

WE HANG ELEPHANTS HERE: EXCERPTS FROM A NOVEL

A thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of Western Carolina University in
partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Masters of Arts in English

By

Miranda Darlene Miller

Director: Prof. Pamela Duncan
Associate Professor of English
English Department

Committee Members: Prof. Jeremy Jones, English

Dr. Mae Claxton, English

March 2017

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee members for their tireless efforts to bring about this creative thesis. To my director, Prof. Pamela Duncan, thank you for your serene insights and excellent conversation. In the face of my anxious nature, you were the calming, grounded mentor I needed most. To Prof. Jeremy Jones and Dr. Mae Claxton, thank you for your support, feedback, and pleasant conversations on the inner workings of Appalachian works. Words cannot express how much I appreciate your help on this journey with me.

To my family, thank you for your endless support in my creative endeavors. You provided me with a supportive, loving atmosphere, and I cannot thank you enough.

To my cohort, I thank you for your support through this process. When I was shy and afraid, you showed me the true goodness of the human spirit. I am glad for the lifelong friendships that I have built with you. Through my friendships with you, I have gained the confidence to go forth in the world.

To Dr. Beth Huber, thank you for your mentorship over the course of my graduate study. You believed in me when I did not believe in myself, and I am so grateful to you.

To Ron Rash, thank you for your guidance in the early stages of this story. Our discussions on place writing taught me that the work that I do as an Appalachian writer is valuable. Thank you for helping me have faith in myself as writer.

Lastly, to Mary, the elephant in the room, I hope that you have found peace in the afterlife. Thank you for helping me turn a critical, respectful eye to the place that I love.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	ii
ABSTRACT	iv
CHAPTER ONE	1
CHAPTER TWO	30
CHAPTER THREE	70

ABSTRACT

WE HANG ELEPHANTS HERE: EXCERPTS FROM A NOVEL

Miranda Darlene Miller, M.A.

Western Carolina University (March 2017)

Director: Prof. Pamela Duncan

In 1916, the town of Erwin, TN was made infamous for hanging the circus elephant Mary for the murder of her caretaker. Ever since, the town has carried around the moniker, “The Town that Hung the Elephant.” Appearing on storefronts, t-shirts, and book covers, the grainy photo of Mary’s limp body hanging from the railroad derrick has haunted the town for years, earning a profit for those seeking out the macabre and disgusting those in the town that just wish the world would forget its grisly past. But, perhaps the town is cursed. A hundred years after the hanging of Murderess Mary, another mad elephant, Bernice, kills the ringmaster of a local circus, and businessman turned politician Dan Lange is paying for votes with blood. Rallying the people of the region, Lange obtains enough signatures to have the murdering elephant hanged in the same spot where Mary met her maker, the recently closed CSX railyard. The first public hanging on American soil in years draws together an unlikely group of people—Todd Bedford, an Erwin native and green field reporter sent back home to cover the hanging; Danielle Myers, a University of Tennessee student, Florida transplant, and animal rights activist; and Jim Bedford, a recently displaced railroad worker and Lange supporter. Though sharing little in common, the fates of these three people are intertwined through their attempts to save Bernice and bring the attention of the nation to one small town in East Tennessee. This creative thesis will be

comprised of three representative chapters of the working novel *We Hang Elephants Here*. As an Appalachian native and scholar, I have had a keen interest in representing the region with the respect and honesty it deserves. Drawing on inspiration from Appalachian authors such as Ron Rash and Barbara Kingsolver, I first seek to address and dispel harmful Appalachian stereotypes that have been traditionally perpetuated in books, television, and films. I will focus strongly on place writing, which I define as representing equally the positive and negative aspects of a region the author has chosen. This novel will take place in my hometown of Erwin, TN and is based on the hanging of the elephant, a historical event that happened in Erwin in 1916. Furthermore, in the vein of Ann Pancake's activist novel *Strange as This Weather Has Been* (2007), I will focus on the effects of the local railroad industry closing on the town and its people. Overall, this novel seeks to comment on the sensationalism of the historical event, address regional problems often overshadowed by stereotypes and absurd history, and understand the faults and virtues of Appalachia through insider and outsider perspectives.

CHAPTER ONE

Todd's Notes on a Hanging – July 15, 2016:

The facts as I understand them:

- In 1916, an elephant (African or Indian, I cannot tell from the picture) was hung in the Clinchfield Rail Yard in the small town of Erwin, TN.
- The elephant, Mary, murdered her handler in Kingsport, TN over a disagreement about watermelon. She must have strongly felt she was in the right, but – being an elephant – could only express these thoughts in terms of heavy handed lashing of said handler.
- The town of Kingsport, demanding punishment, ordered Mary the Elephant to be killed by firing squad.
- As an elephant is larger than the usual game of black bears or mountain lions, the firing squad's bullets were unable to bring down the beast.
- Mary was then transferred 39.3 miles to Erwin, TN where she was hung from a 100-ton derrick car.
- Supposedly, the other elephants in the troupe were lined up to watch because "An elephant never forgets."
- The chain snapped the first attempt.
- She finally died before dark on September 13, 1916. Her remains are said to be in Erwin in either under the animal shelter or (more likely) in the CSX, formally known as Clinchfield, Rail Yard. The yard was closed down in January 2016, leaving 300 workers displaced. Maybe it's Mary's Revenge.
- Supposedly, the last person who had knowledge of Mary's whereabouts died a few years back. If someone knows, they aren't telling.
- *The Hanging of the Elephant* by Charles Edwin Price (1992) only authority on this?

September 13, 2016
Small Town Boy Fumbles Lines

“Bad news for Bernice,” field reporter Todd Bedford clips out behind his twitching smile. Evan, his camera man, motions for him to back up into the shot but thinks better of it and beckons him forward again. They are lined up outside the train depot in Erwin, TN, a small town that uses monikers like “rustic” and “southern charm” to justify the cost of the town revitalization efforts. A biting wind picks up, spreading cigarette butts and fragments of McDonald’s cups about their feet. The dilapidated brick building looms over them in the background, the aged bricks burning into a gray September sky. Clouds saunter above them, dark and heavy, threatening to dump a hard, grueling rain into the valley. Todd feels the ache of injury-induced arthritis creep into his pitching elbow, making his hold on the microphone emblazoned with the CNN logo stiff and awkward.

Behind him, a crowd forms near the tracks. People slide past Evan and the mic guy, Isaac, tripping over the camera wires. In the lens, Todd sees teenagers poking in behind him throwing up the wayward bird, their boney fingers thrusting forward in boyish protest. He turns to look at them, but they breeze off and blend into the chortling crowd. Only in his early twenties himself, Todd feels their roguish fire lick at his lungs, threatening to spill from him. The teens huddle together, all talking at once as they watch men in work boots clamor around a half-constructed stage for tonight’s main event.

The breeze picks up the scent of food vendors firing up their deep fryers and grills for the festival lunch rush. The salt and tang of barbeque wafting out of the Hawg-n-Dawg booth communes with the sweet sugar of Mennonite doughnuts. Thin wisps of blue smoke carry the scent of homemade, amateur burgers bathing in buckets of fatty grease. A Grecian vendor

familiar with the festival circuit, doles out strips of cheap beef for gyros while his tan, lanky son shivers over the cucumber sauce. Tired mothers in Grid-Iron Gang sweaters flit around a fold-out table, each competing to create the best arrangement for half-empty condiment bottles. An elderly woman from the Senior Citizens Center brews a fresh pot of coffee while her trembling companions dole out the rest of their crumbling biscuits. Todd's stomach turns in nauseating hunger. Apart from the few bits of sour fruit on the plane ride from Atlanta to the Tri-Cities Airport at five that morning, he hadn't eaten for fear of yakking on national television. The hour-long drive home through twisting mountain roads hadn't helped either. Now, nearing noon, he feels acid in the back of his throat and the wear of travel seep into his skin.

He could be nervous too.

Todd scans the crowd for no one in particular but catches familiar faces bleeding in and out of the mix. His high school English teacher swallowed up in her bougie wrap from France stands alone on the sidewalk, tight-faced and wide-eyed. His little league coach, baseball coach, and driver's ed instructor all stand together near the funnel cake vendor, clad in the royal blue and white of school colors. They look like war strategists as they lean over a playbook for the high school's failing football team, eyes intent on the next faulty, fumbling play. Two guys from Todd's baseball team, home for the weekend from their fifth year at UT, push each other towards his high school girlfriend, who takes orders at the Ninth Street Baptist Church hot dog booth. They don't see him, and for that, he's thankful.

Todd looks down at this outfit, his simple gray sports coat suddenly feeling too big for his scrawny frame. His sweater vest, he realizes, is too baggy. The wind pushes the fabric in large waves over his thin chest. The faded fabric of his tight khakis, bought some years ago for a baseball banquet, tug and twist the hair on his thighs. His stiff, new loafers pinch his feet through

his thin, red argyle socks. Looking over at his former teammates, he sees them both dressed in gaudy Volunteer orange gameday t-shirts and sweatpants. They look natural as they lean on the hot dog booth's table, conversation easing out of them with the smooth confidence of small-town stardom. Todd turns away from them, adjusting the tight half-Windsor pushing into the base of his throat.

“Go again with your line, Todd,” Evan nods to him while looking into the camera. “And try not to move around so much. Your eyes are shifting; it makes you look untrustworthy.”

Todd begins again, sweeping his arm out behind him to point at the stage. Evan sighs and looks up from his camera, impatience clouding his face. Todd apologizes, sticking his free hand in his pocket to keep from fidgeting. He's antsy, his whole body itching to move.

“C'mon, Todd, what's with the accent?” Evan steps back from the camera and crosses his arms. “You sound like Lindsay Graham in a chokehold.”

“Sorry,” Todd mumbles, the word garbled and heavy in his mouth. He repeats his opening lines, devoting a bit more time to the Bern- and a little less hitch in the -ice. But who for Christ's sake thought it was a good idea to call the elephant Bernice anyway? The old name lends itself to even the most atrocious accent violations.

Todd blames the atmosphere. The mountain air fills his lungs; he breathes out grass and twang. His tongue shakes off the shackles of neutrality, relaxing inside his mouth. His jaw feels slack. He hadn't even noticed he'd let his hold go, let his tight grip on his neutral tone slack. He tightens his jaw, swallowing down the soft, sloppy vowels of a reply.

“Just pick up after that line,” Evan says. “You can work on it later.”

Todd clears his throat and starts in again. “The pachyderm faces criminal charges for the murder of Magnificent Marcus, the ringmaster of Magnificent Marcus’s Spectacular Circus and Exotic Menagerie.”

Even as he says it, Todd can’t believe the words are coming out of his mouth again. Three months ago, when the news first broke that an elephant had trampled a circus ringleader to death, he – like most people – saw *The Erwin Record*’s Facebook post about it, acknowledged it was a tragedy, and moved on with his day. He never imagined it would spread any further than a Thursday afternoon local story, but here he stands trying to phase out the homey honey in his voice with words like “pachyderm.”

“Okay, I think I’ve got it,” Evan takes out his tape and shoos Todd out of the way to mark two Xs on the ground. He’s not much older than Todd, but he harps and nitpicks. Evan’s a man of craft, one of those guys that squints and grumbles and makes you move three centimeters to the left and then three centimeters back to the right. “You’ll stand on the right, Todd, and the Barnett woman will be on the left.”

Ah, Starr Barnett. Every day at noon, five, six and eleven, a grainy amateur video of Starr fills the screens of local news stations. Her husband Calvin, who had been filming the circus illegally on his phone moments before, captures his wife center frame about a minute into the video in a brilliant flash of human vulnerability. And, naturally, the couple wanted to share the pain and shock of that moment with the local news station.

Behind Todd, two of the teenage boys stare at the unedited version of the clip on a phone. Todd could do an entire reenactment of the video for as many times as he’s seen it. He mimics Starr pointing her bony finger at the center ring, flaccid shock flooding his features. Suppressing a chuckle, he mouths along with her screeching, “She looked him in the eye! She meant to do it!”

Evan glares at him as he fiddles with some SD cards from his camera bag, so Todd returns his hands to his pockets and listens to the last of the video in silence. After Starr Barnett of Kingsport, TN, with her sagging skin and American flag cardigan, says her infamous line, Bernice commits her crime of intent.

The first time watching the YouTube video, Todd didn't notice how the force of Starr's turn swings her gold cross necklace around to face the camera. He was too distracted by her hitching wail of anguish to catch how her black eyeliner, sitting in jagged lines below her waterline, makes her natural expression look forlorn. It was easy to get wrapped up in her story with the trauma exuding from her shaking hands and chattering teeth. But now when Todd sees the video, he notes she's the only one looking at the camera. When Starr recognizes no one around her is listening, she opens one eye a slit towards the camera before she covers her face with her hands, but her husband pushes her out of the way so he can bring the ring into center focus.

Now Todd won't deny what happens next is tragic, but even tragedies lose their flavor when you roll them around in your mouth for a long time. The camera zooms past Starr and focuses in on Bernice. She, with her great battle cry, rises up on her hind legs in her final pose, her trunk pointed skyward for luck. Below her on the ground, Magnificent Marcus lies in a heap, a rag doll discarded. He, as the autopsy revealed, is still alive at this point. If you watch the video enough times, you can see him breathing. Bernice rears back. Magnificent Marcus takes a staggered breath in, blood dribbling from his mouth onto the floor of the center ring. One hand lifts as if his last little bit of human will could block the gods of gravity and force, but Bernice drops her weight onto his head at 00:08:42 every time. The news cuts off the video right before Bernice pulverizes Magnificent Marcus like a toddler squashing grapes, but that doesn't mean

people don't think about what it must look like to have the inner workings of his mind splayed out.

Magnificent Marcus, as the centerpiece of Todd's life for the past few weeks, is always in his thoughts. He remembers watching the clip on the news for the first time, the one where they hadn't censored it. With mixed fascination and horror, he saw Magnificent Marcus's imagination spatter out onto his life's work, an array of color more brilliant and vivid than the crimson, tasseled sarongs draped over Bernice's dull skin, the lasers pulsing in the background, and the surge of silk-dressed clowns rushing to contain her. The scene is so beautiful and brutal that Todd feels bad for thinking of his mammaw's homemade grape jelly whenever he pictures it. The teenagers howl, gag, and then fall into fits of laughter at each other's twisted expressions.

"You think there's anything not fried here," Evan says, his voice snapping Todd back to attention. He tries to ignore the snide tick of the comment.

"You don't want to get closer when Dan Lange comes on?" Todd asks looking back at the stage. The workers are hanging a large banner now that runs the length of the stage. In red letters, it reads "Dan Lange for Senator. Let's Put America Back in Business."

A Series of Tweets from October 13, 2015 –



Dan Lange @CarKingLange 41m

Disgusted by the graphic media! Just saw @magnificent_marcus get crushed during dinner. C'mon, @news_channel_8, my kids were watching!



Dan Lange @CarKingLange 34m

I feel for the screaming woman. That filthy animal is a murderer!



Dan Lange @CarKingLange 22m

We should take a play from Erwin's book and hang that murdering elephant. A murder should be put to death row no matter what.



Dan Lange @CarKingLange 20m

Where's those animal rights people now? If they want animals to be treated like people so badly, they should #hangtheelephant!



Dan Lange @CarKingLange17m

AAs your future senator, follow in our forfathers footsteps and bring criminals to justice. I think that its time we #hangtheelephant.



Dan Lange @CarKingLange10m

You have a say in justice! Show your support for @magnificent_marcus and his family by signing a petition to #hangtheelephant.



Dan Lange @CarKingLange1m

Support JUSTICE by signing my petition to #hangtheelephant! Link in bio. PRAYERS FOR @magnificent_marcus

November 12, 2015

Newcomer's Lange News not 'Newsworthy' After All

Todd's hands shake as he fidgets on the uncomfortable chair in his Executive Producer Maura's office. He's never pitched her a story before, and he's nervous. She rifles through some papers, not seeming to notice him or the way his knee jumps up and down in rapid, sporadic beats. With each passing tick of the clock, Todd feels his throat tighten, his resolve weakens.

Todd, this is important.

He stokes the fire in his chest, remembering the headline he had read that morning about Dan Lange, the Yankee businessman turned politician storming through his hometown. Headlines like **Lange Promises to Return Coal to the Region** and **Lange Vows to Fight Obamacare** litter the front pages of local newspapers. Leaving a string of failing car dealerships

up and down the east coast, Lange had now turned his diseased hands on a Tennessee senate seat. Breezing through mountain towns and backwoods hollows, Lange had pushed every fundamentally religious, homophobic, racist, coal mining, my-blood-is-red-for-Republican cliché his tiny, closed-off mind could conjure. His rhetoric, divisive and intense, spread like a fever through his rural constituents. Red “Vote for Lange” signs popped up like pox in neighborhoods and across highways, on billboards and banners, t-shirts and ball caps. The infection spread, hot and stinking.

His own father caught the fever, spouting at every chance how their very lifeblood was coal-fueled. Little flecks of coal ran through them, burning and powering their very existence. All of Todd’s life, the food, clothing, shelter, cars, schooling, trips to Dollywood, baseball uniforms, his first date with Ivy Harris were all sponsored by money earned from working on trains that hauled only coal. Where Todd was from, coal was as necessary as oxygen, but one mine closed, then another, each bronchiole filling up with ash and dust. And here Lange comes waving an empty oxygen tank and promising fresh air.

“Ma’am, I think we need to do something on this guy Dan Lange,” Todd begins.

“Dan Lange? Who’s that?”

“He’s running for senate in Tennessee,” Todd rushes forward. “And I believe he’s danger-“

“He’s running Republican?”

“Well, yeah, but – “

“Then there’s no story there. A Republican is running in a red state; what does it matter to us?”

“But he’s proposing to bring coal back.” Todd speaks louder now, not realizing that this little fact means nothing to Maura, an ivy-leaguer from Pennsylvania. “It’s impossible. He’s telling blatant-“

“Listen, you seem to care about this race, but frankly he’s not saying anything that any other Republican senator is not saying twelve times over. Come back when he does something newsworthy.”

“Newsworthy?” Todd is stunned. “If we don’t expose this guy now, then he’ll be in Washington.”

“Like I said, come back when he does something newsworthy.”

“Senate hopeful and owner of six local car dealerships Dan Lange,” he begins again, “spearheaded the campaign in early June to punish Bernice with his controversial ‘Animals are People Too’ slogan...”

Todd remembers old footage of Lange in a white suit and orange tan spitting bullshit like "If people want to be truly equal, then Bernice should be punished as a murderer." Pointing to the sky for emphasis, he calls for a trial, for animal rights activists to observe justice, for humanists to think about the rest of the circus workers, for Christians to take dominion back over the beasts, for fathers and mothers to look at Magnificent Marcus’s four starving children, for people to pity this self-made business man who was only living the American dream. Lange goes on until his orange face burns blue, and his saliva coats the microphone.

“And I want you, most of all, to remember our heritage,” he says, looking straight into the camera. “Go to my website and sign the petition to hang that murdering elephant.”

Todd picks up again, "After much petitioning, Lange and his supporters have broken through legal barriers and have set the hanging for tonight at six in the CSX rail yard in Erwin, TN. This site holds historic significance as the place where Murderess Mary, another circus elephant, was hung for the brutal trampling of a civilian in 1916. Although the railroad ceased all operations in Erwin and fired 300 workers earlier this year, a CSX representative informed us that some workers have been rehired to prepare for the event."

Todd looks down at his cards. "We're calling it an event now?"

"What else would you call this freak show?" Evan shrugs.

"Let's break for lunch," one of the crewmembers says. Todd nods, happy to get away from Evan's cross tone and meet his father at the rail yard's breakroom.

Todd's father is the type to eat Lunchables so he can work overtime. He scarfs down ham and cheese crackers while he recaps the last rerun of *Perry Mason* he saw. Todd listens, smiling and refusing intermittent offerings. Around them, the breakroom is alight with nervous energy. Men stare at spots on the wall, pretending to be interested in laminated safety posters or a faded advertisement for the railroad softball team. A few seats down from Todd's father, Bill Harris, a sturdy, gruff man Todd has known since his childhood, looks at his smartphone, scrolling a meaty finger up and down the screen but looking at nothing. He glances over and nods to Todd's father. "Whatya say, Jim?"

"Ah, nothing much," Jim nods back. His voice sounds like gravel and barbed wire, and he looks no better. Todd's eyes track over his father, taking in the salt of him. Jim is on the younger side of his fifties but the past few months have made him older. White litters his once dark beard, and peppered hair pokes out from underneath his Earnhardt ball cap. His cheeks,

once full with overweight, were slimming down and paler. He chews slowly and looks past Todd and out the dirty window, eyes red with sleep deprivation.

The weight of the room soaks into Todd's skin, making his blood feel heavy and his hands tremble. His father doesn't look up from his small, plastic tray, focusing only on assembling small sandwiches.

February 1, 2016
From the Citizens for Coal Country Facebook Page -

**Citizens
for Coal
Country**

Citizens for Coal Country

February 1, 2016 at 8:03 AM

In a new statement, Senate hopeful Dan Lange, local car dealership tycoon, promises to bring mining issues back to Washington. Lange has criticized the Obama Administration's harsh policies that take away the livelihoods of miners and railroad workers. Speaking specifically about CSX Railways, Lange swears that his work on the Hill would help restore jobs across the region. In the statement, Lange goes on to say that he wishes to work closely with senators from WV, VA, and KY to restore jobs to local workers. After calling climate change "an unproven piece of crap," Lange addressed Citizens for Coal Country directly, praising our efforts to fight for miners and their families.

**Lange Vows to "Fight for Railroad Workers" in Fiery
New Speech**

October 13, 2015

Last Train Out of Erwin Sings Sorrowful Swan Song

The CSX railroad system boasts a hearty 21,000 miles in length stretching from Miami to Montreal. Arteries jut and fan out to terminate in places like Memphis, St. Louis, Flint, and Boston, places built on the backs of sweat and steel. Trains course over flatlands and past monuments, pulsing through towering cities and tiny towns, hamlets and hollows. They roar up mountains on a cacophony of screeching, groaning thunder, Sisyphean and ever-present.

In Erwin, the railroad is a subconscious thought, always lingering. It's there but not noticeably so. If you live there long enough, the train creates natural pauses. Dinner conversation fades with the sound of the horn blaring over crossroads. Train cars, bulking and hissing like angry bulls, ram into each other, locking together and sending vibrations through the valley. To the untrained ear, the echoes sound like the bending, buckling metal of a crash, but most Erwin natives will not even glance up. Trains are commonplace.

After living in Atlanta, Todd has forgotten . The boisterous inevitability of the 6 AM train from Erwin to Shelby, KY, once drowned out by silence of slumber, startles him awake. His eyes pop open, and he jolts upright from his prostrate position on the couch of his childhood home. The muted TV flickers over a rerun of an old cartoon, the bright colors pulling the room into dim focus. Rubbing his face, he can see the kitchen light reaching down the hall and spilling into the living room. His parents speak in low murmurs, their tone tense and serious.

Fear floods Todd's chest. As the anxious child of relaxed parents, any conversation calling for serious looks and hushed tones felt amplified. He kicks the blankets off, exposing himself to the chill of the drafty house. He shudders and pulls on the socks he wiggled out of in his sleep. The house creaks and groans, a shaky exhale of exasperation against the October rain. The natural house sounds conceal Todd's light footsteps as he pads down the carpeted hall to

stand outside the kitchen. His parents, huddled around the coffee pot, cannot see him from their angle. He pulls himself up into the shadows. From his position, he can see the muted television. The local news flicks back and forth between robotic anchors and recapped, overplayed footage from the 11 PM show.

His momma's voice is stiff and grouchy from her long night at the ball and roller factory. Her smell, grease from the steel parts and Marlboro Light cigarettes, overpowers the coffee. She lets out a huff of angry air, "Well, what are you going to do?"

"I can hold a job in Flori-"

"Well, don't expect me to pick up and move with you."

"Tammy, I have to if I want to keep my seniority."

"Are they for sure going to close it down?"

Todd's eyes widen. *Closing down the railroad?* Acid spews at the bottom of his chest, burning and brutal. It corrodes his ribcage, bubbling up over his lungs and lapping against his heart. He trains his gaze on the screen but sees nothing.

His father sighs, heavy and tired. Jim Bedford is always bone-deep tired. His body sags along, awkward on trick knees. His back aches, his bones creak. He doesn't eat well and drinks too much, his beer gut leading the rest of his body whenever he moves forward. He is barely well kept, his hair getting long and his beard only trimmed once every few weeks. But, he makes money, so the work is worth it. Like his father before him and his grandfather. Like his brother and best friends. Like his wife's father and uncles. Like two of their neighbors and ten people at their church. They all work and make money to pay into railroad retirement that keeps them comfortable in their arthritic, inactive eighties. They pay into railroad health insurance, which keeps their families comfortable in their absence. The bills, the food in their bellies, and the

education Todd receives all flows from the railroad. All CSX asks in return is the small sacrifice of Jim Bedford.

Jim answers after a long while, “It’s likely, so we should just be prepared just in case.”

Tammy doesn’t answer. Something must catch her eye on the TV because she turns up the volume. Todd’s attention snaps to the anchor’s absurd, animated voice: “Last night, controversial state senate hopeful Dan Lange announced a campaign to hang the elephant. The defendant in question is an Asian elephant, Bernice, who murdered ringmaster Magnificent Marcus last Sunday at an event in Kingsport. In a series of tweets, Lange condemned the circus for not taking action against the elephant and praised the town of Erwin for the hanging of Murderess Mary, a circus elephant also convicted of bludgeoning an untrained handler in 1916. Lange’s campaign will coincide with the hundredth year anniversary of the hanging. No word yet on whether Lange will be successful, but followers on Twitter have shown their support in droves. Petitions are expected to be released on Friday. Now we will go to an amateur video of the incident sent to us by Calvin and Starr Barnett of Kingsport.”

Tammy huffs at the TV, “What an idiot. That was Kingsport’s elephant to begin with.”

Jim sighs, “Well, at least he’s going to bring coal back. Maybe I won’t be in Florida for too long.”

The railroad closed officially on a Thursday, Los Jalapeños night, but Todd, like most, wouldn’t know until the official press conference that night. The news snuck up on them, clubbed them from behind. Todd and his sister, Brennon, sat on the couch of his childhood home, both staring at their phones, both idling by while their heavy-footed mother, Tammy,

scrambled to get ready upstairs. Brennon scrolled through Instagram, silent and hard-faced as usual, passing judgment on her classmates' selfies.

The TV was on, but neither Todd nor Brennon were paying close attention to the program. It was some reality show where a heavily bearded man from the Asheville area explained the finer workings of being a man of the land, the kind of program Todd dismissed on principle. In the man, Todd saw his great-grandfather who kept money in his mattress and raised hogs and corn. Todd saw the old wood carver at the Apple Festival yelling a sermon about Freedom Fries. And Todd saw reflected in this man the show runner's deep-seeded belief that people in the Appalachian Mountains really did live barefooted, dueling banjo lifestyles. Annoyed, he turned back to his phone. It buzzed with a flurry of emails from work asking him to complete various fact-checking projects. His EP, a particularly diligent woman, was the primary sender. Todd forced out one-sentence assurances:

Yes, I have been working on the project.

I'll get it to you by tonight.

I am looking up that information now.

He wasn't, in fact, doing any of those things. Instead, he sank back further into the family's old, broken-in couch. The cushions were thick and enveloping, smelling of his mother's fall candles, grease from his father's shirt, and Marlboro light cigarettes from the days before his parents stopped smoking in the house. The faded brown corduroy fabric smelled of home. He wanted nothing more than to turn into it and sink into a worry free slumber.

But the sound of his father's footsteps lumbering towards them jerked him out of his haze. Jim stopped in the doorframe of the living room, pausing to look at the television. He stood

there for a moment with his hands in his pockets as the North Carolina man droned on about the miles of land he owned.

"Man, I'd like to be him right now," Jim said. "All that land and no one to bother you."

He shook his head and emerged from his fervent dreams of isolation. Jim Bedford had always subscribed to the belief that owned land was the epitome of freedom. A man's property was his own private island constructed by and submissive only to him. Or, as Jim puts it, "If you can't pee in your own front yard, what's the point?"

Neither Todd nor Brennon responded and their father dropped the conversation. Todd, a tiny apartment dweller, had no front yard to have any opinions on, and Brennon was still in high school. Regardless of their housing situations, Todd didn't want to go into the deep misrepresentation of Appalachian living the show brought up, and his father wouldn't have cared about it anyway.

"Varmits," Jim snapped his fingers at Todd and Brennon, using his childhood nickname for them. "Is your momma ready to go?"

Todd and Brennon shrugged and Jim plodded upstairs only to be sent back down again chased by their mother's antsy requests for more time. It was a Friday night, and the family was getting ready to leave for their usual Friday dinners at the authentic Mexican restaurant Los Jalapenos – a respectable, family establishment frequented by white families who can't pronounce "arroz con pollo" and wispy hikers blown in from the Appalachian Trail. The home of the 32 oz. margarita and \$2 beers, Todd had been looking forward to keeping their standing 6:30 PM Friday dinner arrangements.

Tammy finally staggered down the stairs in her casual-formal blue floral t-shirt from Wal-Mart and jean capris. She adorned herself in a homemade charm bracelet with silver hearts

reading “Todd” and “Brennon” and “Jim.” She wore the silver necklace Todd had gotten her for Christmas – the tree of life with their initials engraved on the leaves. His mother had recently changed her hair from the same mousey brown as Todd and his sister’s to a blonde that made her look younger than she actually was. Next to their father, who was seven years her senior, she looked fresh, and he, grayer and heftier from work, looked like he could use the drinks they planned to have.

Jim drove, one hand on the steering wheel and the other over Tammy’s, a quiet and infrequent sign of affection for them. They bickered on the way to the restaurant – over the radio station, over the amount of time each took to get ready, over how late they could stay out, over how and where to park Jim’s behemoth truck. Each gave no ground, and as they climbed out of the truck, they left their arguments resting on the seats behind them.

Los Jalapenos would be a big space if the owners hadn’t shoved tables into every available square foot and lined the walls with booths. In the main section, eight large tables made up of smaller tables pushed together in an effort to accommodate the large families spilling out of them. One wall had eight two-seater booths with customers either waiting for to-go orders or pimply high school couples too enraptured with one another to listen to the waitress. On the other side, typical American families of four sat glaring at the squealing babies teetering in the high chairs at the middle tables. Their waitress, a girl Todd went to high school with, led them to the second section, a smaller version of the main section with one row of tables and another row of four-seater booths. His aunt and uncle waved them over, their expressions looking odd.

They sat, exchanging obligatory pleasantries, but the amount of heart usually present when Todd visited was not there. His aunt stared at his father with a drawn, worried expression,

one that Todd had never seen before. His uncle stared into his menu, waiting for the waitress and making no eye contact.

Todd glanced back and forth between them, an odd, creeping sensation overtaking him. Though crowded, the restaurant was quieter than normal. People craned their necks to look at Jim, people that Todd was sure he knew but couldn't place, all with tight faces. Todd looked back to his father, who smiled and waved off his aunt.

"Ah, what can I say?" Jim looked at the menu for the name of his usual. He could never remember if the dish came with guacamole or not and seemed to be going through extra efforts to make sure it was not.

"What's going on?" Todd asked. His mother and his aunt look over at him, their eyes cutting into his. The women stare at him. His mother with deep bags from twenty plus years of third shift work, throws her glance back and forth between him and his father.

"Nothing, Todd. Don't worry about it," Jim interjected. "Nothing right now."

Todd was about to speak, but Bill Harris comes over to clap Jim on the back. "Whatya say, Jim?"

Jim shook Bill's hand, smiling despite the looks going around the table. Bill nodded to the rest of the table, his expression like a bull dog with his lower lip stuck out and his mouth turned down.

"Well, no use beating around the bush," Bill says, loud enough for the next three tables to hear. "What are you going to do?"

Todd's eyebrows turned down in confusion. He turned to his sister, who had been quiet this whole time. Her face was sullen even when resting. She turned her phone towards Todd, showing him a Facebook article. There on the tiny screen sat an article on *The Erwin Record's*

Facebook page with a picture of a woman standing outside the Erwin rail yard, her suit pressed and her tight pony tail pulling her tan face up into harsh, grating lines. He looked down at the headline, not believing he let this story slip past him:

CSX Lays Off 300 Workers in Surprise Press Conference.

October 16, 2015

A poor start to an unfinished unfinished article by Todd Bedford –

On Thursday, Oct. 15 2015, the railroad died not with a bang or a fiery protest but in a poorly attended press conference on the barren strips of a parking lot. No word given to the families, no notice of upheaval. Instead, CSX in an unsurprising move chose not to look into the faces of the 300 men and women it decided to screw over but down to its note cards where pretty words like “downsizing” and “relocation opportunities” stand bold and beveled on fine, crisp paper. This reporter noted that the moment his own father told him the news, the 52-year-old Erwin man kept a stone expression in the face of his fresh-eyed, cushy jobbed son –

Jim had packed up a few belongings and moved to a rail yard in Florida. Down there, the apartment is small and there isn't a front lawn. The air is strange, heavy and humid, Jim reports back. Todd's mother doesn't sleep after work. And Todd, disconnected in Atlanta, feels the familiar ache of homesickness now radiating off his father. This two week rehire has been the first time Todd has seen Jim in months, but they don't have enough time to talk about anything deeper than the weather. Call it the newsman in him, but Todd tries to push further, ask the hard-hitting question:

“How is work, Dad?”

"Work is work," Jim says, finishing off the last little bit of his meal. The interview is over. Todd glances at the few other slumped workers in the room. One of them nods as Todd and Jim stand. Jim claps the man on the back as they walk out the door.

"I gotta show you something."

"What is it?" Todd knows his father won't answer but asks anyway. They don't talk as they crunch over gravel towards the yard's diesel shop. His father limps along on his aching knee, looking around them and pulling his ball cap down over his eyes.

"Todd, this is – what do you guys call it – off the record."

"Dad, what's going on?" Todd wipes his sweaty palms on his jacket.

His father sighs and looks him in the eye, "Me and the other union guys, we got a plan."

Ice fills Todd's gut. There was only one god that ruled their lives in Erwin, and that was the railroad. From the look on his father's face, they are about to commit a dreadful sin. Gone is the relaxed man eating Lunchables. In his place stands someone Todd has never seen. His father stands before him, jaw locked under a three-day-old beard. His hands tremble as he fiddles with the key for the shop. Todd had seen his father angry before, but never had he seen him white-hot, seething.

"John thought it up, but we all pitched in and had this sign made," his father explains as they enter the shop. There, leaning against the wall in the darkened room, is a simple sign about the size of a door that reads: "CSX THE REAL MURDERERS! HANG THE RAILROAD! PRAY FOR THE FAMILIES!"

"Dad, what does this mean?" Todd manages to stammer out.

"We knew your news people were coming." His dad looks at the sign, nostrils flaring.

“So instead of the elephant, we’re going to hoist this up. Give CSX something to think about, you know.”

Todd stares at the sign, thinking of what all could happen. If the workers were caught, their careers could go down the drain. Lange’s campaign was robust and indestructible. His mindless hoard of supporters got past tons of animal cruelty laws and had created a spectacle for the nation. To speak up now...at this event...Todd couldn’t even imagine the ramifications. His career could skyrocket if he gets this story. His father and the other workers, on the other hand, would never recover from this last-ditch the grapple for their former way of life.

He takes a breath, fully intending to put an end to this suicide mission when he catches his father’s eye. There he sees the pain of the last few months, the failure at having to leave his family, and the resolve to do something about it.

“What’s mom going to say?”

“She works third tonight, so nothing I hope.”

If the workers are successful, and with a little help from Todd’s camera crew, the whole nation would know what happened to the railroad workers. Erwin was built around the railroad, and to have it ripped out from under them was devastating. Worse than a natural disaster, this closing was a man-made storm of bullshit. Cutting 300 men like that was brutal, but if they could tell the world, perhaps they could save more than an elephant.

It is a good plan, Todd thinks.

August 18, 2016

Scrawled notes from the desk of Todd Bedford:

The female Asian elephant weighs somewhere between 2 and 5 tons. If I had a talent for math, I would calculate up the gravitational pull, the strength of the chain, the amount of force it takes to end the life of a creature.

There are four types of hanging: short drop, long drop, suspension, and standard.

A fun fact for good Christians in Sunday school: Crucifixion was also referred to as “hanging.” Now turn in your Bibles to Job 12: 7-10.

It’s almost time, and Bernice rocks in her cage, causing the whole thing to lumber about. With no room to turn, she stamps her feet on the floor. Her drowsy gaze falls over the crowd and then to the row of her sister elephants standing on the other side of the tracks. To stay true to the first hanging of the elephant, Lange had suggested lining up Magnificent Marcus's other elephants for a lesson they wouldn't soon forget. One of the revolving spotlights flashes over her face, reflecting the mist in her eyes.

A frenzy of people thrash and scream behind protester and supporter gates. Bernice reaches out her trunk to the crowd, straining to get closer to their outstretched fingers.

A girl leans over the gate, throwing her whole body forward. The crowd surges with her, all the protesters helping her flip over the gate. She loses her footing and Lange’s supporters laugh as she lands face first on the gravel, but she is up and running again before Todd can take a breath. A flurry of words shoots out of him as he tries to relay the situation to the camera. He isn’t sure if he’s making sense, but Evan motions for him to keep going.

The protestor charges headfirst for one of the police officers, but he sidesteps her ill-planned tackle and lets two other burly policemen pile on top of her. The girl thrashes and wails as they handcuff her, kicking her legs out. Todd notices something’s written on the bottoms of her sneakers and motions for Evan to zoom in. As she stills, he can read “Make Peace” in bold letters. But, before he can comment on it, the two officers haul her up and drag her towards a

van. On top of the Erwin police, there are Lange's private security team and Kingsport officers in riot gear. They make a steady line in front of the stage.

"That's the problem with these liberal kids today." Lange is speaking again, looking bored as he leans on the podium. "They've got no respect for authority or for justice or for their own opinions. I mean, you got those people that scream – and I mean they're foaming at the mouth – saying animals are people too, but when animals murder people they back track, they say 'My God, how can you hurt this defenseless creature?'"

The protesters shout and shake the gate while the supporters cheer. Lange takes the mic from the podium and wanders over to the side of the stage closest to the supporters. He says, "And you know what they do? They don't care about God. Not like you folks. You folks in Erwin are good, Christian people. When I moved down from New York to open my many successful dealerships, these people in East Tennessee didn't shun me. No, you bought cars from me. And they're reliable, right? Not like that Bernice. Poor Marcus was relying on her to provide for his four innocent children and what'd she do?"

"Murderer!" Starr Barnett shouts from the stage pointing her bony finger at the elephant again.

A swell of raging support and swears fly up and mix with the low hanging clouds. Lange pauses and shrugs his shoulders at the protesters who hurl insults and obscene hand gestures. A supporter bolsters his way to the gate facing the protesters. He's older and one of the only supporters Todd recognizes; his aunt's ex-husband, Lloyd Carpenter, a nasty piece of shit who wears gold rings on his bulging fingers and two buttons open on his shirt for the world to see his greasy gray chest hair. His large belly heaping out over his jeans helps him part the crowd like some backwoods Moses.

“Oh, here we go,” Evan says, a smile sliding up his face. “Lange’s got ‘em riled up now.”

Todd feels panic in his chest as Lloyd goes to speak. The heaping pit of walking garbage points at an ethnic looking teenager nearest him and draws in a large breath. The kid makes eye contact with Lloyd and raises his chin in challenge.

It’s then that Todd makes a decision, or rather, his body makes it for him. He sees Lloyd, the only person in a flurry of faces that he recognizes, the only person from Erwin the cameras can see. If Todd lets him speak, someone will get details on him, someone will tell the rest of the nation that this one asshole is from Erwin. From across the tracks, Todd can see his dad and other railroaders standing in the shadow of the stage next to the crane. Jim doesn’t move or look at anything in particular, just slumps his shoulders and shoves his hands into the pockets of his CSX issued coat. And Todd is thinking of him as he steps into the shot. He juts his arms out and staggers as if he’s stumbled. Evan curses, and Todd knows he’s ruined the perfect shot of a racist hayseed, the shot everyone wanted to see.

“What the hell, Todd!” Evan yells, swinging his camera around to look at the reaction of the protester. “Could you be any more of a spaz?”

Before Todd can answer, Lange picks up again, raising a hand for silence. He waits till everyone is quiet, until the crowd faces him. The air is invasive around Todd. It’s crisp and painful to breathe. Todd feels as if it takes extra effort to haul it into his lungs and force it back out again.

“It’s time,” Lange says. A floodlight in front of Bernice hisses to life. The elephant groans and sways away from the bright onslaught. She stamps the ground and throws herself against the side of the cage. She shakes her head to try to remove the heavy chain, but it only rattles and shimmers against the light. “Before we get started, I would like to thank CSX here in

Erwin for their efforts to make this as historically accurate as possible. Remember, if it's good enough for our ancestors..."

"It's good enough for us," the supporters chorus.

"That's right," Lange smiles. "I would also like to thank the good people of Erwin for their support. I may live in Kingsport, but my heart – you know where it is – it's right here. These are good, hardworking folks here. They're what makes America great, and they are going to help me put America back in business!"

Todd's chest fills with something black, deep and burning within him. He feels it expand like dark spores filling his lungs, like thorns wrapping around his throat. He wants to turn towards the camera and say something, that Lange is a liar, that this is wrong, that this is his town. He wants to leap on stage and make Dan Lange use some of his money to pay those workers, but that would be too tame. He clutches the microphone in his trembling hands until his knuckles go white. A beating would work. If he could just clear the police line and get on stage, he could beat the sense into Lange or at least take the smile off his face.

He turns to the camera, jaw locked in anger. Evan motions for him to speak, but he can't. He whips back around at the mechanical whir of the crane coming to life. The chain feeds through the pulley, making small metallic clicks. For a second, his subconscious mind reminds him of his family's only trip to Dollywood. He thinks of the anxiety of the Tennessee Tornado as it climbs the first hill. The crane starts off slow – *click, click, click* – and people hold their breath. Everyone watches in silence as the chain lifts off Bernice's back – *click, click, click, click*.

Locking his teeth, he watches Lange and waits for the union's sign to rise triumphant over Bernice's head. He wants to point out the exact moment Lange's face falls as he realizes murders don't happen in Erwin. That injustice sits on the shoulders of businessmen like him who

close rail yards and coal mines. Todd wants to see him stammer and try to draw attention away from the gashing wound in Erwin's side. He wants to see Lange fall apart, and he wants to share it with the world.

Todd feels it before he sees it. The cage groans as Bernice's weight lifts off of it. And he feels the sagging boards shudder back into place in his chest. And he feels the moment Bernice sags onto the chain like a vice around his neck. He swings his gaze down to where he last saw his dad. A few police officers and security guards are wrestling with workers. They thrash about and pull at each other's clothes. Some men scatter, running into the night in their overworked, loping way. No one gives chase.

Frantic now, Todd hollers, "Dad!"

Jim looks up from his knees, his hands behind his head. Bernice's thrashing shadow blocks his expression, but Todd knows it's pained. He remembers his father's bad knees and thinks about the gravel digging into them. His father has arthritis in both his arms, but the cop doesn't know that as he yanks Jim's stiff elbow behind his back and presses his face into the ground. His father – his kind father, his do-right father – doesn't resist as the officer looks up at Bernice's strangled sound. She sputters as air leaves her lungs. Sound sticks in her throat, pushing out over the crowd in deep, groaning gurgles. Her body swings. The wind batters against it blowing blood from the cutting chains across the dim grey of her body and onto supporters and protestors alike. The other elephants stomp the ground and trumpet out a twisted "Taps," creating tremors in the ground beneath them. Their agony floods into Todd's body, causing little cracks in the bones of his fingers, in his skull. The trainers use electric cow prods to hold them in their rocking cages. The derrick that Bernice swings from screeches in teeth curdling spurts, threatening to topple over at any moment.

Jim doesn't flip the officer off of him as the last bit of life twitches from Bernice's limbs. The officer watches Bernice's body twists on its chain and leaves Todd's father lying in the sharp gravel.

The crowd makes so much noise that Todd can't process a single word. He only looks from his father to Lange. The businessman isn't looking at Bernice or the manic crowd or Todd. Instead, he smiles at the security guards carrying off the sign the union men made. He stands with his hands behind his back, glancing over his shoulder at where the camera crews are set up. Next to Todd and Evan, a field reporter for the local news threads his fingers through his unruly hair in bewilderment. The reporter turns to Todd and shrugs, unsure of what else to do.

The black in Todd's chest wraps around his heart. Before he can think, he throws himself into a sprint towards the main stage. He skirts through the scattering, chaotic crowd and around photographers. He ducks a police officer and hurls himself at the main stage. He rips one of the banners and claws his way up. He screams and reaches for Lange, looking at his smug expression, wanting to end him, needing to feel bone and flesh break beneath his fingers. He is just reaching out for Lange's pants leg when he feels pain. Then nothing.

When he wakes the next morning, his breath is shallow and his mother sleeps in a chair next to his hospital bed. The sterile smell of the room stings his nose, and he thinks about going back to sleep. He remembers what happens – his father lying there, Lange's smug expression, the pain of being sacked by two police officers. Rubbing his face, he spots his phone on the bedside table and opens it. There are missed calls from Evan and work and family members, but he ignores them and goes straight for his *CNN* app.

There, written in large letters, is the headline:

Erwin Native Attacks Lange Over Hanging of Elephant

CHAPTER TWO

Hope is not a nice word. Hope is not friendly or sweet. Hope is like claws dragging across your insides. Danielle's retreat into the mountains was built on hope – lifeless and fatalistic. Yesterday, she told a counselor this without meaning to. As she sank into the cushions of the overstuffed couch in the University of Tennessee's Counseling Center, she could feel the words slipping out of her mouth like a thief with his bounty on his back. The counselor, Jarod, a younger guy with an open, bright face, lit up at small words like *escape*, words said without much meaning. Guilt clouded up in her, brushing against the back of her eyes. She didn't look up at Jarod, didn't want him to give him any more of her sparking words. The tug-of-war between them had always been in his favor, him yanking words out of her, her, a rigid, whip of a girl, digging her heels in.

“I had hoped that things would be better here,” she heard herself say, far off and weak.

“Better?” Jarod asked.

Danielle was silent for a long moment. The type of silent that swelled until it pushed against her, pressing its engorged fingers into her skull. As Jarod stared at her, she almost laughed. He, sitting there with his glowing face, so young and eager, didn't seem to notice the awkward, bulging mass of words left unsaid between them. That they took shape and grew. There was an obvious joke to be made here, a joke that everyone from late night talk show hosts to nervous, chuckling professors were making.

The elephant in the room.

“Do you mean better for your mother?” Jarod prompted. He sat in a winged armchair beside her, a legal pad posed on his lap. Danielle noticed that he dressed nicely, looked nice

even, with his sea foam green button up crashing against his dark, sandy skin. She liked that color on him. Despite his pink lips always pulling into a taught smile, Danielle liked Jarod. She liked the soothing baritone of his voice, liked the way he sat on the edge of his seat, as if he could barely contain his curiosity about her. Liked that he seemed to understand even though she didn't believe he ever could. If she thought about it, that's why she kept coming back to counseling even though her father told her she could stop if she wanted.

"No, not really," Danielle said. "It costs them more money for me to go here, and Momma didn't really want me to go."

"Why do you like it here?" Jarod wrote down something on his legal pad. She craned her neck to get a better look, but she couldn't make out his tight chicken scratch.

"It's not Florida." Danielle was too quick to respond. Her answer was automatic, a lie. The answer was an exhale of shallow breath. "There are mountains here."

"You came for the landscape?" Jarod asked.

"Sure," Danielle said without conviction. There were mountains if you cared to drive out of the city. If she asked her roommate Jordan for a ride, she could be dropped off at a hiking trail, and there she would find mountains. Knoxville itself was more urban than she had anticipated, more urban than she was used to. It had towering buildings and lots of traffic. It was a place where it wasn't safe to walk home alone at night. The campus itself was all-encompassing. The dorms were high rises. She had to take a bus between classes to get anywhere. The classrooms were stadiums, the professors charming or eccentric, boring or invigorating, always at center stage. An undecided sophomore, Danielle drifted in and out of gen-ed classes numbering in the hundreds. She, somewhere in the upper seats, was swallowed up in a sea of nameless peers. People were everywhere, shoving past in the dining lines, taking up

space, swirling around her, never passing the same person twice. They were loud, tall, attractive people. Quiet, mousy people. All of them, talking and moving at once. There was no ocean, no sandy beaches. The mountains were far and Momma, when she was alive, was farther.

But, here, even in Jarod's cushioned office, with orange decorations that scream in their spots, Danielle feels safe. Here was not Florida. The rooms, at least ones Jordan existed in, were not quiet. Music played here. Daddy and Justin with their long, hard faces were still in Florida with their heads bowed to the ground. And Danielle was here away from all of that. It was better for her here in Knoxville where the mountains are half an hour away.

"Danielle, when was the last time you saw your mother?" Jarod asked. "Were you there?"

Danielle looked down at her dangling feet. Being as short as she was, the couch cushions sucked her back, kept her feet off the floor. She swung them like an impatient child not wanting to sit any longer.

"Danielle?"

"No," Danielle spat out. "I can't remember when I saw her last."

Jarod said nothing, choosing instead to conceal his thoughts on his legal pad. He pursed his lips, then sighed. She tried to dredge up something to give him, a consolation for having to deal with her. She knew there were other people he could be seeing. His desk, piled papers, looked ready to collapse under the weight of his importance. He was probably thinking about what a waste of time she was, probably wishing she would just leave. She could tell him that she didn't really see Momma at the last because it was a closed casket. She pawed through her memories like basket of dirty laundry, looking for something clean she could give him. Every piece she pulled up seemed to be stained and wrinkled, unwashed, not pretty. Looking up at him, she could see the light in his face dim, flicker, then fade into a canvas of nothing.

Panicked, she started to say something with no real plan, “I- “

The timer Jarrod kept on his phone trilled an upbeat, generic note, a nicer way of telling her to get out and never come back. She stood to go, rushing out of the door before he had a chance to speak. One small memory, a stainless one, popped into her head as she scurried past the receptionist and out the door.

Danielle is eleven and has chosen the music for this recital. From her angle, she can see her mother, father, and brother sitting on uncomfortable, plastic chairs in the third row. Her mother smiles broadly at the stage, coughing only a little and showing no signs of illness or discomfort. Her father’s mouth is turned down in his usual, loping frown. He leans towards her mother and whispers an annoyed comment about Zoe Masters’ mom and her camera on a tripod. Her brother, sixteen and always groaning, plays a game on his phone, absorbed in a world of his own creation. Danielle sucks air in and out in excited, unfettered breaths. She is doing this for them, mostly for Momma, but for all of them.

For this recital, each of the girls in the class were to pick a song and develop a routine based on that song, and while they were not required to keep it a secret, Danielle concealed the song deep in her heart, hiding it from her father and brother who didn’t really care but most of all from Momma who was often too tired to come to dance class anymore. It was to be a surprise for her, but as is the way of most children who were unaccustomed to keeping secrets from a beloved parent, her timid heart ached, threatening to break.



Danielle Myers @ohmydanni

@langethecarking we will not be silenced today. #stopthehanging
#animalsdeservebetter

I shouldn't be here, Danielle thinks. The crowd jostles her forward away from her friends. She's smaller. Her thin ballerina frame bandies about from person to person like a plastic cup being kicked by unruly children. She mumbles apologies that are neither heard nor cared for. All eyes are forward staring at the rattling cage before them.

Her shaking hands shoot to her face, a jagged nail skirting across the skin of her chin. The nail, long and with chipped lavender polish, wades through a layer of foundation, collecting it as a snow plow does the grit and grime off Kingston Pike. The sludge builds up under her thin nail, taking with it the dust of the city and two layers of CoverGirl foundation that sat too light on her brown skin. She slides her forefinger along her chin and over her jaw, pausing at spots where the skin is rough from scabs. Never gentle, she pushes at one of the scabs, wincing only a little. Thin, burning lines creep out of the scab, but Danielle doesn't mind, doesn't even notice. She moves from the scab when she feels the wet of blood speckle her finger. She wipes the dots of blood into the side of her jeans without much thought to it.

Danielle shifts from one leg to another, wishing she had worn her tennis shoes instead of her roommate's red high tops. Her arches betray her. They pull tight and cramp up in the shoes, her life as a dancer forgotten under the duress of the concrete and the gravel beneath her. The ground is hard and flat and unforgiving as ever, unnatural for a mountain town, she thinks. Pain scratches its way up her calves and into her hips. She's dehydrated and wishes for pickle juice to ease the cramping she feels. Glancing around, she thinks she's the only one with this particular malady. Men and women with an array of protest shirts surround her, all standing forward with their gazes tight on the cage. Danielle is too short to see the elephant, so she looks at the signs and tee shirts around her.



Somewhere down front, a leader, either sanctioned or self-proclaimed, leads a chant, “Fuck Lange! Save Bernice!” The chant starts small at first, a cry of passion from a sore and dry throat up front. Then it ripples to a few deep voiced men surrounding. They take up the chant with dogged precision, pumping their fists and rousing teenagers around them. The chant surges back through Moms for Animal Rights in their coral shirts and hipster twenty-somethings, probably from Danielle’s school, in their flannel and nose rings. Some women near her wear hot pink pussy hats, the ears pointing sharp like spikes ready and waiting for Lange’s head.

Danielle steps away from the women, feeling conscious that her kinky-curly hair, swept up in a half-hazard bun is not stuffed into one of the knitted caps. Her roommate, Jordan, with her neon teal hair, throws her body into the chant. Jordan is taller than Danielle and stands with

her shoulders squared, confident and enraged. The fingers on her raised fist quake with a deep fury. She shakes the ground around her with her shouting, her eyes never blinking, bulging instead with indignation and disgust at the scene before them. She is tall enough to see the leaders in front of them.

Jordan's emotions leak into Danielle stirring feelings deep inside her. Her belly burns with a feeling – inspiration, maybe? She isn't sure. Jordan is avid and full of life. Small earthquakes erupt from her and unsteady Danielle. Her legs feel weaker in Jordan's presence. Her gaze is hazy and unfocused. She looks up at Jordan's pinched face. Her eyebrows knit at the bridge of her small, sloping nose. Her makeup – always perfect and notoriously expensive – sits in smooth angles on her face. Everything about Jordan is sharp. Her mouth, often expelling expletives, is thin and comes to cutting points. Her cheekbones are high, her cheeks shallow. The well-blended contour lines over-emphasize her blade like features. She uses little blush and an abundance of highlighter. Her face sparkles like a sculpture doused in diamonds, but the most dramatic part, and enviable too, is her eyes.

Jordan, as Danielle has learned from their short semester of living together, is obsessed with making her eyeliner sharp enough to “slice up the souls of weak-hearted men.” In the mornings, she stands in front of the single shared mirror with stone stillness, hardly breathing. Slow and steady, she draws harsh black lines across her top lid. She then cleans up the lines with q-tips and primer, smudging and correcting until they glint when she turns her head from side to side. Danielle has watched Jordan stare someone down while wearing beautiful eyeliner, feeling the fear of the meek. She thinks that if Jordan got the chance to stare down Dan Lange he would crumple into a pile of ash and fake hair.

Jordan lets out a belting, unintelligible screech. Her roommate's heart shakes itself from the shackles of her ribcage, roaring out of her and tearing across the crowd towards the main stage. Lange isn't out there, but Danielle is sure he can hear.

The force of Jordan's cry startles Danielle. She rocks to the side into one of the other protestors. Though the person does not seem to notice. Turning back toward Jordan, she finds that other protestors have moved to fill her spot. Like a noxious gas of outrage and contempt, the protestors expand to fill any space made available. A man, smelling sickly sweet with a mixture of sweat and cologne, moves forward without noticing her. Turning, she sidesteps a man with another lighter man on his broad shoulders. The lighter man's foot collides with Danielle's shoulder sending her scampering to the next available space. A group of girls, preteens maybe, rake their eyes up and down her thin frame before turning back to a gaggle of college-age boys in UT sweats in front of them. Danielle recognizes one of them as a guy from her freshman English class, but he was too enraptured with chanting that he did not return her gaze.

Sucking in a deep breath, she slides past the girls, not wishing to insult them more with her presence. She feels awkward and bulky in Jordan's clothes. Before the protest, she had asked to borrow one of Jordan's many animal rights t-shirts, but that had escalated into a pair of Jordan's ripped jeans that she had carefully adorned in quotes from *Mad Woman in the Attic* and *1984*, an odd but fitting combination. Jordan, an English and Poli-Sci major, taught Danielle all that she knew about the intricate workings of advocacy. Her side of the room was littered with clothes from varying punk bands, Knoxville feminist groups, and Planned Parenthood. She had hand-drawn pictures of uteruses with cute, winking expressions, placing the smiling pink posters of female pride proudly on the center of her wall. She had pink water bottles with the Notorious R.B.G and Hillary Clinton, books on the sexual history of Victorians scattered about, *The*

Clitoral Truth on display in the window, and a poster of *Legally Blonde* taped to the plain wardrobe. And while Jordan had many varying interests, they all seemed to relate back to her constant, itching need to be a good person, which she was. Loud, Danielle thought, but good nonetheless.

When Danielle first met Jordan, she was akin to the social issues plaguing everyday existence. She understood, for the most part, that women, especially black women, were underclass citizens, that civil rights was still an issue, that there every politician had an agenda. She was acutely aware of some of these issues more than others, but not enough to articulate her feelings on any of them. She, first and foremost a dancer with an undeclared major, has not had the opportunity to immerse herself in as many controversies as Jordan has. However, Jordan had scooped her up into her feminist bosom and there she has been nestled ever since. Every day, Danielle sees the world with new and improved eyes. Jordan's influence had been like glasses to her, the mostly blind child. Her roommate is a guide through a world full of hate and spitting greed. Under Jordan's precise tutelage, Danielle has learned to name the things she's experienced or been a perpetrator of: sexism, ableism, micro-aggressions, communism vs. capitalism, misogyny, political correctness vs. *political correctness*, internalized misogyny, mansplaining, patriarchy. You name it. Does it seem excessive to her? Yes, but Danielle likes that she knows how to name the problems in her world now. She likes to know that her feelings of outrage and disgust, contempt even for the white men that lord over all has a channel in liberalism, and she likes knowing most of all that she has found a place in an accepting albeit loud community.

Though, in moments like this, in Jordan's baggy jeans and Jordan's boxy shirt, she feels smaller than she's ever felt. She opens her mouth to pick up on the chant, but a young man in

jeans and a beanie bumps into her side. Without thinking, Danielle apologizes but immediately regrets it. Jordan says not to apologize for taking up space. She shouldn't but the words float out of her, taking her breath with her.

Her shaking fingers find her chin again, pushing and pressing at the acne cyst until it pulses. She knows squeezing won't help, but she does so anyway, pressing her fingers absently around the circumference of the zit. Blood rushes to the places where she touches. Her skin grows hot, the white blood cells trying to repair the damage she has done. Using her forefinger and thumb, she squeezes until her fingers shake. The cyst only grows. *It's not ready yet*, she chastises herself. She takes another step forward into a pocket of air only to be carried further by the swaying crowd. A wave of people surge, pushing her forward until she presses up against the cold metal of the fence. People pack in behind and beside her. Bodies, rhythmic and damp, move along to a frenzied song, a hallow song. Danielle doesn't understand the words, or rather doesn't hear them, but the music picks up in her body. She feels her hips begin to move. Her calves, once aching, loosen as she sways to the beat of the crowd. She closes her eyes against the dimming light of day, sinking down into herself and away from them to a quieter place.

When their long-limbed, freckled dance instructor, Miss Nadia, announced the assignment, Danielle felt paralyzed. She was a child who enjoyed and even thrived under structure. On the rare occasion that Miss Nadia gave up one of her rigidly choreographed dances in favor of free-styling feats of expression, Danielle felt her loose limbs seize up in indecision. In the freestyle dances, Miss Nadia would step back and watch with one of her perfect, expectant eyebrows raised. She would not keep time, not step in and correct, not utter a word of construction. Every move Danielle made would feel wrong and awkward under Miss Nadia's

scrutiny. During these dances, Danielle would miss the certainty of the planned. She would long for the sureness of knowing which move came next, of having Miss Nadia show which move to make next.

After the announcement, the other girls fell into excited chatter. They pitched songs back and forth to each other, their heads bobbling in excitement. Stronger, more certain girls staked claims to popular songs that Danielle recognized only in passing. Apart from the classical music of their routines, her own song repertoire included the rhythmic raps of nostalgic 90s artists spilling from her brother's booming stereo system and her mother's fascination with quick-paced, energetic showtunes. Music had never been her own. Embarrassed at herself, she stayed silent, slinking out of the practice before the others noticed her.

As she clamored up into her brother's used Chevy S-10 truck with the chipped paint and the new stereo system, she rattled off any and all the new songs she knew. Jumbles of lyrics crashed around in her brain, a cacophony of mixed rhythms and misconstrued messages. She shook her head to clear her mind of all the possibilities. With her worried, big eyes she looked around at her brother for a help she could not yet articulate.

Justin, a brother who was always tired, a brother who did not care about ballet, turned the truck on with a heavy air of annoyance clouding his features. Danielle's existence, she had discovered in her short decade of life, was a great thorn in her brother's sinewy side. Like her, her brother was lean, his limbs longer than his body. His expression was naturally solemn, eyes big and mouth downturned even when resting. As is the punishment of most teenage boys, he was tasked with carting Danielle to and from her daily ballet class. She was keenly aware of the subtle shift in his expression when he would see her in the school pick-up line. His eyebrows

would knit, his mouth would tighten. In response, Danielle would sink in her seat, wordless and guilty like she was the shackle attached to her brother's ankle.

As always, Justin nailed the gas before she got her seatbelt on. Fighting the forces of gravity and motion, she clicked the buckle into place and took up again the arduous task of silently asking her brother for song suggestions. She felt as if she were looking at him on a screen. He was there but a two-dimensional glimmer of a human. If she were to reach out and touch him, she would find hard plastic in response. The green, foamy ocean framed his elegant profile as they sped down the A1A. He paid Flagler Beach tourists little regard, staring straight forward. He lifted one of his heavy hands up to skip a track, the motion looking almost painful to him. Danielle turned away, staring straight at the long, flat strip of road before them. Outside, pastel beach houses rolled by. Blips of Easter pink and seaside blue winter homes, spotted with leather-skinned elderlies, offered only gloating glares at the sputtering truck.

"Justin," Danielle began, her voice barely scratching over her tight vocal chords. He didn't look at her. The song's bass pulsed like her quickened heartbeat. He bobbed his head along to the music. As if in a music video, his lips moved over the words noiselessly, replaced by the gravel and rock of the singer. Justin never sang aloud in front of others.

"Justin," Danielle tries again. She rested her hands on her knobby knees. Her feet do not touch the floorboards, so she swung them back and forth to the rhythm of the rap. "I have a question."

"What?" Justin huffed the word. There was no heat behind it, but Danielle dropped her eyes to her pale pink tights.

"I-I have to pick a song for my dance recital," she started off strong, her voice only hitching the once, "but I don't know what to pick."

Her voice fell; her indecisive tone ricocheting off the windows and seats. They swell with the strength of rising water, arching only to crash and sputter against the dingy seats. Justin tightened his mouth into a thin line. He didn't take his eyes off the road outstretching before them. Justin, she knew, had very little interest in her life and no interest at all in ballet. He was more concerned with the tiny affairs in small universe that is high school. Wrapped up in homework and baseball and the awesome gravitational pull of Lenore Michaels, a goddess who lived amongst the mortals of their neighborhood, Justin had little time to devote to the small problems of his kid sister.

Danielle held her breath. Justin didn't speak for a while, mulling it over in his brain. She was sure that this was the most brainpower he had ever devoted to her. Music, to Justin, was an experience. Even just watching him, the spoken words, the pounding of the bass, sunk into his clear skin. It drifted through him and animated in the bobbing of his head and the tapping of his fingers. He trusted music in a way that he didn't trust other people.

Justin turned off A1A and into a stretch of inter-connected suburbs leading up to their own quiet community. Danielle didn't think he would respond when Justin took a deep breath in. He let it out in a slow fizzling way like when air leaks out of a tire. He glanced at her for a moment before turning his eyes back to the road.

"Something good," he huffed after a moment.

Danielle's shoulders dropped, her whole body sagging against the window in timid disappointment. When they pull into the driveway, Danielle spilled out of the truck. Her brother, whose used so many voices to convey his own, had failed her in a marvelous, expected way. To Danielle, his words were not even outwardly malicious. No. She saw his songs retreat to a small room inside his mind, a place where there were locks and steel doors. For him, music was his

emotions, his feelings. Danielle understood this only a little and not enough to press him any further. For one ephemeral moment, he had cracked open the door only to slam it in her face again. Not wishing to repeat the experience, Danielle scampered across the thick, manicured grass to the house.

When the news about the elephant broke, Jordan stared at her phone for a solid twenty minutes. She sat on her bed with her hands frozen in the air as if she were trying to clutch something. The situation perhaps. Danielle found her like that, petrified, pale, and shaking. She entered their small dorm room on her tiptoes, as she normally did. Jordan was prone to scare easily. Any slight noise would pluck a sour note on her taunted nerves. Through their two semesters living with each other, Danielle found that Jordan was an excitable person. Every feeling she had was fueled with rocket power and red bull, driving her to great highs of passion to the deepest pits of despair.

Danielle had gotten used to tumultuous weather over their months of living. Like one of those survivalist guys in their tin foil helmets and fortified basements, she prepared herself for an onslaught of emotion, whether that be the burning sunshine of happiness or a tsunami of tears. Often, she would find Jordan collapsed on the bed, eyes welled up over a picture of a dog she saw on Twitter. Other times, she would be seeking cover from an eruption of volcanic rage at a classmate or a politician.

Even today, Danielle dropped her backpack on her bed, awaiting the storm forming on Jordan's face. She looked at Jordan, her muscles tensing up. This storm, unlike the ones she had weathered before, was electric. Static energy permeated the air around them. Danielle felt that if she were to reach out and touch her friend, she might get zapped into next Tuesday. This was not

one of her normal freak-outs. There was something much more sinister behind it, something dark, scary even. Panic cut into Danielle's chest. It was the kind of throat closing, chest-heaving panic she felt whenever Momma would cough too hard for too long at the hospital. An ice-veined panic. A returning tumor panic.

Although she didn't know what a stroke was, she assumed that Jordan was having one in that moment. Her usually vivid and vivacious roommate looked like a black and white image, frozen in abysmal dread. Danielle was reminded of a vintage movie star who had flung herself across a chaise lounge in some exasperated and dramatic way. Streams of tears still wetted the apples of her cheeks, cutting through careful contours, sparkling highlights, and pale pink blush. Jordan made no noise and neither did she for fear her roommate would shatter into several thousand tiny, inconsolable pieces. Danielle wasn't even sure Jordan was breathing when she dropped down beside her on the bed. It was a long time before Jordan moved and longer still before she spoke.

"Danielle," her voice started off thin and small. It was on a rare occasion that she called Danielle by her full name. Her high-pitched tone struggled to keep the full ferocity of her feelings at bay, but in a flurry, in a spilling, crashing, flooding way, she sputtered, "Danielle, I-I can't. I c-can't."

All at once, her chest began to heave. Her whole body convulsed, and she doubled over, dry-heaving. Her face flushed red, then purple as she struggled for air. Danielle, panicked, tried to pound on her back, to loosen up the grip of that black, humming mass beneath the surface, but she felt her own limbs start to tremble with worry. Jordan's breath became quicker and shallow, the air skimming across the surface but never going deeper than that. Her eyes were red and bulging. Danielle dropped to her knees in front of Jordan, trying to push the thoughts of her mother doubled-over in her open-backed hospital gown out of her head. This grief was the bad sort, the consuming,

swallow-you-up sort. Danielle remembered her brother's wailing song at the onset of Momma's illness. The gray, dismal rivers of mourning mixed with expensive eyeliner rolled down Jordan's cheeks. Jordan rocked backwards and forward, a pendulum ready to snap under the weight of the great injustice she had uncovered.

"Jordan!" Danielle shouted trying to break through the wall of grief Jordan had flung up between them. Jordan clutched Danielle's arms in her vice hands. Her boney fingers dug into the skin of Danielle's arms, bringing forth quiet bruises. Panic rose in the base of Danielle's stomach, crawling up her with its icepick fingers. Her spine chilled. The hairs on the back of her neck stood alert. Someone was dead, Danielle thought, or dying. The grief spewing from her lungs in heavy, wheezing spurts must have been reserved for loss. Agony cracked across Jordan's face. *There must be something...must be something*, Danielle thought, frantic.

Before thinking about it, before her wires connected, before the halting synapse processed in her brain, Danielle smacked Jordan across the face, heavy and stinging. She had seen it done in movies. The starlet, suffering the loss of her beautiful beau, screaming and thrashing about, gets brought back to sanity with a hearty slap. Hysterics were usually handled that way, right? Pinpricks sprang up across Danielle's thin hand, and the skin there was red. She gasped, clutching her hand to her chest. Her thoughts were a mess of static blocking out sound and sight. Her focus went to the thousands of needles pushing into the thin skin of her palm.

The room went silent. With her eyes screwed shut, Danielle didn't know if it was because of what she had done or because she had gone deaf with the shock of it all. Slowly, she peeled one eye open, then the other. Jordan sat still again. Her labored breathing slowed only a fraction. She stared up at Danielle with a mixture of hurt and betrayal, her red cheek cradled in her palm.

At first, neither of the girls moved. Their eyes, Jordan's steely gray and Danielle's soft brown, locked in a stricken, questioning way. Jordan's petite, pink mouth dropped into a perfect, aghast O. It was the silence of misunderstanding. As the seconds ticked by, Danielle became acutely aware of the grave mistake she had made with her tiny but sharp act of violence.

Defenses stampeded into her head: *I didn't know what else to do. It was a natural response. I thought you were going to hyperventilate. You were just screaming. I didn't know what to do. I didn't know what else to do.* All of them were pathetic. They dissolved in her foul mouth like a peppermint, treating a symptom in a pretty way but not touching the gnarly root cause. Pacifist Jordan would never understand the action, so Danielle said nothing, letting her offending hands drop to her side.

"Now," Danielle said, her soft voice the pebble that shattered the silence. "What the fuck is going on?"

Momma never cussed. The jagged edges of cuss words would have disrupted the melodic flow of Momma's musical tone. Even when angry, Momma's tone was gentle, guiding, never harsh or grating. Daddy is gruff but never loud. He was apt to stick with minor cussing such as "damn" and "hell." Cuss words that weren't really bad because any soul could find them in the Bible plain as day. Danielle used to giggle over them in her Sunday school class. But those words were holy, coming from her father and his Father before him, they weren't ugly, stinking. Coming out of her mouth, after what she had did, her words tasted like soured milk, of foul eggs. Those words, flowing so natural off her tongue, felt like they came from someone else, like she wasn't speaking.

"Why would you—" Jordan began in a whine, screeching and unbelieving. She sputtered off before completing her sentence. Danielle turned her eyes away in shame. Acid bubbled up from

her gut, gurgling at the edges of her esophagus. She didn't feel bad that she slapped Jordan. At least the half-sentences were better than no communications at all. She felt the shadow of guilt creep over her at the fact that she was not sorry, not even for a moment.

Jordan's eyes narrowed to slits, "What the fuck is wrong with you?"

She launched to her feet, towering over Danielle. She stared, unblinking, eyes glassy and blind to any explanation that Danielle could give. So she didn't. Instead, she crossed her arms and quirked an eyebrow at her roommate. Staring at Jordan's flushed, tear-stained face, Danielle couldn't see a mark or a sign that she had committed the sin at all. The lack of evidence convinced her to stand her ground, to push for an answer to the problem, "Jordan, what happened?"

Jordan's eyebrows knitted in confusion, the cause of her grief seemingly forgotten. She opened her mouth and closed it again. Opened and closed it, looking very much like a gasping fish. Danielle winced, every muscle in her body tensing for the biting lecture she was about to be bombarded with. If there was anything to be said about Jordan's personality, it was not in any sense subtle. She huffed, snatching her phone from the bed.

"Here." Jordan shoved the phone into Danielle's hand. She expected to see a text message screen open or a list of recent calls, not a breaking news title:

BREAKING: Tennessee's Lange Moves Forward with Elephant Hanging

"I have never been so embarrassed and enraged in my entire life," Jordan said through gritted teeth. "This asshole just gets to –" She finished the sentence in a low growl, words not seething enough to express her encompassing rage.

It was Danielle's turn to be stunned. She remembered hearing about the Twitter rantings of a madman while sitting in Momma's hospital room over fall break. At that time, the guy had

only a thousand concerning signatures, but no one, not even Momma, who watched the presidential race proceedings through tubes, turning up the volume to drown out the steady blips of her heart monitor, saw his cause as legitimate. Sitting in a chair next to her, Daddy scoffed at the man's audacity, putting to rest any possibility of the fool – as Lange was referred to among their family – succeeding. Satisfied with Daddy's judgment and Momma's wheezing words turning back to her constant and reverent praise of Hillary Clinton, Danielle had put the incident out of her mind. Not much one for news herself, preferring instead to watch YouTube clips of Misty Copeland than engage in the pits of political punditry.

Jordan tapped her foot in impatience, waiting for Danielle to have a reaction of equal magnitude. Perhaps, she was waiting for Danielle to apologize, to be so equally stricken with anguish over an animal with magnitude. The way she stared with a fire flickering behind her steel eyes, the way it turned them molten, burned into Danielle. Gone was the agony, replaced by anger, flecks of frustration, and a heaping smattering of idealism. These intangible things collected like little stones in the bottom of Danielle's lungs.

“We have to do something!” Jordan shouted when Danielle didn't say anything. “We have to call senators and start protests. We-“

We can't do anything, Danielle thought. The ice of dread licked at her stomach. This, the news that the elephant was officially being hung, was inconsequential. They have already announced their plan. What could stop Lange and his cronies from completing it? When a disease like this hate takes hold of the body, it is fatal. Clinical terms like *chronic* and *malignant* flashed into Danielle's mind. Malignant, something infectious, always spreading, unable to be stopped or reversed no matter how much money you throw at it. No matter how many nights you spend

praying. No matter how far away from home you get. Malignant as in the kind that scares the piss out of a person. Malignant, malevolent, murderous.

“Terminal,” Danielle muttered, though she didn’t mean to say the word aloud.

“Dani, it’s not terminal,” Jordan wrapped her strong hands around Danielle’s shoulders. “It’s not terminal. We can change this. We can do something about this.”

She said the last part in a low, awesome whisper. Jordan squeezed Danielle’s shoulders, once lightly and then again more assured. Danielle took in a shuddering breath, a Momma breath. Jordan trailed off into actions they could take: calling senators, starting protests, breaking the elephant from her confines...going to this doctor, starting this new medication, make “when the time comes” a daily phrase.

Jordan moved away and to her computer. She, a writer for a few blogs, opened up a new document. Without hesitation and too many thoughts to lock away inside her, she pounded on the keyboard. All her fury and might hammered into the keys, punishing them for their slow speed. The slap, seemingly forgotten, still sat heavy on Danielle’s hand. She stared at Jordan’s righteous spine hunched over her laptop. She showed no signs of loss, only determination plated her form. Looking at her was like looking behind the curtain in Oz. Movements, Danielle understood, began with people like Jordan who were trying hard to prove they were good people. Her roommate was a cog working in a larger machine of goodwill. She was a fearsome sight.

Danielle spun on her heel. In short, tender steps, she made her way out of her dorm room and down the hall, not sure if she was going right or left or if the direction really mattered that much at all. Her eyes fogged over, blurring her vision. A hateful thought entered her mind. It was the kind of thought that sent a bitter, metallic taste to her mouth. It wasn’t pretty or constructed

well, springing into her mind the way a passing car throws cold rain water on an unsuspecting pedestrian.

If only Jordan had become a doctor, then all those smarts might be a bit more useful.

In this moment, Danielle feels decidedly alone. No Jordan. No one looking her in the eye. No Momma. The fence presses into her chest, pinching at points along her ribcage and shoulders. She reaches her hands up to clutch the cold, biting metal. To her, it has become a grounding boundary, a response to the points of pain leaking from inside her. Like solemn little wails, solitude leaves small, detailed etches in her skin, a furrowed brow, a downturned mouth. To the outside eye, Danielle looks distraught, her expression pulled tight at the corners of her mouth and eyes. Her skin is splotched and bloody. Should someone spare a passing glance, they would see her frozen as one the faces the editors of TIME select for their “Young Girl Braves Everyday Life in Third World Country” editions. They would use adjectives like “ruddy” and “forelorn.” Multicolored people swirl and mix around her, young people, old people, all unnerving and beautiful but not looking forward with wayward expressions. She feels loneliness roll off of her like tendrils of fog, wispy and evaporating.

Danielle glances around to see if others feel the same, if one other feels the same. The man to her right, his voice hoarse from his violent screaming, rattles the fence before them. The links clink against the fence, their small clasped arms holding together in solidarity. The man yanks at the chains, bending a section in his fervor, but he is unable to break them. His heavy brow sits in a hard line across his forehead. For a moment, he stares at the fence, incredulous that it dares to defy his will. He hits the fence with his open palm. When it makes no moves to bow before him, he rears back and kicks it, letting out a low growl as he does so.

Danielle slides away from the man as much as the crowd will let her. Her shoulder presses against a girl who does not look over at the touch. The thin woman shouts over her head at the stage, calling the workers murderers. The men press on, not looking up, not seeming to hear the woman's raw rampage against them.

Four men, having cleared a semi-circle of space, now face them. They're painted an ugly blue-gray, the color of numb, lifeless bodies. Each of the men has slathered a letter from PETA in a striking crimson across their heaving chests. To Danielle, the letters look carved, bleeding. Streaks of the paint roll down into the men's blue sports shorts, painted the same color as their bodies. Tracing her eyes up from their bare feet, Danielle's eyes lock on their most striking feature, large papier-mâché heads in the shapes of elephants. Whoever made the heads is a detailed oriented person. Looking like a cute, animated elephant, someone had done up the heads to look doleful, like Dumbo. The cartoon eyes, large and unblinking, stare straight into Danielle, challenge her to resist their charm, to deny their humanity. The men lurch forward, their signs held above their heads like the banner of a ragged but proud army. The wind and damp air bend the flimsy poster board at the corners. As the clouds fill in above them, rain threatens to douse their palpable fire. Danielle studies the sky, her bones filling up with tension that reminds her of hurricane weather. She feels the soft, pattering steps of her worried mother shuffle over her skin. She follows the itching with her fingernails, raking them up her arms until great welts rise up. The man kicks the fence. The woman chants, throwing her fist in the air. Armies of ants move beneath the surface of her skin.

The itch is her mother's calloused hands. It is the salt air of a home she should have never left. Granules of dead skin fill her fingernails as she snakes her hand down the back of her shirt. Her fingers, urgent and clawing, follow their own path beyond her control. They crawl down her

back and over her neck. She buries them in her hair, diving until her fingers reach her flaking scalp. No one notices, and each solitary swipe of her lonely fingers emphasize this. She feels her mother's panic digging into her skin. In the back of her mind, she hears Momma call to her. The voice is faint underneath the yelling in the crowd, but it draws her eyes forward.

Danielle. Dani-baby.

She presses her face into the fence, relishing the cool on her cheeks. She stares at the ground for a moment, her gaze unfocused. The concrete and gravel churn, the swirl of it like the ocean in a stormy December, ambiguous, ashen, and volatile. She wants to fall into it, let it pull her into its cold embrace. She would drift down until her skin would go numb. The water's cool, dark hands would drift over her, stinging at first like alcohol but healing, antiseptic. Those were the hands of her mother too. Her mother's hands rubbing cocoa butter lotion over ashy elbows and knees after a shower. Her mother's hands, cold with the poor circulation. Her mother's hands were the ocean, but both were gone now.

Dani-baby.

"Momma," Danielle whispers. Her mournful eyes swing up to cage. It rocks on its wheels, its bolts groaning under the elephant's mighty weight. As a ship lost at sea, it floats in her vision, anchored to the small patch of rolling track. Danielle feels her stomach heave. This is so wrong, so *wrong*. Acid burns at her throat. One person was already dead, but here Lange, another solitary man, was trying to take another life. She wretches at the thought.

The Myers home was not remarkable, or normal for that matter, when measured against the elaborate sets of sitcom television shows, but it was cozy in its own way. A two-story Colonial, painted a muted, respectable grey, with a red front door, the house was a carbon copy

of the other houses surrounding it. Danielle leaned into the heavy door, shouldering through it with her boney shoulder. The threshold gave way to a bright, white hallway. There was a place where Danielle and Justin were supposed to hang their coats, but discarded rain jackets pooled in tiny puddles on the floor. Whether the days were dreary or bright, the house put forth a warm light, a comforting glow.

“Momma!” Danielle called into the expanse of the house. She kicked her shoes off in the doorway. Taking a running start, she slid into the living room, skidding to a stop in front of her mother resting on the couch. She did not look up from the laptop propped on her thick knees. Her face, lit by the dull glow of the screen, shimmered in a playful way, like a smooth river stone. The tightness in Danielle’s chest eased, replaced by an excitement only her mother’s smile brought her. With a shake of her shoulders, she discarded the unpleasantness of the song selecting business.

“One second, Dani-baby,” Momma said, her tone flat and distracted. On the TV behind her, anchors on the news batted loud, important nothings at each other. Their voices crawled into the room, tangling into the carpets and burrowing into the lazy blue loveseat. One of the anchors, a pretty woman with shining red lipstick, tried to push her big words over the desk to a blustering man with broad shoulders and a round, drooping nose. He reared his head back and spoke every time the woman spoke, raising his voice whenever she uttered a syllable. They used words like “expert” and “punditry” and “atrocious,” words with sharp edges, words that Danielle didn’t care to know. The woman’s red mouth pulled into a thin line. Whatever she was about to say next was cut off by a trilling commercial for used cars.

Danielle teemed with the urge to move. As per their usual ritual, Momma would lean back on her cushions, wrapped in the soft fleece of her blanket, and watch Danielle twirl around

the living room. Even if she made a misstep, Momma would clap. Her applause, pounding and too grand for the tiny room, filled Danielle with a sense of achievement she didn't rightfully earn. Though her father complained about how much ballet cost. Though her brother hated that he had to pick her up every day. Her momma watched with an attentive spark in her glassy eyes.

"Three more sentences," Momma said, her mouth turned down in an uncharacteristic, tight frown. Whatever her momma was reading sucked in her whole attention. Her chapped lips pursed. Her eyebrows, thin swipes across her wide forehead, drew together. Nearing the end of the article her eyes ticked back and forth across the screen in a frantic way. Danielle's shoulders shrunk and she knitted her fingers together in uncertainty.

"Alright, little one," Momma said, turning the laptop away from her. She brought her thin, shaking hands up to rub her eyes. No doubt, Danielle thought, she'd been on the computer all day looking up the sort of things grown-ups. Although Momma had always stayed at home, all of Danielle's little life, she hadn't stayed glued to her computer like she had been recently. Danielle had noticed that the television rarely moved from CNN now. The red logo had burned into the screen. Momma watched with furtive intensity, trying her best to answer the question, "Who would be the next president?"

Danielle had been told in school that this president could be historical. Her teacher, the peachy Miss Rivers, had brushed over the subject with an excited trill, not seeming to notice the seriousness of the situation. At home, Danielle's mother had been consumed by the prospect of Barack Obama becoming president. She put signs in their yard and bumper stickers on all three of the family cars. She went volunteering on the weekends, and on Sundays, she led the prayer for Mr. Obama's victory in front of the whole congregation. More than anything, Danielle

noticed the way Momma said his name: “Bar-AH-ck Oh-ba-MA,” like his potential could not be tampered down by a mere mortal. She spoke of him with the reverence of God.

Danielle leaned forward on her toes, feeling the need to be closer to her mother, “Momma, what were you reading?”

“Nothing for you to be concerned about,” Momma said. She leaned forward, resting her elbows on her knees. For a moment, she surveyed Danielle’s appearance. Her look was hard but not mean, as if she were reading on the computer. It was the same look she gave her tomato plants in the back yard when she wasn’t sure if they were growing or not. Feeling a bit awkward, Danielle twirled. Her soft pink practice skirt fluttered up around her, rising like small thin petals taken up on a summer breeze. She spun once, twice, three times before Momma stood and took her tiny shoulders in her warm hands.

“Is there something on your mind, Dani?” Momma asked. She was giving Danielle that hard look again. Her eyes narrowed like they do when she needed her glasses to read something. In her excitement to recreate dance class for her momma, Danielle forgot all about not having a song good enough to dance to. Justin, who knew music as one knows how to breathe, said it had to be good. Her teacher, though not saying it aloud, expected excellence. Danielle again remembered the worry gnawing at the back of her throat, its plump body stuck in her esophagus.

She looked up into Momma’s round face. The apples of her cheeks were rosy, or maybe they were flushed with fever. Momma took in a rattling breath and turned her head into the crook of her arm to cough. Her cough was long and heaving. She threw her whole body into it. Her shoulders tremored from tiny earthquakes crackling through her lungs. Her eyes screwed shut, fighting off tears. Each breath in was a gasp, a desperate cry for good, clean air. The inside of

Momma's chest sounded like a candy wrapper being rattled, an annoying, putrid sound only made by old women in the backs of churches. Danielle hated that sound too.

After Momma got sick, Daddy had told Danielle and Justin not to bother her with too many things. She often needed rest, and they were supposed to fend for themselves as lonely children do until Daddy got home from the firm. If Momma were to ask for something, she was to have it that minute. Danielle, as Daddy had told her, was too old to be acting like a foolish baby. That's how she felt – small and burdensome. She closed her mouth and swallowed hard. The lump in her throat did not go away, but she wasn't about to let Momma see that.

"I'm sorry, Dani," Momma said. "What'd you ask me?"

"What were you reading?"

Momma's hands tightened on Danielle's shoulders, a gentle squeeze. Danielle looked up at her momma again. This time, Danielle saw a glow there. Instead of small sparks, there was the warmth of the evening sun touching the ocean. Momma smiled, the corners of her mouth like shooting stars off to dance across the world.

Momma snapped her fingers and spun on her heel. She dropped back onto the couch and took up the laptop. For a moment, Danielle felt a pang of jealousy jerk at her heart. She wanted to be as loved as that old laptop.

"You need to see this," Momma said. She typed for a moment, searching for something within the depths of the internet. She clicked once, again, and then flipped the laptop around to face Danielle. The blank screen of a loading YouTube video greeted her. Momma smiled, her teeth white and shining. Every day, despite if she was leaving or not, her mother would put on bright pink lipstick. On the rare occasion, when Danielle begged with every vibrant, crying atom in her body, Momma would dab the pink lipstick onto her tiny lips. She would make her pucker

and pop, smacking her lips together to blend the pink over her small canvas. The video flickered to life, drawing Danielle's attention away from her Momma's beaming face.

The video began slow. People whom Danielle knew to be famous because they were in movies and had perfect noses. An acoustic guitar began slow and soft, matching the celebrities' little head bobs. The song began shortly, with one man singing the same words as Barack Obama was speaking. The music in the background was never louder than the speaking or the people singing. It was a soft tune. Momma started to sway her hips in tepid circles. Danielle followed suit, moving herself up onto her toes.

Danielle liked it when Momma danced. Where her movements were trained by Miss Nadia's strict hand, her momma was freer. Her dancing came from pure feeling. Momma took the music in her. It filled her up like the salty morning breeze drifting through palm trees. The louder Obama spoke, the more Momma moved. She raised her long, elegant arms above her head. Danielle followed suit, pointing her fingers in a delicate but sharp way. Momma's fingers splayed in the air. They stretched as if she were trying to reach through the roof and brush the clouds. Danielle stretched too, reaching her arms up until they ached, until she felt the blood roll down from her fingertips. She stretched further than she thought she could.

At the climax of the song, the singers and Obama repeated the words, "Yes, we can." It started off quiet at first, as if only a mere suggestion of success. Then, as the music gets faster, as the speaking strengthens, the singers belted out their ardent belief with the abandon of true belief. Momma turned her eyes skyward, singing with her scratchy voice, singing despite her dry, raw throat.

"Yes, we can."

"Yes, we can."

“Oh, yes, we can!”

Danielle felt the words too. They were the way her heart beat faster when the teacher was about to call her name. They were smooth like the crane’s flight in the canal near their house. They were the breathless moment before opening a birthday gift. Those words, reaching out from the vast internet abyss she was not yet familiar with, were movement. Momma moved as she hadn’t in months. She allowed her shoulders to slosh back and forth to the gentle tune, the ice on her stiff hips dissolved.

When the song ended, Momma dropped back onto the couch in a heap of rattled breathing and tense smiles. Danielle made a move toward her mother, but Momma held up a dried, ashen palm to stop her. Danielle pulled up short, all the warmth from the music video melting away until she felt like stone bones and ice. Momma began coughing again, turning her face away, her palm shaking. Momma’s fingers curled in and she brought her balled fist to her chest, tapping there as if trying to loosen something.

“Momma?” Danielle asked in a worried, quiet tone. She didn’t think momma could hear over her lungs knocking against her ribcage. For minutes, Danielle stayed frozen in mid-step, afraid to move the air around too much. Momma winced, coughed two final, weak coughs then leaned back into the cushions of the couch.

“I’m sorry, Dani-baby,” Momma croaked. “I swallowed down the wrong pipe, I guess.”

Danielle knew her mother was sick. She knew in her heart that her mother wasn’t a normal, chicken pox type of sick either, but she accepted this explanation. If her mother swallowed down the wrong pipe, if spit had just sputtered into her windpipe, then her mother was not a sick as Daddy and Justin were making her out to be. Momma was never as sick as all

that. Danielle smiled, the corners of her lips pulling tight against her tiny cheeks. Momma opened her arms for Danielle.

Danielle launched herself into Momma's awaiting arms, burrowing herself against her mother's cushiony bosom. Momma pulled Danielle close, held on tight.

"Momma, why did you want me to listen to that song?" Danielle asked.

Momma, usually careful with her answers, spoke up immediately, "It gives me hope."

"Hope?"

"Yes, it gives me hope for you and Justin," Momma began, squeezing Danielle to her. "It gives me hope for our country. For better lives."

Danielle didn't quite understand what was so bad about their lives then. They lived in a house that was bigger than prissy Avery Simpson. Daddy and Momma and Justin all had cars and cell phones. Danielle had ballet and dolls. Their TVs were flatscreens, and their neighborhood had a pool. Despite all these things, Momma's "Hope" filled the yard, covered their hearts in bright blue t-shirts, and rode along with them to school, to the firm, and to ballet practice. Momma's hope was always with them.

Last Phone Call

Hello? Dani, are you there?

Momma? I can't really talk right now.

**coughing* Dani, is there any way you can come home for the weekend? I*

have something to tell you.

I can't, Momma, I have a big test to study for.

Ah, that's right. You told me you had tests. I understand.

I gotta go. We're going to the library.

Dani?

Yeah?

Dani, I love you no matter what.

I love you too, Momma. Now, I gotta go.

I'll call you later.

[The phone shuts off. Silence in the dorm room]

I lied, Momma. There is no test.

I lied, Momma. There is no test.

I lied, Momma. There is no test.

"Dani," Jordan shouted. "Look!"

Danielle looked up from her copy of *1984*. Her bones felt heavy, her eyes red-rimmed and tired. Jordan's enthusiasm was shrieking, screaming even. It chattered across the short expanse of her tiny dorm room. Danielle flipped over on her bed, swimming out of her haze to Jordan's intense and shaking gaze. For her roommate, everything was a lesson in extremes. Devoted love or visceral hatred. Insomnia or narcolepsy. Full knowledge of a subject or none at all. Jordan had only two settings, it seemed.

In the beginning, Jordan explained it as an intricate, life or death path all leading to her future. Danielle, a lost soul, had once took the plunge and asked Jordan why this was. If past-Danielle had been expecting a simple, low-key answer, she was proven wrong almost immediately. Jordan, without skipping, told Danielle with her wide, shaking eyes that what she had for breakfast each morning determined whether or not she would get into graduate school, which determined her future career, which ensured the stability of her future life. For Jordan, everything is future centered. She curates her life like an art collector: only the finest pieces, no matter how small, get in.

“What?” Danielle asked. Even talking felt heavy and difficult.

“Look!” Jordan insisted. She shook her laptop at Danielle. She rolled her office chair to Danielle’s bed and placed the computer in front of her. With her fragile laptop free from her strong fingers, Jordan sat forward in her chair. She stared at Danielle in muted enthrallment. Her whole body trembled. Danielle wasn’t sure yet if it was from excitement or fury. With Jordan, the twin emotions rattled her body and rolled off her in harsh, choppy waves.

Danielle turned her eyes to the laptop. She winced at the brightness of the screen. She hoped, for the sake of her sanity, that this was not another hanging elephant article to add to the pile. Since the atrocity had been announced months ago, every speck of Jordan’s body devoted itself to destroying the likes of Lange. Jordan was a good person. That, Danielle was certain of.



The Future is Female

August 19, 2016 at 10:23 AM

Greetings, ladies! As strong and capable women, you know that there is power in numbers. After the disturbing footage of Senate hopeful Dan Lange going on a rant in which he called women animals and reminded his constituents “It’s hanging time in Tennessee,” we are reminded that now, more than ever, we need to focus on the task at hand. It is time that we band together and contact our senators and representatives to stop this horrible crime against animals. We, as women, can stop Dan Lange. All it takes

is 5 minutes out of your day! Check out the article below by moderator [Jordan Barnes](#) on tips for calling your government official!

“You got published?” Danielle mumbled. *Must be an excited shaking then.* Her mind raced over how this could affect Jordan’s omnipresent future. Getting published could mean getting a steady job writing articles for a feminist magazine or a non-profit. A job meant that Jordan would not have to go to graduate school, but any potential jobs created a different path than she was planning in the first place. Getting published adjusted the schedule, the time table. If she wanted to pursue journalism or writing for a non-profit, she had to change her major (again) from English to Journalism. That would bring up questions on whether or not she would even have enough time to change her major at this point. And what if –

Danielle felt her breathing quicken. She spun the laptop back to Jordan, “That’s great.” Her tone crumpled to the bed beside her, falling short of the intensity Jordan expected and deserved.

“Isn’t this the most amazing thing you have ever seen?” Jordan said. “Think of all the opportunities this could open up.”

Danielle would rather think of anything but that. She lifted her book back to cover her face. Her arms felt as if they would fall off. Her blood sat thick and heavy in her veins, moving like sludge moves through the sewers.

Jordan laid one of her cold, twittering hands on Danielle’s arm, “Dani, I have never been so simultaneously happy and feeling like an extraordinary imposter.”

Danielle waded through her muddled thoughts, looking up at Jordan through her long eyelashes. Not being one to understand the tones and nuances Jordan’s incredible conversation spectrum ranged, she blinked in a quiet, solemn way. Frankly, she did not feel like being happy for anyone, let alone for something as trivial to her as a publication was. But, because she doesn’t

want to dampen her roommate's happiness any more than she had the last couple months, she forced a smile onto her face.

"That's great," Danielle said, trying to force some enthusiasm into her voice. Jordan didn't take the bait though. The corners of eyes lost their crinkle, and her mouth drooped in hurt way.

"I'm sorry," Jordan said. "I bothered you while you were reading. I'll just –"

Danielle felt her whole body sigh on the inside, a gathering and release of all her tense muscles. Ever since Momma died in May, ever since her tawdry, sluggish trek back into the mountains, she felt the color seeping out of her life. Once vibrant hues slipped pigment by pigment into flecks of mute gray. Even Jordan, the tumultuous swirl of light and emotion, the girl who she had retreated to, could not bridge the gap between feeling and not. Though it was only August, a month into their sophomore year together, Danielle could feel the weight of a thousand sighs sitting in her lungs, filling them up until they pressed into her ribcage, ready to burst.

She shot Jordan an apologetic look. "So, we're calling our senators then?"

The light in Jordan's face flickered then ignited with a light rivaling the sun. Although Danielle wasn't sure, she thought that this was the face of excitement, like the blinking of a marquee. Her cheeks flushed, and her eyes cleared up as if a fog lifted from them. Jordan saw the world with a fresh, uncensored view. Like Orwell, she was tuned in to the injustices that existed around people like air. The world, to Danielle's good roommate, was toxic. All her causes are a noxious poison pervading every pore. Like a putrid gas, the problems of the world sunk into her skin and filled her up, always expanding and pushing on her from within. Any small victory was sweet gasp of air, shallow and unfulfilling but still breathing nonetheless.

Jordan was a good person. Of that, Danielle was certain. She saw it in the way Jordan stared into the abyss, into a future that was perfect. It's in the way she trembled when she saw news that

upset her, when she saw an injustice in the world, as if every cell in her rejects the horrible and the ugly.

Things I did instead of calling my senator:

- *Fought ferociously with the free spirit of the internet (3 hrs)*
- *Wandered through Wal-Mart to fulfill my ingrained capitalist needs (2 hrs)*
- *Took a shower (40 min hot water; 20 min cold)*
- *Watched Spongebob and tried not to think of the underlying themes of working class struggles (2 hr)*
- *Put on a bra that doesn't fit (5 min)*
- *Put on a shirt that is too big to hide my jelly rolls (20 sec)*
- *Put on jeans that didn't fit (5 min)*
- *Replied to text messages (20 min)*

Things I will do before calling my senator:

- *Create a script for calling my senator (30 min)*
- *Read over the script 12 times in the mirror (10 min)*
- *Take deep breaths to calm my stuttering voice (10 min)*
- *Sit on my bed with phone in hand (30 min)*
- *Dial the number (10 sec)*
- *Wait for the rings (20 sec)*
- *Hang up immediately when someone answers (1 sec, almost 0 sec)*

—

The cage's rocking slows. Bernice turns in the cramped space. Each step is an agonizing shuffle of mass and force. Danielle feels the footfalls in her chest, her hammering heart stuttering

to match their nervous gait. The kicking man and the thin woman are looking at the elephant men bleed into the crowd. The woman's eyes shine with fresh, bulbous tears. They spill over her lids and roll down her cheeks, flooding the lines in her aging face. Danielle wants to grab the woman's hand, but Bernice calls her attention with a low, heaving whine.

The crowd around her goes silent, or she thinks it does, at least. The roar eases to a murmur, talk drifting over in unintelligible whispers, wafting out like the receding tide. Silence floods her ears, thick and filling. Her fingers relax their hold on the fence. The pulse of the acne cist resumes, aching in a dull, lazy manner. She brings her fingers up to pinch the cist, gentler this time, absent even. She doesn't wince but looks at Bernice with wide, soft eyes. The top layer of skin breaks, only a little. The only fruit, a colorless fluid, drips down her chin. She digs, feeling the pop build up. She knows if she keeps going, she'll feel the sting of blood. As she locks eyes with Bernice, she sees the familiar spark of life, a shimmer of the familiar.

Bernice's eyes, lit by a fizzing flood light, are a rich dark brown. They speak tales of a rollicking earth, deep and lively, ancient eyes. Bernice is old and beautiful with her firm, strong skin. She gives no indication that death looms in the distance like the eminent minute hand ticking ever closer. She looks only at Danielle, her gaze unblinking, undeterred by the onslaught of raging support. One by one the other protestors melt away from Danielle's vision. She is alone again but this time not lonely. The difference is the stage at curtain call. The faces in the crowd are blurred, one mass of attention. They are not communicative; they are reciprocal. A dancer goes through her fluid movements, and the appreciative crowd sends warmth, adoration even. She feels her mother in that look. Danielle's breath hitches. Momma is there, smiling for her, calling out to her. Momma is there.

Bernice huffs, but it is not hateful or even hurt. Her head shakes as if she is trying to get her bearings. Her gaze fixes on Danielle again, more determined this time, meaningful. Though obscured by the bars, Danielle can see the muscles in her broad back relax, the skin shaking then going slack. The elephant lifts her trunk only slightly, the tip wrapping around the bar of the cage at first as if she were using it to steady herself. Then, shaking at first then sturdier, she reaches out to Danielle, her great trunk unfurling into a steady, straight line.

Danielle, in the back of her mind, feels music begin to drift into her again. This time it is softer. She feels the motions stirring in her ankles, the itch to move her hands to delicate points. The music climbs up her calves and into her hips; it rolls over her back, brushing its thin hands over her ribs and along her shoulders. It fills her up. *Yes, we can. Yes, we can.* It is not Bernice feels the music lifting her up over the fence. A thousand hands of promise help her to the top of the fence. She doesn't remember moving, but she feels strength return to her limbs. She pulls on the bar and flips over it, never taking her eyes off Bernice. She drops to the ground in a heap, the gravel scratching her face and arms, but she feels nothing but the pull on her heart.

Dani-baby, I miss you.

Momma. Danielle almost says the word aloud as she leaps to her feet. She is running forward, captivated. *Yes, we can. Yes, we can.* She feels the music in her bones as her legs pick up speed. Jordan's baggy jeans are heavy on her. The material works against her light, bird bones, weighing her down. The boxy tee-shirt rubs against her as she runs. Her arm outstretched, she reaches for Momma. If she could only extend her fingers more, let her arms stretch out like bungee cords. The expanse between them, only about 20 feet, feels wide and glacial. She skids on gravel, running with little more grace than a weak-legged fawn. Tears spring to her eyes, blurring her vision. In the shadow of the dying light, she can pretend the outstretched trunk looks

like an arm. She can imagine ashen skin, a sure and steady strong arm. She can pretend her mother is standing there, whole again, full and smiling. Danielle feels a sob clawing at her chest. Its talons sting in her throat.

Almost there. She's almost there. Her strides are in slow motion. Her heartbeat, erratic now, feels as if it may burst forth from her chest. *Just reach a little further. Just a little more.*

A weight hits her chest like a semi. She is sure something inside her, a bone maybe, cracks. Waves of darkness swell at the edge of her vision, rising up and crashing into shards of stars. She tries take a breath, but her lungs rebel against her. She is suspended in a half-life, not breathing but not dead either. There is only pain sitting thick on her skin.

Two sets of hands grasp her, hauling her backwards. In her haze, she is distantly aware of someone screaming. It is a terrible sound, like glass shattering, chords snapping. Years of agony build into that sound. Pained voices, terse conversations, things left unsaid in a silent dorm room all feed into the voice as it splinters. It is long and pronounced. She can't make out what the voice says at first, but then it knocks into the side of her head, "Momma!"

She becomes aware that the voice is hers. Her voice, once so quiet, never loud when it needs to be, rakes out of her. Her screeches sound like metal dragging across the gravel and concrete. Her voice is the bloody one; it is wounded. An onslaught of sight and sound smack into her. Her limbs are moving without her permission. Her arms pull and yank in the police officers' iron grasps. Like two vices, their steel fingers cut off circulations. Her hands go numb. She kicks out her feet in awkward arcs. The police officers never falter, as if she were a child swinging haphazardly between her parents. She closes her eyes against the harsh light of the spotlights.

If the officers say anything, she doesn't hear it. Instead, her mother's voice fills her head. It is soft and cool like cotton sheets on sunburned skin. *Don't struggle, it says. Be still.* She feels

herself go heavy. Her legs are like lead weights. When the police officers let her go, she drops into a heap on the hard ground. She feels tired. Gravity, or maybe one of the officer's knees, pushes into her back. The blackness is back at the edge of her sight. It starts, slow at first, ebbing in and out of her vision. Then, nothing. She isn't sure if she gives in and closes her eyes or if her brain shuts down for her, but the world is quiet again.

Danielle is eleven and has chosen the music for this recital. Fidgeting backstage, she feels stars shooting into her fingers and toes. Around her, other girls race to get ready. Their mothers float around them like watchful angels, ready to tuck a misplaced curl or touch up smeared lipstick. Danielle doesn't have on lipstick because she didn't want her mother to worry about it. While the other girls sat for layers of theatre powder, mascara, and blush, Danielle's face is naked, plain.

On stage before her, Emmie Han jumps around to an upbeat pop tune, her usual focus abandoned for tight twirls and flighty leaps. Emmie was taller than Danielle with a long neck and graceful, strong legs. In this moment, though, she looks like a fairy floating without wings. Different colored lights fight to keep up with her quick, feather-light steps. As Danielle watches, her chest tightens. Emmie's music, the rush of the other girls around her, and the way Momma cranes her neck in the crowd all pile onto her heart, careening over her ribcage. For a moment, she is unsure she has made the right choice. Compared to the other girls, her song was obscure, hardly even a song at all.

Before she can think about it anymore, Emmie's dance ends on a final, reeling pirouette. She waves to someone in the crowd that Danielle cannot see and prances off the stage. She taps Danielle in with one of her paper doll hands, wishing Danielle luck as she scampers off to join

the other girls. Miss Nadia, standing opposite Danielle on the stage, nods her head and waves Danielle forward.

Danielle swallows over the lump in her throat. *Yes, I can.*

Raising her chin up in the elegant way ballerinas do, she slides out to the middle of the stage. From there, despite the lights shining in her eyes, she can see the outline of her family. Momma smiles and clasps her hands together, leaning forward on the edge of her seat. Through the darkness, her momma's blue Hope t-shirt stands out against the black backdrop of the crowd. Danielle smiles to match her mother's, happy even if her lips aren't as pink right now, even if her tutu is not the royal blue of a Hope t-shirt.

She raises her arms up, her fingers spreading out in the air. The music begins. She twirls once, twice, three times, her eyes only leaving Momma for a second. In the crowd, her momma stands, too excited to remain in her seat. In that moment, as Danielle sloshes her shoulders, as she stands on her toes and twirls, as she leaps about the stage with in a jolting way, she feels the words lift her. She is no longer touching the stage any more but floating over the crowd. Her mother is not sick. Momma looks up at her with shining eyes and cheeks flushed with life.

In that moment, Danielle is hope.

CHAPTER THREE

For the all of Jim's life, waking up has never been painful. The alarm, set on its highest volume, broke through the wall of sleep he built around himself. His brain awakens first from the dark waters it floats in. It sloshes about in his head, trying to make sense of direction. With his eyes closed, in the stillness of the dark, he feels like he is already in his coffin. His rough hands are crossed over his chest as he lays flat on his aching back. The new memory foam mattress Tammy swindled him into getting swells around his joints and cradles his neck as he imagines soft, black dirt would. Alone in bed, his half-thoughts try to place him at home or in Jacksonville, though neither really changed the way his elbows stiffen up and refuse to move. A layer of nicotine grease sits yellow on top of his skin, staining the sheets and pillows in a sour way, pushing him down into practice death.

The alarm sounds again. Used to, he only had to set one alarm on the ole radio clock to get his flat ass out of bed in the mornings. At the time, when his back didn't scream in protest and his bones didn't rattle rigid underneath his waning muscles, he would spring out of bed without much thought to how many hours of sleep he got. The siren sounds of Heart, Shania Twain, or even at one point the sweet, mellow voice of a one Mrs. Tammy Bedford had him floating out of bed. That was back when he worked for himself laying carpet for Keesecker's in the middle-class homes of Unicoi County.

Something pops within him. He isn't sure if it is in his back or his knee or even within him at all. Whatever it is, he does not feel the relief of pressure released anywhere on his body. The alarm sounds a third time. Jim's spirit swims upwards through the molasses of sleep, breaking surface some minutes later with a phlegm-filled cough. His lungs always wake before

his brain. The tar in them, heavy and hot, bubbles up, demanding to be released from their fleshy prison. He takes in hoarse gulps of air, sending his lungs reprieve from their sticky confines. They rattle in appreciation though nothing comes up. Whatever damage he has done to them settles back down like brown, wet leaves.

Jim rolls over, untwisting himself from the clinging sheets. The cotton clings to his sweaty skin, though he doesn't remember being warm once in the tundra of his and Tammy's bedroom. His wife, hot by nature and sometimes out of spite, leaves the overhead fan on even in September, when the temperatures would drop to the mid-50s at night and the house is drafty. He shivers when the sheet drops off his bare shoulders. His blood feels colder these days. The blood thinners he takes for his traitorous heart do that to him. They water down his blood, make him weaker, he thinks. He'll think it over three or four times before he'll let Tammy and her silver tongue harangue him into going to that twiggy Dr. Moss again. That woman had given him medicine for old people problems like cholesterol and blood pressure, problems his 76-year-old father calls him to complain about. Sitting still pretty at 54, Jim doesn't see the need for such a drastic change in lifestyle just yet.

He puts his feet on the cold hardwood floor, wishing to God of IcyHot that his back wouldn't hurt so much today. He has important things to do.

With one of his calloused, stiff hands, he paws at the hard plastic of his cellphone. Half the time, the dreaded thing pretends not to register him as a human. He pushes the center button on the phone and swipes, just like how Todd taught him. The phone thinks for a minute, pretends it doesn't remember how to open, then finally clicks on to the plain blue default background. The alarm trills stop, their absence leaving the room silent and hollow. For his wife, who has maintained a third-shift lifestyle for the entirety of their 25-year marriage, the room is designed






to be a hibernation den. At seven in the morning, she would lumber up the stairs, the bones in her lower-back popping the whole way. Without much awareness, she would strip in the middle of the room, tossing her greasy work clothes into the hamper near their bathroom. If she didn't have to take a shit (which she usually did now since her digestive track has been all screwed up) she would pull a nightgown over her sweaty, pre-menopausal skin, and drop onto her side of the bed, not to be awoken again, under penalty of death, until her three o'clock snack. That is, unless she had one of her snooty-falooty lady meetings at the Johnson City Country Club for lord knows what reason. Those women, all older than her and retired, demand her presence at 11 AM sharp without much regard for her schedule or the fact that she spends all her spare time making nonsense center pieces or typing minutes for meetings. Stuff that they don't really thank her for and won't do themselves.

But she has time to do those things, he thinks. Her job at NN Ball & Roller, though not a cushy office job, is at least steady. Jim runs a finger over the screen, pulling up his missed calls. A cold chill starts in his spine, prickles up his neck. The little orange 1, indicating a missed-call, glares up at him bright and hot as the July sun. His eyes pop open and his thoughts screech to a stop, deafening in his ears. Panicked, he taps on the phone app. The protective screen Todd had insisted on bounces against the phone's actual screen but does not register his touch, forgetting for a moment it was only there as a tool for him. His second attempt, fueled with the frustration of a self-proclaimed low-tech redneck, is over successful. The screen leaps to his recent calls to dialing Todd's cell phone number with all the speed of a hummingbird's wings. Before he can get to the back button, the screen times out, shrouding the room in darkness.

"Well shit," he mutters, his voice all gravel and barbed wire. The words scratch out of him as he fondles for the switch on the lamp on the rickety nightstand. At this hour, he doesn't

think Todd will answer, but Jim doesn't want to worry him without reason. Todd, like his mother, is a worrier. His mind leaps from worry to panic to outrageous relief in flitting, capricious ways. Tammy does this too. Jim figures it's because they're so quick. He knew a long time ago that both of them, Brennon too, are all smarter than he is. He's smart, too, for someone with only a high school education but not in the way they are. Every night when *Jeopardy* comes on and Alex Trebec chimes out the players' names and jobs, he forgets Todd Bedford, professional away-from-homer and Tammy Bedford, PhD in unnecessary home renovations. They'll answer questions about long-dead poets, shout over each other about Italian paintings, and spit food in their enthusiasm to name the 1939 Oscar Winner for Best Actor (Robert Donat from *Goodbye, Mr. Chips*, if someone, most certainly not Jim, wants to know). They would pull Greek gods and Civil War poets from their heads, while Jim adds to his collection of cholesterol platelets with the fried, fast-food of the night. If he's lucky, a category about classic cars would come on. That's when he'd be cooking with peanut oil, as his daddy would say.

Jim manages to turn the light on, his flat fingers fumbling with the switch. The dull yellow light arcs around half the room. The black-out curtains hung over the bedroom window and the glass door leading out to the balcony suck in the little bit of light that dares go near them. For a moment, he forgets he is old. He pulls the phone down, holding it almost between his knees before his blurry vision swims back into focus. The text, though Todd had made it bigger for him, moves and doubles like a trick mirror at the circus. Jim grumbles and snatches Tammy's reading glasses off of one of the books she's left on the bedside table but never bothered to open. They are purple and plastic and sit awkward on the crooked bridge of his once broken nose. But, the text comes back together and rearranges itself on the tiny screen.

Phone		More
Today		
	Todd outgoing	6:23 AM
	Mike Harris (3) incoming	6:02 AM
	Tammy (2) incoming	12:22 AM
Yesterday		
	Tammy outgoing	4:33 AM
	CSX incoming	4:01 AM

Mike Harris, a man Jim has known his whole life, rarely ever ventures out to make a phone call anymore. A fellow conductor, Mike and Jim rarely saw each other for sleep and work. Their conversations are short and always stuck to subjects where they both had authority: train rides to and from one gray, desolate depot to another, muscle cars, and musings on what lay beyond the pearly gates of retirement. Most of their grumbles sound like the grumbles of their railroader fathers and their railroader fathers before them.

Jim huffs a sigh of relief. For a moment, he forgets he isn't on call with the railroad right now. Today, for once, he doesn't have to keep his hand hovering over his phone, waiting to drop whatever project, whether it be laundry piling up or catching up on his usual four hours of sleep, and run to the railroad. He must be delirious from his six hours he got last night, he thinks. He remembers that today is special because he's at home and he doesn't have to show up to the yard

office until eleven. Today he doesn't have to walk the length of 115 train cars and inspect the wheels. He wouldn't have to sit and stare out of a window for hours on end, bored out of his skull. No today, there would be no deadhead rides to Kentucky or South Carolina, no bland, quiet engineers. Today they were going to let that head bitch at CSX have it in front of a national audience.

With a groan, Jim stands up. The balls of his feet burn as bone spurs dig into his flesh. His knees crack back into place. He extends his elbows, wincing as they grind, bone on bone, in protest. He can't recall when he got this way. For all he knows, he was climbing out of his crib cracking and popping, gritty, stinking of sweat and work. He presses the button to call Mike back and pads over to stand next to the cold balcony door.

"Hello?"

"Whattya say, Mike?"

"Jimbo, did I catch you sleeping on the job?"

"Just barely. I thought I'd gotten a miss call for sure."

"Ah, you jackass. You're better than me. You don't get no miss calls."

"Did you need something, Mike?"

"Yeah, I was just calling to make sure you were still good to go with the plan."

"I said I was."

"Well, don't hurt to check now, Jimbo. Did you hear Bob Crabtree done dropped out?"

"You're shitting me."

"Said he won't lose his job over this, but I told him it was volunteer work. Plus, we're all in the union. Union won't let anything happen to us, right Jimbo?"

"Well, Crabtree's got little kids. I guess I understand."

“Jim, you think we’ll lose our jobs?”

The nervous tick in Mike’s voice puts a pang of doubt into Jim’s heart. For a moment, he doesn’t say anything. Worry boils up in his chest, licking at the bottom of his heart. He presses there, wishing that his chest had a release valve. When the pressure built up too much, when his food got thick and stuck in his esophagus, when he had so much hate and anger and exhaustion chopping at his ribcage, he wanted to open that valve and let all that hot air out. If he could let it all go, he thinks, he wouldn’t feel one step closer to death every time he answered a call to take a train.

“Jim?”

“Union’ll take care of it. It’s freedom of speech. They can’t do anything about freedom of speech.” Jim pushes assurance into his words. If he wasn’t sure, Mike wouldn’t be sure either. The last thing he wants is to have the boys pussy out on him. “Besides, that Dan Lange guy wants to bring railroad jobs back. He’ll be on our side if it comes to it.”

“That’s right. He probably doesn’t even want to hang that elephant anyway. He just wants the attention.”

Mike says his goodbyes, and Jim hangs up the phone. When he brings a hand up to rub his eyes, he knocks the reading glasses off. They clatter against the wood floor and disappear under a decorative armchair. For a moment, he considers bending down to get them, but he isn’t feeling too generous after Tammy’s 3rd Shift Syndrome had kicked on in full force last night when he called to tell her he was home. Besides, since he doesn’t live here anymore, he could just say he doesn’t know what happened to them. Worst came to worst, he would blame it on her damn cat.

He turns his thoughts back to Mike's question. Saying that Lange would protect them was one thing, but he wasn't sure that Lange guy could really do anything about it. Lange is just one mortal man going against the railroad.

At 65, Jim's father, William Ernest Bedford walked away from the railroad with the most coveted retirement plan in the county and a silver-plated belt buckle emblazoned with a CSX train charging up the mountain. A foreman, he had spent his last ten years swiveling around on an office chair, a place he never thought he would be. Like every day, he wore a nice button-up church shirt and jeans. He was in charge of other workers, men like him who were scrappy with families to feed. Men with good humors. Men who didn't talk much. Men who had to wear steel-toed boots and slept rarely. All these men were under his watchful eye, but days after his most coveted birthday, he sat down his post, his railroading task done.

Jim's momma, June, and his sisters, Anne and Lynne, planned a barbeque in his honor to celebrate this milestone. Family gathered out in the bad yard, their cars and trucks and mini-vans crowding their driveway and the neighbor's yard. Kids ran in and out of the house, slamming the screen door behind them. Tammy and the other women smoked and cackled in the kitchen, all dancing out of each other's way. Different crockery and Tupperware made its way from the kitchen to the picnic tables Jim and his brothers-in-law sat up under the awning they installed the summer before. Jim, manning the grill, sipped on his second beer. He, once a short-order cook at a local diner before you had to have two college degrees and license to do that sort of thing, preferred to cook the meat himself rather than stand over someone else's shoulder and watch him ruin a perfectly good burger.

Despite the heat of July, Jim stood in a clean pair of work overalls and steel-toed boots pinching at his feet. His CSX ball cap, a reward routinely passed out to boost worker morale, covered the sheen of sweat dotting his forehead. Sweat clung to his back darkening his yellow, cotton CSX shirt underneath. This color was more forgiving on him, making his leathery work skin look darker, less red and overheated. As he waited to flip the burgers, he kept his free hand on the cellphone clipped to his belt loop. Though it was the newest model of flip phone, obtained through a nifty railroad discount, he wanted to be sure he could feel if it vibrated or rang, just in case he miscalculated his starts and CSX called him into work.

He, by some miracle of railroad timing, wasn't supposed to be called in until later that evening. For the past two weeks, he had worked his ass off taking trains to and from Shelby, Kentucky. Each time he took a train, made the stops and all, he got a thing called a start. Once he got six starts, the railroad gave him two whole, undisturbed days off. The catch, because there was always a catch, was that if he deadheaded – meaning if he rode a train all the way to Shelby with no stops – his starts would reset. Though not impossible, six starts were a rarity. Tammy had said that his karma must have been good for the railroad to give him six starts. As with most jobs, those with more seniority got starts more often. Jim, only working with CSX for five years, didn't think it was karma but his own hard work paying off.

Will, as Jim's father was referred to, strode through the door, greeted by cheers and party poppers. The kids, romping around the yard, whooshed past Jim's leg, running over top of one another to get a chance to tell their Pappaw the cheesy congratulations Tammy, Lynne, and Anne made them practice earlier. From his position, Jim could see through the door into the front room. His father stood there, his eyes cast downward, shaking his head. He was an awkward man, always had been as far Jim could remember. He was a walk-softly man, quiet and

lumbering, with a fixed, hard look in his glassy eyes. He wasn't one to volunteer to pray at church, and no one ever asked him to, some too afraid to speak to him, others knowing that he wasn't about to stammer in front of God and everyone. Oh no, even on a day as special as this one, there would be no demands for speeches, not that Will Bedford could make a grand one anyway.

Jim turned back to the grill. The burgers sizzled in their spots, a content white noise. The sound rose up and mixed with the breeze blowing through the woods behind the house. Jim remembered many a night spent out in those woods. That was back when they didn't have air conditioner, weren't even in the realm to consider it. Will had thought it a luxury, like most things Jim or his siblings ever wanted. New bikes, new cars, family trips, a state-of-the-art stereo system with cassette, record, and 8-track player. Jim shook his head, remembering how he and Lynne had slaved away in that diner, him a cook and her a waitress. Anne, older and already out of high school then, fixed hair at one of the only salons in town. Their mother, June, worked 2nd shift down at the Industrial Garment most nights making sewing the arms onto shirts. Daddy, a conductor back then, was gone most nights on a train bound for Spartanburg. It was on those summer nights after his shift at the diner, when the sweat would soak through his shirt and moths would fling their twittering bodies into the buzzing bug light, that he would sneak off into the woods with a flask of stolen Jack Daniels and his sleeping bag, a small .410 pump action shotgun slung over his back.

Out there, he would lie on the ground and stare up at the tops of the trees. Around him, creatures would rustle the dead underbrush, keeping their distance from his modest fire. He would lie there and drink, letting the amber liquid light up his throat, make his fingers go numb. Back then, he would think about trivial matters like which girl he would ask out for Friday night

or if he would have enough money for the Chevy Nova by the end of the month. Though no one ever accused him of being a deep thinker, he would lay up there and ponder about roads his life could take. Often, he entertained the idea of becoming the auto shop teacher at the high school. That was until he found out you had to go to school to be one. Then he thought about opening up his own breakfast joint. Warmed to the idea of owning his own paint and body shop. Anything but the railroad, he thought. His father, his grandfather, his great-grandfather, uncles and cousins, friends' families. All had eventually succumbed, walking single file through the door of the yard office to get their starts.

But, that was a long time ago, Jim thought. He flipped the burgers, commenting to himself on the perfect grill lines, on the rich, brown color. No one, he thought, could make a burger as fine as him.

"You're gonna burn those." Jim turned to see his father filling up the doorframe. People buzzed behind him, the excitement of his arrival discarded for practical tasks like corralling the kids and stacking Dixie brand paper trays on the counter.

"Bull," Jim scoffed. "Why these are the finest burgers you've ever had in your life."

Will eased down the steps, favoring his good knee. He was silent as he got his beer and moved to stand next to Jim. He surveyed the meat, but made no more comment on it. Instead, he slipped his drink slowly and looked out over his modest land.

"You happy it's finally over?" Jim asked, wanting to fill the silence.

"I reckon," Will managed to push out, his words heavy. Every act of speech for Will was labored, as if his words had to scrape their way up his rocky vocal chords. Jim got his talkative side from his momma.

Jim looked over at his father. He was shorter than Jim remembered. His black collared CSX shirt made him look thinner than normal. If he turned to the side, Jim doubted anyone would be able to see him. He must have shaved for today because gone was his robust, peppered beard. Lines ran down his face like the ridges in an old tree. Though he had worked in the yard office the past fifteen years, Will's face had never lost his leathery tan. Each wrinkle in his broad face was dark as the muddy Nolichucky. Sweat blotted his forehead where his dark head of hair used to sit, barely hidden by his Vietnam veteran cap he had nearly worn out. He looked tired, Jim thought. The loose skin under his eyes, from all those years of bringing and taking trains, the kinds of dark, puffy bags that sat under Jim's own eyes, were deflated and sagging. Will hadn't slept well in years for all the aching of his bones. His mouth, fine lined from where he used to smoke, sat in a thin half-scowl. Faces, if left in the same position for too long, really could freeze like that.

"Daddy, what are you going to do with yourself now?" Jim asked, unable to stand the silence anymore. "Go camping?"

"Ah," Will sighed. He looked up towards the woods leading away from the house but dropped his gaze to the threadbare, dirty rug at the base of the steps. "My arthritis couldn't take it. No, the next time I'll be on the ground it'll be before they put me in the hole."

Jim chuckled. He knew the feeling. After only five years, he knew that there was too much housework to be done before he'd ever get back to the woods. Tammy had made sure of that.

"Your momma wants to travel," Will said. "I reckon I have time for it now."

He looked off into the woods again as if something caught his eye. Then he looked farther, beyond the trees, farther than that. Somewhere where Jim couldn't yet see.

“You have the money for it now,” Jim said. “That first retirement check will be nice.”

“Oh yeah,” Will replied, soft, thoughtful. He shook his head and clapped Jim on the back with one of his thin, arthritic hands. “Yeah, you’ll get there too. Don’t worry.”

Jim found his next words rushed and hard to say, as if he had gotten the dry heaves all of the sudden, “Was it worth it?”

Will didn’t look at him for a long time. So long that Jim thought he hadn’t heard him at all. He turned back to the burgers, flipping them one by one onto a long platter someone had left for him. He frowned at the how one side was darker than the other. The meat would be tougher now and too smoky. He didn’t even melt the cheese on top like he was supposed to. Compared to his other culinary achievements, they would have been better off eating charcoal bricks on buns.

“Jim, I’m glad you decided to sign on,” Will said on the tail end of a sigh. “Puts my mind at ease knowing you and your family will be taken care of if you stick it out.”

“I don’t think Tammy’ll give me much choice.” Jim was only half-joking.

“She knows you two will have a good life when this is all over,” Will said. He clapped Jim on the back again and turned his attention to the grill. “Your hot dogs are going to be black if you don’t get them off soon.”

“Lynne likes them black,” Jim shot back. Will shrugged. He didn’t know these things. Years of missing family barbeques will do that to you, Jim figured. Will took in a breath to say something, but thought better of it. He nodded to Jim then turned, lumbering back into the house.

In the black waters of sleep, Jim barely heard the phone. He was a heavy sleeper when he could manage to jump off that cliff at all. It was the end of February, a week before the anniversary of his six years at the railroad. Though he was on his mandatory 12-hour rest period,

his eyes snapped open. He rolled over and snatched the phone from its hook, breathing out a huffed greeting.

“*Jim...*” Lynne’s warbled, watery voice dripped through the phone. Jim shot up straight, a chill running through his blood. No good call ever came at night. All the possible scenarios flashed through his head. Dark, bloody images of his frail mother fallen out of the tub, bleeding out onto the yellowed linoleum. Anne’s husband, a police officer, lying on the frozen ground. A burglarly gone wrong. A car crash. A factory explosion. He felt his breathing bow up and stop.

“What is it? What’s wrong?” His voice didn’t come out as assured as he would like. Too high, too fraught.

“*Jim, you gotta come up to momma and daddy’s,*” Lynne began. “*There’s been an accident.*”

Jim launched himself out of bed, his arms and legs numb. He put on his clothes without thought, throwing on his jeans from the day before and not bothering to tuck in his shirt. He called Tammy at work, telling her to get home. With her work only being a five-minute drive from their house, he didn’t wake the kids but instead made sure every door and window was shut and locked. He worked quietly, praying that the kids would, for once, just stay asleep.

He padded down the carpeted steps of their two-story home, sliding a little in his socked feet. His bladder panged and he dove into the bathroom, wishing he could stop the shaking in his hands. With as brief as Lynne had been on the phone, Jim knew that one of his parents was dead. Had to be. Since he worked out of town, both Anne and Lynne were emergency contacts for a majority of the family. Lynne’s voice had been sharp like shattered glass, cracking and translucent.

It's Momma, he thought. After using the bathroom, he stood over the sink trying to catch his breath. Air pushed its way out of his lungs, shouldering out of him in thick waves. His hands shook as he washed them. One shuddering breath in, one breath out. One in. One out. His already labored heart hammered in his chest as he bolted out the door and into his truck.

He passed Tammy's car on the road, but was too focused to stop. There wasn't any information he could give her anyway. He sped down the two-lane road, his old truck roaring against the cold winter wind. Rolling through stop signs, forgetting things like seatbelts and turn signals, he screamed past sleeping houses and into the crowded driveway of his parents' house.

Anne's new SUV, red and shining, still reeking of new car after her husband's promotion devoured most of the space around it. Lynne's modest Taurus, a car arguably too old for her, sat partially on the grass and out of the way. Jim slammed the truck into park. Without the sound of the motor, the cabin filled with the guttural pounds of his heart. He could feel the blood move through his veins, pulse into his fingertips. He stared into the truck's full ashtray. The crooked little bodies of the cigarettes wove around each other, curled up like dead, dried-up maggots. His momma always hated that he smoked, begged him to quit. She would wrinkle her button nose at the smell of his clothes, drop lines about black lungs and cancer. Once, when she was watching Todd, she taught him all about the hazards of smoking. When Todd came home, he curled his small, bony fingers around Jim's arm, dug his nails in, and begged him not to die.

Jim slammed the ashtray shut.

He slid down out of the truck, his feet crunching on the gravel driveway. He took one stuttering breath, then two. The air wheezed around, dry and crackling in his lungs. A knot of muscles just beneath his shoulder blade drew up, twisting, yanking, exasperating. He slipped

forward on shaking legs, shuffling up the driveway and towards the house. He dug one of his burly palms into his eyes, pushing back against the pins pricking there.

As a boy, his father told him that crying was not a man's way. It was after the only spanking he could remember, the one that stung the most. He and another boy from his neighborhood, he forgot who, were messing around with BB guns, shooting them at squirrels and flower pots in the neighbor's yard. Lynne, an insistent, obnoxious child prone to crying fits, had yanked at his gun, crying out for him to let her shoot with it. Her being little, Jim had told her to go on, but she clutched the barrel with her tiny, iron fingers. They warred over the gun, Jim using what little boyhood strength he had, Lynne pouring her willpower into her arms. Jim, waiting until she leaned back enough to touch the ground, let go. The gun ricocheted off Lynne's face, busting her small nose and swelling her lip. She tumbled backwards and rolled ass over eyes down into a small ditch jutting along their property. She popped up bloody and crying, screaming that Jim had kilt her dead. All the noise and the clamor woke up their father, sleeping off a deadhead from Kentucky. Next thing Jim knew, he was bent over the rocking chair on their front porch – in front of God and everybody – awaiting a punishment that he'd never forget. Jim remembered the cold sweat of fear running down the back of his neck, the way his bladder clenched in panic as his father slid his belt off as easy as fingers through water. Daddy, at the time, had said that crying would only make it worse. *Take it like a man.*

Though it wasn't the first time, his father had laid into him, Jim still felt the sting of that belt even now. It's screamed, scalding message still striped his backside.

He bounded over the porch now, flinging open the storm door. It clattered against the side of the house, the sound of clashing metal reverberating through his skin. A few quick steps through the dark and modest living room brought him into the yellow light of the kitchen. There,

sitting hunched in chairs, was his mother and sisters, staring at him with their identical sets of water-logged eyes. A sharp gust of relief washed over Jim. There was his momma, his tender, sweet ole momma, sitting in her usual spot at the old wooden kitchen table. Dressed but without a stitch of make-up, she rocked forward, bringing a protective, concealing arm around her other plastered wrist.

“Momma –“ he started. June raised her good hand to cut him off.

“Now, Jim, don’t get mad,” she said. She looked sideways at Lynne, who sat sniffing next to her. “I told them not to bother you.”

“Momma, he has a right to know,” Anne said, “to help Daddy.”

Jim dropped down into a chair across from his mother. His eyebrows knitted in frustration. There was nothing Jim hated more than when someone beat around the bush. Still crawling down from his earlier panic, he fixed Anne with a hard stare. “What about Daddy? What’s going on?”

June tossed glances back and forth between June and Anne. She took a deep, tired sigh, bringing her good hand up to pinch the bridge of her nose. She looked older somehow. Gray strands at the base of her skull crept slowly up, devouring her the artificial red in her hair. If Jim thought about it, he couldn’t remember what her natural hair color was. She was so quick to cover up any wayward strand, he thought that the red had just soaked into her, became so synonymous with Momma that it was natural. Crows feet wrinkled out from her bloodshot eyes when she looked up at him.

“Jim, your daddy’s not been well since he retired,” she said, her voice quiet, deflated.

“He did this to Momma,” Anne interjected. She trembled in her spot at the end of the table. With a choked sob, Lynne jumped up from the table, moving instead to counter behind

them. She threw open the cabinets, banging ingredients down onto the counter. Flour, sugar, a bottle of cinnamon.

“Lynne, your daddy’s trying to sleep,” June said in a harsh whisper. Lynne didn’t turn around, only stood staring at the counter in silence.

“What happened?” Jim asked again. He looked at his mother’s cast. June was a thin woman all around, always had been. As she aged, her skin only grew thinner, more translucent. He could see the veins running beneath her tan arms. They snaked up her in blue streams, flowing around her. Her fingers on her injured wrist were swollen up around her finely manicured fingernails. The pinkish skin stood out against the deep red of her polish, clashing in a sickly way. She had chosen blue for her cast, as it was her color. Everything she owned, all her modest dresses and day clothes were in varying shades of blue. Knowing her, she had probably asked for blue so as to match everything else.

“You remember your daddy was in Vietnam,” June began as if she’d ever let anyone forget it. His momma bought a supply of Vietnam veteran hats and shirts, all black with his army unit stretching out in gold letters across his chest. Always crafty, she had framed his army picture in a shadow box with his medals of honor. They’d travel every year, at her insistence, to his army reunion to rehash old memories. Where most people wanted to forget that time, June Bedford brought it out as a badge of honor.

She continued without waiting for affirmation, “Jim, he saw some terrible things over there. That man in there was brave.”

She sucked in a steady breath. Jim didn’t understand why she was bringing that up right now. His mind drifted back to Tammy. He felt apologetic for scaring her, for making her leave work when she had so few sick days to spend.

“Jim, he had someone die in his arms, one of his friends. And, you know your daddy keeps it all inside him,” June said, slapping her hand to her chest. Her voice waivered, threatening tears. “He won’t even tell me what happened over there. He keeps it all to himself, locked up in him somewhere deep that no one can get to.”

“Momma, what do you mean?”

“Daddy had a nightmare,” Anne said, unable to stand being silent anymore. “Momma said he was screaming his brains out about Charlies and telling people to get down.”

June covered her face with her hand. Though she made no noise, her slight shoulders shook with racking, silent sobs. Jim looked between her and Anne. Anne’s fists balled up on the table, clenched so tight her knuckles were white and shaking.

Lynne took up the explanation next. “It was like he wasn’t even here.”

“I shouldn’t have tried to wake him up,” June spoke up over Lynne. His sister fell silent again, turning instead to pouring flour into a mixing cup. Jim looked back at his mother. She was far off too, staring into the memory. “You aren’t supposed to wake someone up when they’re like that.”

His screams had startled her. She jerked out of sleep to find him thrashing in the bed next to her, shouting and carrying on. “One of the worst sounds you’d ever heard in your life, Jim.” She’d reached over to touch his chest, trying to shake him awake. He had grabbed her arm fighting her, fighting something off in his dreams, squeezed until her wrist snapped under the pressure of a mad sleep. Her scream, she thought, woke him up, but it wasn’t him, not really. She said he rocked back and forth on the bed, sweat-drenched, talking out of his head. She’d called Anne, who had been out, then Lynne.

“Jim, when Daddy saw what he did...” Lynne strained out. “Jim, he just cried. I never saw him so shook up. He couldn’t drive Momma to the hospital.”

“The doctor had to give him some knock-out drugs,” Anne added. “That’s why he’s asleep now.”

“He’ll beat himself up over it the rest of our lives,” June said. She stared at the closed door to the bedroom. Tears rolled in sporadic lines down her face, collecting in wrinkles in her cheeks.

Jim dropped his head into his hands. Their words hit up against his skull. They batter and bash, trying to force their way in. The only one he let in, that his mind was stuck on, was the image of his father crying. His father, a man who stood tall, who had whipped him for doing harm, had been so inconsolable that he had to have sedatives. Jim’s body quaked with an emotion he couldn’t find a name for. It wasn’t really anger. He couldn’t be angry now that his momma had reminded him about Vietnam. But, it wasn’t sadness either. It was a battlefield with choking smoke. It was flashes of gunfire that he couldn’t quite place. It was being stranded in the middle while people you know, people you love died around you.

When he could speak again, he looked at his mother, searching for explanation in her face.

“You said he was like this since he retired,” he said.

His mother didn’t look at him, just stared at the door. The sound of Lynne’s whisking consumed the room. Anne, unsettled and seething, took up the explanation, “The doctor told him to go see the psychiatrist at the VA. This ain’t the first time something like this has happened.”

“It’s not?” Jim asked in a dumb voice. He hadn’t heard any of this. With his work, he hardly talked to his parents but once or twice a week. Neither one had mentioned anything

happen. With him being gone all the time, there were troubles not worth telling. Jim couldn't usually be counted on for a crisis anyway. CSX didn't give one of their men away so easily.

"I think after he retired," his momma began in slow, hushed tone. "I think when he went to work for the railroad, the job was all he could think about. Then, when he retired, he had room to think about over there."

Anne shook her head, not in a rejecting way but in a pity. She looked at the table, "We was out playing golf a couple Sundays ago. It wasn't too cold, but we had the course to ourselves. You know, how Daddy likes it."

They were having a great time, Anne explained. He was winning, as he usually does. If his life had taken a different turn, Jim imagined his father would have been a professional golfer. Jim could see him out there in all-weather golf jacket they had gotten him for Christmas. He would sweep a calculating eye over the course, seeing all the divots and traps, feeling the wind, like God looking out over creation. His shots were damn near perfect on good days, fair but professional on bad days. The golf course, after he retired, had become his second home. It was a good day for him, Anne told him, continuing her story. They were on the ninth hole, the difficult one with two sand traps and a water hazard when a Wings chopper, one they sent out into the mountains to rescue injured hikers, had flown low over the golf course.

"Jim, I don't know what happened. One minute he was fine then the next he was laying on the ground screaming. When I got him flipped over, he looked right through me. Like I wasn't even there."

Tears sprung up behind his eyes, but he wasn't going to let them out. He wouldn't dare. *Take it like a man*, he thought. Besides, he hadn't been there anyway. His momma, his sisters

had been there. This was their sadness to bear. June sighed, a heavy, resigned sound. Lynne whisked, the metal scraping against the plastic bowl. Anne shook her head.

Jim wasn't one for lurking in hallways. That was for thieves and the nosey. He had just come in through the open kitchen door, making no noise, hoping to sneak up on Tammy and give her one of those shocks that kept their marriage on its toes. He'd been thinking about her the whole ride home. Over flat ground, weaving through mini-vans stuffed with rowdy families, rolling past state troopers, and climbing up mountains in the bored haze of his truck, he thought of her pretty eyes, the ones he'd fallen in love with first. When they were young, Tammy's eyes had been Liz Taylor violet. They met in the parking lot of the old bowling alley. Seven years his junior, they were never supposed to meet. She had gone there with the intention of dating a classmate. But, in 1988, through the blue haze of cigarette smoke, when twenty-five felt like the prime of life, he spotted her violet eyes. He was hers ever since, like it or not.

Now twenty-eight years and two kids later, he discovered that her eyes were not violet. Those had been colored contacts. Her hair was not blonde; it had been dyed. Her body was not hers anymore, she had given it to him and the children and work. He was her devoted sod. They were different. Tammy was her own force of nature, temperamental and devastating. Moods would cloud her pretty, pointed face. When that 3rd Shift Syndrome, a name he would call her bad moods, would kick in she would hurl hellfire and ice in his direction for the littlest infraction. The air around their household would shift, sudden and palpable. Electricity would sit around her in a swirling cloud, ready to lash out at anyone that dared dredge up any bullshit with her. Half-crazy, god-like she would conjure wrong doings and new annoyances out of thin air. With a flick of her wrist, she could turn the ground to eggshells around her. Not even the lightest

step into the house escaped her notice. But, as a mountain stands up to a storm, he had taken even her heaviest verbal blows, never once bowing, just weathering. Plus, she reminded him often that staying married is cheaper than a divorce.

Remembering that his wife was a goddess in this household, he found himself frankly agog that she hadn't heard him pound down the hall in his heavy boots. The sharpness of her tone had stopped him short. The edge in her voice, serrated and slicing, the finality of it, made him believe one of the kids was in trouble, a kind of trouble that he didn't want to get involved in. With his wife, her word was law. The dynamic they had built as parents had put him in a lesser but kinder position. Tammy's role as disciplinarian came natural to her, like a mother bear protecting her young. Black bears scattered across their house in the form of lamps and figurines and fleece throws, a fierce reminder of the love and protection she held over the family. The job was natural to her, and Jim loved her all the more for it.

"I don't care," Tammy yelled, her voice ricocheting off the faux wood paneling in the living room. Jim shrank back into the shadow of the windowless hallway.

"Momma, you can't mean that." The child in question, the one disrupting the harmony of the household, was – of course – Todd. Though his son would never like to admit it, he had his mother's temperament. He, too, was quick to passion, often flying off the handle at the slightest thing. Jim liked that about him. He liked to see him all riled up. Todd, for the most part, had been a quiet kid. He read as often as he played sports. Though he participated in many activities (as Jim's wallet could tell you), he did not sling himself into the mix as Jim would have. Todd, named after the shy, domesticated fox on *Fox and the Hound*, was a smart but withdrawn kid.

Through the years, Jim had watched Todd as parents tend to do. He saw him grow and learn. He saw him bring home good grades like he was supposed to. He saw his sister and his

cousins and his classmates pester the devil out of him, and he also saw him sit as passive as a stone, like he couldn't be bothered to stand up and defend himself. And, in the ways that parents do, Jim had tried to teach Todd to defend himself, tried to goad the boy into arguments he would win, all to build character, but even through high school and the torrential, choppy waters of those teenage years, Todd had bit down any fight he had in him. Any disagreement or displeasure he had would boil to the surface, flushing his ears red, making his lanky hands shake. An argument would simmer to his lips and steam out in a low huff. Lots of these moments had been aimed at his momma, but fear of her wrath must have been like lifting the lid on a pot overboiling. It wasn't until Todd got to college that Jim could see the difference. Being at that state school, with all those big ideas from big people floating around, gave him a new air of confidence that Jim hadn't seen before. Todd stood taller, talked back more. He didn't dam up his thoughts like he used to. It made Jim stand up a little straighter too.

Tammy saw things different. Her once complacent honors student was now a sassy nonbeliever. Escaping the world she controlled, Todd loved and feared his mother in equal parts now. He had a job, his own apartment, his own life separate from the hills of East Tennessee. He lived in a city and talked to folks who had more to think about than their next day at work. It was a world Jim couldn't understand, a world Tammy wouldn't though she tried. She went to her meetings with other celestial women. They would get together at the Johnson City Country Club and talk about who knows what for an hour each week. They would do charitable work and spread their benevolence among people who deserved it and some who didn't. She would dress up nice and go on trips they really couldn't afford to conferences all to better the small universe of Erwin. She was a gracious goddess in that sense. But Todd had already looked beyond the hills that surrounded them out into a greater world. Though he would never be a Tammy, ruling

with an iron fist and a giving heart, he did try to make the place he inhabited better. Where she was the entire motor, powering them all down the highway towards a better life, he was but a sparkplug. Todd lived for the world; Tammy lived for them.

“I don’t give a damn who’s in office,” Tammy shouted. Jim can’t see her face but he knows well enough what it looks like. Her face, overtaken by clouds, was hard and cold, a biting hailstorm railing against a tin roof. “The devil himself could be in office as long as he signed the bill to bring back coal.”

“Momma.” Todd’s voice is metal, stone, weathered and weary but still standing. “Don’t you get it? Those laws are helping keep coal miners safe.”

“I don’t care, Todd. As long as there’s coal that needs to be hauled, there’ll be trains to haul them,” Tammy bit out, her voice the low rumble of thunder. “That means your daddy can come home. You don’t know how hard it’s been without him.”

Jim shrank back, his shoulders dropping. His hands felt heavy, as if gravity were coming up to take him on under.

Todd was quiet for a moment. Jim imagined him swallowing his more hurtful words back down. “I didn’t figure you helpless.”

A spike of pain hit Jim square between the shoulders. His breath came out in a heavy, cold exhale. The muscles in his arms tensed. Tammy and Todd’s voices faded out, replaced by the roar of blood in his ears. He didn’t want to hear anymore. The way their voices trembled, the way they challenged each other. He was the rock caught up in the motor, the broken alternator preventing them both from paradise. Tammy’s small world and Todd’s large one, working against each other, each lost ground because of the life Jim chose. He, too, felt that ache, the way the days picked apart the fibers of his heart one by painful one. In the flatlands, down near the

ocean, the sun burned to the muscle. His bones, wishing to rest on the too damned expensive memory-foam mattress, felt like they were cracking under the air in the hall.

“I have been away from him too,” Todd tried, his voice losing air.

“It’s not the same,” Tammy snapped. “As long as the railroad’s working, I won’t need to work two jobs. Your daddy can come home. I don’t care if its Hitler reincarnate. If coal’s back, he’s alright with me.”

Before Jim can move, Tammy pushed past Todd and bounded upstairs, taking the oxygen in the room with her. He heard Todd kick the couch. His foot made a dull *thud*, barely any sound, but Jim felt it in his gut.

Jim pads over into the small bathroom that he borrows from Tammy from time to time. He flips the light on, wincing at the onslaught of light flooding his vision. The vanity lights’ electric hum brings a monotonous, steady noise to the room. The bulbs are old and one flickers at the end. He makes a note somewhere in the back of his mind to fix it but holds little hope that he will actually remember to do so before he returns to Florida.

If, a dark corner in his mind reminds him.

He pushes the thought away, focusing instead on his small toiletries bag darkening one small corner of the sink. Tammy’s box of makeup crowds the sink. Various powders of pinks and reds and beiges, half-used mascara tubes, pencils in the same shade of charcoal, and lipstick tubes spill out onto the porcelain counter. A box of Q-Tips crowds the opposite side. In the back corner, a round, tiered organization contraption holds brushes in different states of decomposition. Most had lost the little rubber nubs that protect your scalp from looking like it got caught in a fight with a Tasmanian devil. Fine-tooth, purple combs are missing some of their

teeth. A green, plastic wide-toothed comb she brought with her when she first moved in, the one she uses most, holds the primary slot on the top tier of the organizer. A new and old version of a Con-Air hairdryer hang next to the mirror. The newer version works better but she can't seem to throw the other one away, despite his urging. Filling up the other corner, a small, round basket holds four different curling irons. Though Jim can't seem to find a difference in them, Tammy insists she needs them all and needs them all easily accessible for that matter. Having no room for a medicine cabinet, an improvised, rickety set of shelves hung on the wall, mostly holding Nyquil and sleep aids.

Jim tosses the Q-tips under the sink to make room for his toiletries bag, an old, burgundy makeup bag with Aloette in script jutting across the top. He makes another mental note to buy a manlier looking toiletry bag, but this one had served him well with its space and plethora of pockets. He pulls his toothbrush and a small tube of Colgate from one such pocket. He squeezes out two small dots of toothpaste the onto the dry brush. His hand hesitates over the knobs. For a single beat, he forgets which one is hot and which is cold. The labels over the cheap plastic wore off a while ago. Then, as if his muscles act on their own, his fingers turn the right knob and cold water, stuttering at first, splashes out into the stained sink.

Gah, Jim, he curses himself. A sinking feeling hits his chest. It draws his heart downward like an engine jumping the track around a dead man's curve. It bounces off his ribcage, all screaming metal, and plunks into his stomach. There, standing in the mirror, all brazen and giving him a no good, hairy-eyeball look is his father. Though he'll never be as rail-thin as his father, he sees it in the flecks of grey littering his beard. There's the outline of his father's nose, the way his thin right eyebrow would flick up in that questioning way, his waning hair parted on the left side of his head. There are added features that his father doesn't possess. The second,

drooping chin clinging to his once strong jaw, his curling, thick chest hair, of which he is so proud, the thin, white scar jutting across the bridge of his nose.

Jim was once purdy. Not the feminine pretty, not overt, obnoxious, manly but purdy like the way the sharp angles of a '69 Camaro slice through the summer sun. The word topples through his mind as he watches William Ernest Bedford brush his teeth in the mirror. That's what women would call him. Women who wore tight jeans after school. Women who ironed their hair into straight, shimmering waterfalls. Freshman girls would giggle when he passed them in the hall and god what a sound that was. Even the meanest woman he's ever met, the one with an artist eye looking for flaws, too pretty and young to ever enter his atmosphere, against all odds, married him. Back then, he had a Burt Reynolds mustache and airy permed hair that floated about his head in a soft cloud. He could eat and smoke and drink what he wanted; fat feared his sleek, steel-plated muscles. There was none of this beer gut business back in those days. The flat panes of his stomach, though not well defined, were pleasing to the eye.

He runs a hand over the curve of his protruding stomach. His fingernails skirt through scratchy, itching hair and over a hill of skin that could be a possible hernia. Ha, hernia. Jim cannot recall a time before 1999 that he thought of the word hernia. He spits the toothpaste in the sink, rinses off his toothbrush, and returns it to the pocket in his toiletries bag. With a final nod to William Ernest Bedford, Jim turns to the shower.

He showers quick, finding his impromptu phone call has thrown him off his schedule. Jim, for his easy nature, likes to be on time, a trait he inherited from his father. He flies through the motions, scrubbing his hair with thread bare fingers, soaping up with the least girly sounding bath product his wife owns, lathering up behind his ears, in his arm pits, the backs of his thighs. The labors of hard sleep roll off him in dripping gobs.

He dresses quicker. In an old duffle bag, he threw together three outfits that would fit for work or home: a flannel, a t-shirt, a long-sleeved shirt, two pairs of jeans, and a pair of overalls. He overdid it on the underwear, stacking five or six pairs in case he got drenched in the rain or he had to shower more often than he planned. He pulls on a pair of the saggy briefs, then dresses in his overalls and long sleeved shirt. Sitting on the bed, he pulls on his socks then his boots.

Jim rests his elbows on his knees. Around him, the house is empty, hollow. Brennon, he knows, is at school. Todd won't be home until later that day, and he never stays home long. Tammy is still at work. Their lives move on at a steady beat without him. These well-set routines move forward like the eager minute hand of a clock. He, the hour hand, inches along to catch up, waiting for the rare, ephemeral meeting. As he does every day, he makes a mental note of how many days there are until his retirement. As if he were on some giant staircase, climbing upwards despite the pulling in his knees, the cracking of bones, the aching in his back, he crawls one step at a time towards that tender age of 65.

What's twelve years to me? He thinks. His huff of bravado trips over the lump in his throat, falling out of him with little tact or care. Pinpricks poke behind his eyes, allowing salty water to rush in. His chest swells up as he takes in a ragged breath. He pushes his palms into his eyes, wiping until the skin around his eyes stings. He stands, colorful spots flashing in his vision, stuffs his thin wallet into his back pocket. His silver CSX watch, a small token of appreciation for fifteen years of service, glints at him. He puts it on, the cool metal biting at his hot skin. The gold CSX letters, stark against the navy background, glare up at him in challenge.

I dare you to be late for work. I dare you to try to leave.

He covers the watch face with his hand. Twelve years, he thinks, is not so bad. Certainly not something to cry over.

Things to do after retirement -

- *Break in the new bed frame with the wife.*
- *Build a '69 Trans-Am from the ground up. Paint it silver with a black bird.*
- *Win against the wife at golf more than once.*
- *Have beers in the afternoon at the Elk's Club.*
- *Buy a pontoon boat and float it on Lake Watauga*
- *Spend a month in the Outer Banks. Catch a record breaking fish.*
- *Buy a jeep for mudding.*
- *Take Todd on a hunting trip.*
- *Camp under the stars.*
- *Go to the Rod Runs in Gatlinburg.*
- *Win the burn out contest with my Nova at the Poplar Car Show.*
- *Build a downstairs bedroom.*
- *Buy a hot tub. Make a balcony for the hot tub.*
- *Pay someone to mow the yard.*
- *Make a garden for tomatoes, cucumbers, peppers, corn, and squash*
- *Build a body shop to paint cars in.*
- *Go fishing*
- *Repaint the house.*
- *Restain the deck.*
- *Go to the Daytona 500.*
- *Go to Talladega.*
- *Watch every race on TV.*
- *Catch up on Longmire.*