starring a rough-looking Charlize Theron. They tried selling them but no would buy them. Phil ended up putting the box in front of the store with a sign that read ‘FREE’ just to get them out of the way; people still hesitated to take them.

As Phil let the rolling metal door to the truck slide up, the staunch smell of damp, molding cardboard and musty paper wafted into the warm morning.

“Oh, this is gonna be a blast,” Cassia said, hands on her hips, eyeing the floor to ceiling stacks of boxes.

The crew unloaded each box and stacked them along the front of the counter. Most of the boxes were pretty solid but a few lost their bottoms and spilt their contents across the wet ground. One of the boxes Phil carried split open at the bottom and tattered leather bound books skittered across the pavement.

“Want some help?” Avi asked as he bent down and picked up a stack of books. Cassia stepped in and also gathered up some of the scattered books.

“Fucking weak boxes,” Cassia said.

“So you got a job, Avi?” Phil asked turning the box over and alternating the flaps to close it up.

“I work for my parents part time at the Indu Convenience store over there,” he gestured toward his parents store next to the all night computer lounge, Zion.com.

“You going to school?” Phil threw a stack of books in the repaired box.

“Trying. I’m hoping it’ll help get me out of my parents’ house.”

“Stay at home, kid. Save some money,” Phil said, always thinking thrifty.

Cassia passed a stack of books to Phil.

“I say get out as soon as possible,” she said.

“That’s my plan,” Avi said. “My parents are pretty old school India. They’re pressuring me into this ridiculous arranged marriage.”

“Really,” Cassia was intrigued. “They still do that?” She always had a thing for exotic men, anything different from the stuck up rich boys her mother had tried to fix her up with after her cotillion.

“A lot of Bengali families stay close in the states and arranged marriage is just another attempt at keeping tradition alive,” Avi said.

The box repaired and restocked, Phil picked it up and headed into the shop.

“Do yourself a favor, man,” Phil said over his shoulder toward Avi. “Don’t get married.”

The rest of the unloading went smoothly aside from the fact that Cassia was pretty sure a couple of the boxes smelled faintly of cat piss and after smelling her hand, knew she was right. In the very back of the truck was a big black wooden chest with silver studs and plating along the top.

“What’s that?” Cassia asked.

“Came with the books,” said Dr. Lawson as he and Phil hoisted the heavy wooden box out of the truck and down to Avi and Charlie waiting below.

“I think it’s called a horse tack box,” explained Avi.

“Maybe they stuck the old lady in it,” joked Dr. Lawson.

“Not funny,” Charlie said, smacking Dr. Lawson on the back of the head.

“Well, did you guys check it out before you put it in the truck?” Cassia was annoyed.

“Figured we check it out here,” Phil said as he hopped off the back of the truck.

Charlie cracked open the chest. "I think it's a hope chest," he said as he pulled out a quilt and a wedding photo. "My wife had one that her mother had set up for her. It's like a dowry that young women have in the hopes that they'll be married. Elizabeth kept some old quilts, heirloom dishes, and family photos in her's."

"We've got a dead woman's dowry?" Cassia exclaimed. "That's seriously fucked up. We gotta send this back."

"Send it where?" Phil sorted through the box. "The family sold it because they didn't want it."

Phil pulled out what looked like a photo album and a small diary. He tossed them on the pavement.

"Phil, what are you doing?" Cassia picked up the diary and photo album, they were heavier than she anticipated. "This just feels weird."

"Cassia," Phil pulled out a small stack of books bound in twine and handed them to Charlie who took them inside. "The woman is dead. She doesn't care."

"But I do," Cassia said and went back into the shop. Phil was being so insensitive, not a new thing, but this really got under her skin. She set the diary and photo album on the counter. As she started to go through the album she felt a pang of guilt. Like looking through these private photos would somehow evoke the ghost of the old woman. She went through them anyway. There were black and white photos of toddlers splashing in a porcelain bathtub, a young couple smiling on a beach in old-fashioned bathing suits, the same couple was in a later photo around a kitchen table with a birthday cake, and then again hugging each other in front of a boxy Studebaker. There were also photos of the

young woman in a full skirt dress leaning against an oak tree, a coy grin on her fresh face and opposite that picture was a photo of the young man in an Army uniform, expressionless and at attention. The last picture in the album was in color and of what looked like a family reunion. The familiar faces of the young couple were now ghosts in the smiling faces of the two elderly couple sitting in the very front, their arms linked—same eyes, same smiles. Cassia got goosebumps as she imagined the body of the smiling woman floating facedown in the porcelain bathtub, the wedding gown filling the water around her. She quickly closed the photo album.

Phil, Charlie, and Dr. Lawson were sorting through the boxes of books, occasionally remarking on a cool find. Avi came in from outside, holding two cups of Fresh Market coffee and smelling of fresh cigarette smoke. He set one of the cups down in front of Cassia.

“Thought you might like a pick-me-up,” Avi said as he sat on a stack of boxes.

“Thanks,” Cassia said not looking up. She pulled the diary in front of her and pushed the photo album away.

“Find anything interesting?” asked Avi.

“Yeah, getting old sucks,” Cassia sipped her coffee. She felt Avi watching her as she opened to the middle of the diary. The date read June 6th, 1964:

Dear Henry,

Today we went to the shore and the children had so much

fun. We built sand castles and rode the tramcar on the boards.

Margie got a little sunburn and was fussy for the rest of the trip but

she is sleeping comfortably now. The boys played a clever prank on Susan while she was napping on the beach. They put a clump of seaweed on her stomach and yelled "JELLYFISH!" It was quite funny but Susan was certainly not amused. I'm sure they will tell you all about it when you return.

I don't have the heart to tell them that you won't be back in time for Christmas. I find it hard to tell myself this fact. I miss you, my darling. I find myself holding my breath to keep from bursting into tears in front of the children. Their faces only remind me that you are not here; it makes me resent them a little. I don't think I can do this on my own for much longer. The weight of it gets heavier with every day we are apart. My husband has been taken away from his family and for what? I can only imagine the horrors you see in this godforsaken war. I wish you had never joined the army though I know I should be supportive. I wish I could say I felt guilty for feeling this way but I don't. I feel cheated and abandoned.

Once again I will but this away and start a new letter where I tell you only about the children and how we miss you because that is all you need to hear in such a place. I love you. I love you. I love you. Please come home, my darling, my heart is lost without you.

All my love,

Your Evelyn

“Evelyn,” Cassia said. “What a classic name.”

She turned to the last page of the journal. The handwriting was almost illegible and lacked the precise script that the other entries were written in. There was no date, simply:

Dear Henry,

*The weather is beautiful today. A perfect day for the shore.
How I miss the ocean. Everything is so far apart in this state and my eyes
aren't what they used to be. If I could drive myself I'd leave right now.
We have been here so long I can barely remember what the sand felt like
between my toes or how the ocean spray felt on my face. I'm beginning to
forget a lot of things. Your face was once so clear to me but now I struggle
to remember the color of your eyes. I am losing myself and frightened of
where that might take me.*

*The garden is blooming and the sun is shining so I may go for a
walk. I miss you, my darling.*

Love,

E.

Avi adjusted himself on the stack of books. “What’d it say?”

“Apparently, love sucks, too,” she closed the diary. “Can I bum a cigarette?”

“Sure,” Avi hopped off the boxes and grabbed his pack of smokes. “Mind if I join you?”

The two headed outside. Cassia leaned against the brick wall of the shop and lit her cigarette. The smoke filled her lungs and as she exhaled the curl of smoke twisted up and over the truck. She watched it rise and dissipate. Avi dropped his lighter and Cassia smiled at him, she thought his clumsiness was cute. Maybe she'd let him bring her coffee more often. The rain had stopped and the morning was evaporating in the early afternoon sun. Phil and Dr. Lawson had drug all the cardboard boxes they unloaded down to the curb. Cassia watched as they carried the empty horse-tack box down to the road and then tossed it on top of the pile of boxes. It rolled on its side and the lid flipped open, snapping off one of the hinges so it lay crooked like a broken jaw. The paisley lining exposed to the sun, pink and shiny like a raw throat.