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What follows is a novel-in-stories. This hybrid genre is characterized by a text made up of distinct entities that are similar to stories in that they each feature a unique plot and purpose, but each story (especially as one progresses through the work) comes to depend more and more upon the preceding for context and to fully develop the characters.

The plot of this novel-in-stories revolves around a small town in the North Carolinian piedmont called Germantown. This town is based upon Germanton, NC an unincorporated community located about fifteen miles from Winston-Salem. Another main plot element is also borrowed from real-life events: on Christmas in 1929, Charlie Lawson shot and killed most of his family. The Lawson family murders are still a major part of Germanton and Stokes county history. Many writers, singers, and storytellers have tried to understand this horrendous event that shook the small town. My purpose is not to explicitly seek to find meaning in this event, but rather to explore the impacts and influences of such an occurrence on people—along with how people impact each other, the role of community, and human relationships.

While the following work does harken back to these real places and people, it is truly fictitious and, in the end, is really only based upon these events. The characters and occurrences in this work may find their roots in the real, but have branched out to become their own.

AMIDST THIS FADING LIGHT

by

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A KINDNESS

It was the breathless summer of 1919, and it was so hot that even the air seemed to sweat. All farm work had to be done before the sun reached midday, so production was lower than usual. That left more time to idle on porches or out front of the general store. While the men were out, the ladies busied themselves in the kitchen, prepping all the meals for the day (cold meats and potato salad, nearly too hot to even cook food), and retired with their husbands out front with lace or paper fans in their hands. Each starched dress and cotton shirt was damp at the pits. This was much of the talk. Mr. Vernon told Mrs. Vernon that Tim Peake had nearly sweated through his shirt after doing as little as milking his old cow. Tim Peake told his sweetheart that Vernon smelled like a barn stall.

The best person to listen to—the fullness of her porch testified to this—was Mrs. Honora Brow. The Browns were the most well-to-do family in Germantown. The original Mr. Brow had maintained the only cemetery that serviced the community. He'd gotten his undertaker's license in Reynolds. He was a man that smoked thick cigars and smelled like death. He'd had a habit of pointing at people and telling them when they would die.

Prediction was a Brow tradition, and folks were always eager to hear a tale. If you asked anyone if they believed her fully, you'd probably get a spread of answers and none of them firm. Honora said her father had always been right in his predictions. Her favorite story to recall was when her father pointed to her own husband—a young man of twenty-one—and said that he would die by the week's end. Of course, Honora and her

husband didn't buy it. "Though, I had a feeling, you know, deep in my bones," Honora would later say. Her husband was out mending a fence one evening, and he was shot straight through the head and died. One of their farmhands found him a few hours after his death and brought him up to the house, leaking brains and blood all the way. Honora said that she didn't let her husband's body into the house because it would spoil the cream rug he'd bought her. "He'd loved that rug. It was a wedding present for me. He'd saved up so much; I couldn't let him ruin it." Her father, as the undertaker, gained possession of his son-in-law's body, and, as Honora always said, "Fixed him up real nice." So nice that they had an open casket funeral for him.

No one ever knew who shot Honora's husband, but it was probably one of teenage boys hunting across the creek who fired a wayward shot into the woods and caught the man in his temple. Hunting accidents happened all the time, really. After a while, everyone stopped talking about it, and it became a story that only Honora Brow would tell from her porch. Honora decided to keep her maiden name and passed that on to her son so that Brow Cemetery could always be owned by a Brow. Her son—who had been born only a few months before his father died—went to school to become an undertaker and took over the cemetery, as his mother wanted. He married a local girl—as most did—and his mother approved of her. The Brow's had their fingers in all of Germantown. They told the news, knew the gossip, and handled the dead. Everyone knew that one day a Brow would be prepping them for coffins and lowering them into the ground. Everybody wanted to be on the best side of people like that, almost like they had some say in how folks left this world, some precursor to Judgment Day.

But, that summer, Mrs. Brow was only part of what caught and kept interest. That summer, a new family moved into Germantown. The Picketts came, and everyone watched. Firstly, because it was so rare for folks to move in—Germantown had always been very stable, like a lake on a quiet, spring afternoon. Secondly, because they were odd. A man, his wife, and their two children, a little girl and boy, in a wagon. They were pulled by a fuzzy mare who seemed to die a little at each step. The man whipped her, gently, but his arms were stiff and tense. His wife was beside him out front, her stomach full of pregnancy; she swatted mosquitos from her face with a fan and kept her other hand pressed to her belly. The daughter and the son were in the back with a few belongings: a table, a wedding chest, a box that clinked with the sounds of china, two cots, and one bed frame. There were a few chickens that the children held by their feet. A cow walked behind the wagon, tied to the back.

Reggie had bought the old Himmel homeplace—which was not a house to desire. It was old—it'd weathered about ninety years—and Himmel had outlived his body so in those last years he'd been little more than a skeleton. He'd rarely left his house and became a sort of ghost story amongst the children. Himmel had died in that house and hadn't been found until little John Garner noticed the vultures pecking at the roof. Some of the men went out there and found Himmel in a corner, body stiff and smelling. There were rats there too. Someone said that one of the rats had eaten out the eyeballs. Someone else said they figured that smell would never leave the house. But, Reggie Pickett bought it, and moved his little family in.

It wasn't unexpected—the Picketts moving in—because Reggie's older brother, Marlowe, had come before him by about three years. Marlowe, unlike his brother, had never been a sharecropper but had instead scrapped from inheriting his father's farm and bought his own out in Germantown, bringing along his wife and two children. The wife had died about a year after they'd moved. Mrs. Honora had predicted that one. She pointed to that little bird-faced woman and said that she would die in childbirth. And Lace Pickett did, moaning and clenching her husband, while the midwife stood by with her hands at her apron, and the doctor was a county over. Since, all felt sorry for Marlowe, and he took the charity with grace. He accepted the food and drinks and long afternoons of chewing and spitting and smoking and talking about nothing but life and death, and at some point Marlowe had mentioned his brother, Reggie, and his family, and that Reggie was reckoning on whether or not quit sharecropping and move to Germantown. He'd said then that Reggie was a little odd. No one had thought to ask odd because there were more interesting things to talk about: like Lace's death and that stillborn babe and how all those cakes and pies were so good.

After Reggie Pickett's wagon rattled down the main drag and off towards the old Himmel place, Mrs. Honora Brow said, to her audience of three families (men, wives, and children) on her porch, "Well, I'll be. Didn't you feel that chill?"

There was no chill; it was too hot. But a few of the ladies nodded. Mrs. Kiger said, "Oh yes."

"They'll bring something queer here, mind you me." Mrs. Brow shook her finger at no one in particular, but all thought that finger was aimed at them.

On an adjacent porch sat Mr. Tom Jefferson, who owned the general store. Jefferson lived in an old farmhouse out behind it. Jefferson also knew all well. He sold food, clothes, special ordered out the means for everybody's professions. He sold with a smile and a "thank you kindly." Jefferson lived with his wife, Shirley; the couple had no children, and they were well into their forties. They kept up with a gaggle of nieces and nephews who lived in town, children of Jefferson's two sisters.

More interesting, though, was that Mrs. Brow and Mr. Jefferson, though living so close, couldn't be more different. When Brow spoke, Jefferson was known to head back in his store and dust—though his wife kept each shelf spotless. Well-known was that Brow made weekend trips to Reynolds to buy goods rather than stepping across that sparse yard of grass that divided their properties. They were like two cats sharing the same porch rail. Usually they just stared each other down, but sometimes one would puff and hiss at the other. And everyone else, like fascinated children, stopped to watch.

Jefferson said, "Honora, they're just people. And it's near ninety; there can't be a chill."

Honora took a sharp breath and let it out, whistling between her teeth. "I felt it, Tom. When you get to be my age, you may be more inclined to feel things too."

Brow was puffing up, and everyone wondered if Jefferson would hiss.

He didn't. Instead he went inside the store, leaving his wife with their little niece, Sarah, on her lap. The child said, "I wonder if those children like to play?"

As was customary, a few days later, ladies paid their calls. Headed up by Mrs. Brow and her daughter-in-law, Norma, wearing a white silk dress that swept all the way down to her arthritic ankles, three ladies and Mrs. Jefferson made the jaunt to the Pickett Place. Brow brought an angel food cake. Mrs. Vernon carried a basket of jellies and jams from her past fall's apples, Mrs. Hicks had a small package of sugar that had started to chunk, but not too bad, and Mrs. Peake had a loaf of day old bread. Mrs. Jefferson brought biscuits, salt ham, and some honey.

They walked on the main drag till they turned up the dust road to the house. It was hot; Norma held a parasol over her matriarch. Each one of them felt the weight of summer and of their years on their back. The dirt swept about their ankles in the wind, and a few worried of dusty stockings. Mrs. Jefferson felt bad that she would track such mess into a woman's new home, but she'd been out to Himmel's after his death and had seen how he let the house go. The porch—the whole building really—swung wildly to the left, as if struck by a giant hand. The floorboards had holes and ends that did not meet. There were gaps in the mortar of the walls.

She found the house little changed as she and the other ladies were seated around Helen's small table. There was new furniture there: a bed in the corner with a crib ready for the little life in Helen's stomach, the table with four mismatched chairs, a woodstove charred around the edges by too warm flame. The two children—who shined with a recent scrubbing—played absently on the floor; the daughter danced a cloth doll upon her lap, while the boy made shapes with his fingers.

Brow took in the scene with a raised head and lowered eyes. Dirt was inch-thick on every surface, except the table. Helen had at least cleaned that. Helen also took their offerings with a timid “thank you much” and never made eye contact. Without her belly, Helen would have been a small woman, already graying. She was a woman who had been born to worry, Brow decided, though she wasn’t sure what that meant, but she was a woman who valued her gut feelings, so she stuck to them. Helen had a narrow face which made her look like a shrew (in short, ugly or at least plain), but the boy had inherited that face and it suited him well. The girl had a wide head like her father and a broad mouth which moved with breathy words as she played.

The other women looked around as well, but weren’t sure how to form their opinion until Brow had spoken. They noticed that Helen looked down and that her fingers trembled as she offered them bitter lemonade and cookies that were coarse with poorly sifted flour. They knew Mrs. Brow would notice, and they wondered (but knew, yes?) that their own hospitality was far superior to this little woman in her dirty little house.

Her offerings set, Helen took her place at the table. “I pray it’s fit to eat. Thank you for the visit.”

Mrs. Brow nodded her head, regally. She took a sip of the lemonade, and, without taking her lips from the rim of the smudged glass, she spit most of it back in. She did not take another drink. None of the women moved towards their glasses either. Mrs. Jefferson seemed to enjoy the drink fine. Mrs. Brow asked, “Where are you from, Helen?”

“Up near Saura. My papa owned a farm there.” Helen looked towards her children on the floor.

“And your husband was a sharecropper?”

Helen nodded.

“Hmm.”

The ladies all nodded in unison. It was good to get gossip verified. What did it really mean that Reggie had been a sharecropper—that he was somehow beneath them. That made Helen slightly below the old Widow Lakely.

Helen shook her head. “But he scraped up to buy this here farm. He grows tobacco now. I’ll have a garden next year.”

“He’s a good man, then.” Brow reached across the table and put her hand on Helen’s.

Helen drew her hand back.

Mrs. Jefferson asked, “Helen dear, may I have more lemonade?”

Helen filled the glass. She seemed to notice that the others were untouched. She asked her children if they wanted any.

Both children were on their feet and at the table almost before Helen had finished her sentence. Louise nodded and reached up to take a cookie. The son, stuck close to his sister, actually holding onto the back of her dress where the bodice was messily sewn to the skirts—an ill attempt to resize the garment. He didn’t take anything.

“Quince, you need to eat something. Have you had anything since supper last night?” Helen’s voice was marked by concern.

The boy shook his head. "I'm not hungry."

Mrs. Brow studied the boy for a few moments. Across those cheekbones was a splash of red. She'd seen it before. She remembered her father preparing three siblings—two brothers and a girl—all taken by scarlet fever. She remembered their hands best, folded over top of their stomachs. The girl's mother had tucked a wilted daisy chain between those still fingers, saying the girl had made it only days before. "Boy, let me see you."

Quince looked towards his mother, who nodded in return. He approached the matriarch and looked up at her without hesitation. He had storm colored eyes. Mrs. Brow took his chin in her hand. She said, "You should call the doctor, Helen."

Helen snatched her son, pressing him to her. "What do you mean?"

"He's got the fever."

The other ladies murmured. Mrs. Jefferson studied the boy closer. His face did seem awfully red.

Helen shook her head. "He's red from the heat."

Mrs. Brow rose. Chairs screeched back as the other ladies made it to their feet. The matriarch said, "I fear for him. Pray I'm wrong." And she walked towards the door, leaving Helen with Quince and Louise standing with a half-eaten cookie in her hand and the other women scrambling to follow. Mrs. Jefferson took one last swig of lemonade before going along, sighing.

At the door, Brow turned around. "But, Helen, I am never wrong."

The next afternoon, Reggie Pickett climbed onto Mrs. Brow's porch, taking two steps at a time. Mrs. Brow had a glass of sweet tea in her hand and Norma beside her. Mrs. Lakely and Mrs. Wearn were there too, relishing in Mrs. Brow's opinions of Helen, Louise, and, especially, Quincy Pickett.

At first, Reggie was all politeness. He nodded his head towards the ladies. But when he spoke, it was from somewhere low in him, like something coming from his core and not his mouth. "I don't take kindly to what you did, Mrs. Brow."

Brow took a sip of her tea. "I don't know what you mean, Mr. Pickett."

No one knew much about Reggie then. It didn't seem that his family feared him in any way, though Helen was timid, she didn't seem whipped. And his children had seemed content enough. Folks knew nothing really, except what Marlowe had told and that Reggie had been a sharecropper and now grew only tobacco.

Reggie stomped his foot hard and sudden, and Norma dropped her teacup. It shattered on the porch, a few shards shot by Reggie's boot. He stepped on them and ground them in, teeth clenched and grinding in rhythm with his foot. "She's tired with the baby and the move and the heat. She don't need those kind of words." He pointed one finger at Mrs. Brow's face. She was pale, her mouth open, but, for once had nothing to say. "And you don't talk about a man's only son that way."

By that time, Jefferson had come out on the store's porch. He watched Reggie and had begun to move once that finger had shot out. Now he was behind Reggie and put a firm hand on his shoulder. Reggie didn't flinch at the touch, but he didn't turn around either. Jefferson said, "Now Reggie, I know you're upset, but this is a lady."

Reggie snorted a laugh. “My wife is a lady. I don’t know what this is.” And he spit over the banister.

Jefferson walked him down from the porch and into the store. He took him to the back where Shirley fixed him up a small glass of gin before they both sent him on his way, telling him not to worry, that Brow was full of it. They didn’t say—though they both knew—that he was right about her.

Brow sat on her porch as the other ladies moved to clean the porcelain pieces and soak up the tea before it stained the white boards. She sat with her mouth open. It was the first time anyone could recollect that she didn’t have something to say back. Maybe she was waiting until she figured out something good, witty, and burning. So all waited for what would be said and what would happen next.

Less than a week after Reggie climbed onto her porch, Mrs. Brow sat smugly in her usual wicker chair. The doctor had been seen driving out to the Pickett Place.

No one, save maybe Mrs. Brow, wanted a dead child, so most started nervously chattering with the obvious: Helen was quite heavy; the baby could be coming. The doctor had to be a good sign: there would be a happy, healthy birth. All would gather out in the front lawn of the Pickett Place with cakes and cookies and sweets (buying out all of Jefferson’s sugar) and baby Pickett would bounce on every single knee.

But Mrs. Brow insisted to all who’d listen. “It’s that boy.” No one knew why she was so keen that it be Quince. It had to be because she wanted to be right. Or Reggie’s words still rattled her. It was like she felt her grip loosening on Germantown. It wasn’t

enough to have her hands in the dead; she needed to have her fingers round the living and Reggie and his family had somehow slipped between. They were different, but no one could finger it.

Dr. Holcutt stopped in Jefferson's General for a Coke with a tablespoon of the moonshine that Mrs. Jefferson kept in the back. Men gathered around the doctor on the store's porch. Holcutt took one sip of his drink and then licked his lips. "You can all tell Mrs. Brow that she's right. That ought to please her."

Jefferson poured himself a glass of cola and leaned in towards the doctor.

"What's ailing him?"

"Scarlet fever."

There hadn't been a case of scarlet fever in Germantown for years. There had been some consumption, and there had been the flu last winter that killed a few children and one of the elders.

"You all need to quarantine the place. No one needs to head out there, save me or a preacher, if they ask for one. Tom, I want you to make sure that no one goes over there. You got influence with these people." Holcutt finished his drink and wiped his mouth on his sleeve. He was an older man—though the deep lines under his eyes made him seem a decade older than he was—who stooped a little, but he had thick eyebrows that seemed to inch closer each year, yearning to meet in the middle. Those eyebrows were slightly rounded, which always made his face look concerned and caring; the perfect face for a doctor.

It was common to lose children in Germantown. The summers were hot, and the winters were cold, and if anyone got sick, a child would catch it, and children could rarely shake anything. There was a whole section of Brow cemetery dedicated to unnamed children. Children who died very young. The oldest child buried there was seven. That child had had a name at some point, but to bury a small pine box with no engraved headstone in that section, overrun with maples so that roots rutted through those boxes and the fragile bones and papery flesh within, was free. Sometimes it was the only option. Home burials were troublesome. When young Charlotte Couch died of consumption, her father dug a hole out behind their house. Her mother fashioned a nice wooden cross to mark where her little head would rest. They wrapped her in an old silk dress and buried her with no box to protect her, no herbs to lessen her smell. The next morning, they found her out in the yard, dug up by some dogs or coyotes, vultures making low circles overhead.

There'd been quarantines before. Most recently with a flu. The houses of the sick were closed off, curtains lowered, and doors firmly locked for weeks or however long it took for the disease to run its course. The disease always ran its course, whether it ended in a recovery or a funeral was the question. Before, some folks took bets of what would happen: life or death. It was morbid in a way, but all had to face it, knocking elbows with a family of undertakers had the effect of making everybody very aware of mortality. And in such a small community, the cemetery's occupants almost matched the number of the living. At Jefferson's, men would talk over their wagers and Jefferson

would shake his head and scratch his chin and, laughing, tell them they were awful and they should pray more in church and embrace their wives more firmly.

With Quince Pickett, no one said a word. The doctor came and went and was watched. Even Honora Brow was quiet. She said only, “When he goes, he won’t be buried in the cemetery. They’ll have to bury him out behind the house.” There was still a hint of smugness in her voice. She was pleased to be right. She was pleased that Reggie—who had the guts to speak to her that way—would have to suffer a loss. She was pleased that little body would never be in her cemetery.

Someone murmured from the group on her porch. Most quarantined bodies were laid out far beyond the back reaches of fields. Later vultures would be seen looping over those places, but no one ever went back. Those bodies could still be holding something awful and it could spread. It was for the town’s protection, and the dead were dead and there was no feeling sore about it later. If those first folks of Germantown had been disheartened over a few folks who had to be buried far out and forgotten, then there wouldn’t be a town; there wouldn’t be anyone. It may have seemed cruel, but it had to be done; it was good. Everything had to be good and clean.

Tom Jefferson went out the Pickett Place one late afternoon to see how everything was going. When he came back, so many stacked into the general store and spilled onto the porch that all ended up in his backyard, sitting around him or leaning against old trees. Seemed like the only ones not there were Mrs. Brow and her family. Tim Peake said he saw Honora up on her porch, all alone. Germantown could’ve felt pity for the old woman, but Jefferson was far more interesting.

Jefferson told that he went to the house because he cared, but he actually went because Reggie showed up at the general store. There had been an air of heat and disease around him that day (smelling stale and sour), and folks in the store had given him a wide berth. Jefferson said Reggie had had a look. It was an odd one, one that scared Jefferson more than concerned his noble heart to act kindly.

So Jefferson went out there. He came back. He didn't talk about what he saw there for two days. Until finally, he did. He said:

The house was dark and smelled like unwashed flesh and burned food. The girl child was all sunken cheekbones and sat curled in a corner his whole visit. Helen slumped at the table. Her stomach protruded before her as round and hard as a boiled egg. A darkness underlined her eyes, from lack of sleep, from worry. But, also like a blow to the face. Jefferson did not go upstairs, did not see the boy, though from the darkness and drear of the house, he would not have been surprised if the boy was already dead and decaying above his head or buried back in the hot earth behind the weedy tobacco fields. Reggie paced back and forth; his footfalls were heavy and rambled off the boards.

Jefferson told him about the quarantine, how he couldn't come into town, and that if he needed anything to let Holcutt know and Jefferson would make sure that doctor got it. Reggie paused in his back and forth to shake Jefferson's hand and give a thank you. Helen echoed with a bless you, and the girl was quiet in the corner, though she did snuffle.

"When it ends, what then?" Reggie asked.

Jefferson cleared his throat. He had to think of what words to use: “if” or “when.” He settled on, “If he recovers, scrub him clean with a powerful soap and burn all the linens and his old clothes. If he doesn’t—”

Helen made a noise like a choked wail and Reggie put his hand on her mouth to silence her.

“If he doesn’t, soak a cotton blanket in lye and wrap him up in it. Bury him someplace way far out. Bury him deep.”

“No grave or cemetery?” Reggie’s voice was flat.

“No. It has to be clean for everyone else’s sakes. You understand.” Jefferson put his hand on Helen’s, trying to temper such cruel words with kindness. “Let’s pray it don’t come to that.”

Reggie began to pace again. “Even if we clean him up real good?”

Jefferson shook his head. “Nothing can ever be so clean.”

There was a week without a word of the Picketts. Dr. Holcutt had been frequenting there, but he never stopped to talk. He always just sped down the main drag, wheels spitting dust behind him. When his car came down the road and slowed in front of the general store, everyone knew he’d say, “Quincy Pickett is dead and buried. The house is clean.” And women would bake biscuits and fry chickens, stuff sausage, brew tea, and squeeze lemons. Men would pack up the food and drink and slowly walk down the main drag and turn up the trail to the Pickett Place. All would speak in slow whispers.

None would judge the dust on the furniture or the smells because there would be a death there. The ladies would break out their black crape just for a few days.

But, as Holcutt's car stopped at the general store, Reggie Pickett got out of the passenger's side holding something in his arms. It was Quincy Pickett himself—very much alive. Reggie was holding his little son, and he put him down so he could get Louise out of the back. The children stood against the car while Reggie went inside the general store. Holcutt stayed near the children, in front of them, as if shielding them from view. Or shielding everyone else from them.

It was troubling. Not troubling that Quince was alive, no; no one could have wanted the boy to actually die. It was how Reggie could bring a child so fresh from a sickbed so near—the general store, the hub where everyone gathered now in spare minutes. No one could reckon what Reggie was thinking bringing his boy out. Some ushered their own children back in their houses, but most stayed to watch what Reggie was doing out here with his two children but not his pregnant wife.

At Jefferson's, Reggie bought a thin black coat for Quince and a black dress for Louise. After he loaded his children back into Holcutt's car, Reggie bounded up Mrs. Brow's porch steps as he had before. This time, he spoke so low that he couldn't be heard. Everyone figured he said something cold and cruel in language that would burn the ears. He was in his shirt-sleeves and had his hands down by his sides so that the muscles in his forearms should've looked loose, but instead they were tight. It was almost like his veins stuck out. He said, finally loud enough, "We will have it proper. We will *make* it so, ma'am."

She said, “No.” Mrs. Brow was not smiling. She kept shaking her head. Her face was pale by the time Reggie finally turned and headed back towards the steps. He struck the banister before he went down and got back into the car. Mrs. Brow went inside and came out with a small glass of whiskey.

When asked what Reggie had said, Mrs. Brow shook her head again. Her breath smelled of the alcohol and her eyes were glazed. “Words that don’t bear repeating.”

And when Holcutt came back through, he said he was done up at the Pickett Place. But he wouldn’t tell what Reggie had wanted, why he bought black clothes. He said that he had a baby to deliver in one of the neighboring counties. “A healthy baby, I hope.” And the doctor looked at least two decades older as he left.

There was a smell. Like a stew, like the chicken stew Jefferson always cooked in October, right when the air had just gotten its chill. All came out of their houses and looked at the sky and sniffed. There was no humidity. There was a slight haze over Germantown.

“It’s burning lye soap,” someone said.

“And meat.”

“Probably the Pickett’s burning Quincy’s linens.”

Mrs. Brow came out on her porch. She put her hand over her nose. “Oh god.” She took the first stair; her ankle twisted under her and she fell down the last three steps.

The lye smell was stronger. The meat smell too. Someone out there had to be dead. Mrs. Brow could’ve known, given one of her predictions. But she’d been wrong

about Quince Pickett, so she really had little use now. Honora sat up and held herself. She rocked back and forth very slowly.

A few knowing murmurs rose. Someone said, "It's a kindness." Someone else agreed. "Can't blame the man for trying."

Then: "Should we dig a hole in the cemetery?"

A long pause none could fill. Some had already turned back to their work, their children, or they'd gone back in their houses away from the smell.

Some, stock-still, wondered: What was that smell?

Mrs. Brow, from the ground, said in a voice so small and weak, barely hers, "We got to give that man what he wants. After all this."

With her words, all knew; the knowledge shuddered like a spasm. A few more rejoined their chores; mothers busied themselves with their own living breathing children. Most kept their faces towards the Pickett Place and what must've been there.

Reggie standing outside his house. Far out, closer to the fields that were dead by now, neglected while his only son had gasped for fevered breaths. Reggie standing before a large black pot. Smoke pouring from that pot, smelling of lye soap and burning meat. Helen crying on the porch, braiding Louise's short hair, over and over, weaving and pulling it out, feeling her child breathing beneath her fingertips. And Quince sitting there too, with his little face in his hands, leaning on his knees, watching his father. It would be a hard lesson for a child: the cost of life, breathing while something else was not. He would not be crying, just watching, thinking, and trying to understand. Like everyone has to, in their own way.

In the bubbling liquid in the pot, sometimes a little bone would show. The round back of the skull would emerge only for a moment, to catch the sun, to remind Reggie and all, really. That little skull would tumble back down into the liquid. It would boil low until it would be fished out, perfect and white and clean.

LITTLE RED BEATING

Reggie had always wanted sons, strong boys to help till the land, pull and hang tobacco, to keep his blood going, carry on the Pickett name. His own father had had five children—a girl at first, then two sons followed by two more daughters. The final daughter, the color of blackberry juice, took his mother with her. All his sisters were dead now. One died of scarlet fever in 1899. His oldest sister, Hannah, died when she was twenty.

Reggie remembered watching his little sisters' births, and his mother's sounds were not unlike those howls that came from his own wife as the midwife dug deep or he had to reach inside her himself—no time to wait for the doctor or a ladies touch—and pull out the newborn, like how he wrangled out calves. There was something peaceful about that moment—when the child was finally out in the world, that split second when something was untouched and fresh. Reggie's first child had been a girl. Louise had been an ugly baby—big-headed—until he realized that she had a face like his. Second child, a son. He'd birthed the boy himself and still remembered a space of time between when he had had the boy in his hands, realized he had a son—someone to keep his line going—before the baby started to cry, and he handed him over to his mother. Reggie named the boy after his grandfather. Quincy had been a healthy baby, well-formed or so the local ladies told him, and had a strong grip with his little fists. But when the boy had turned five and they'd moved (Reggie had finally saved enough money to be closer to his

older brother who swore by the fertility of Germantown's soil), he'd seen the red splotches spread across the boy's cheeks. Quince survived the fever but another boy inside Helen's belly had come out twisted and blackened. That shook Reggie, it being so close to his moving his family over several counties and so close to a time when he had finally achieved something: his own farm. His father would have said that something Reggie had done had angered God, but Reggie had had his fill of his father and his god long ago.

Quince grew narrow, slim; he was so slight like a gust would blow him down. He had bad eyes. On the farm, he was close to useless. Too day-dreamy. Once Reggie had found him drawing with his sister's pencils (a purchase Helen had insisted upon because all little girls Louise's age had such hobbies, though Louise had tried to draw once and then went instead to bake with her mother), so Reggie gave him a hand-me-down knife and taught him to whittle, though Quince's hands were long and clumsy, and he often cut his knuckles. He improved fast. His figures were so good that his little sisters began pining for them, going out and fetching sticks for him. Reggie should've been proud, but he didn't feel it. He thought Louise was growing fine, and he smiled easily at the other children as they were born and years passed, but it wasn't there with Quince.

Because of Quince's slenderness—like a young branch—Helen insisted that Reggie not take him hunting the autumn of his tenth year, which was a male Pickett tradition. Reggie worked that tenth year to get Quince's arms strong enough to hold an old rifle, had him practice on old jam jars. Quince was a bad shot at anywhere closer than twenty yards. But, from a distance, Quince could hit anything. Dead on. Just like

whittling, Quince took to it fast. Reggie had been the same with his father—trying to please him. Reggie felt his stomach light when he watched that fluid motion of his son—limber, lithe—as he readied and steadied the gun and shot. The shatter of the glass target. The way Quince set the gun down and looked back at him, smiling, saying, “Did you see that, Pa?” Reggie would nod, almost want to embrace him—but fathers shouldn’t hug their sons—and put his hand on Quince’s shoulder, feeling the thin bones beneath, and say, “Yeah, I saw. Let’s set another.” Reggie felt something for his son then, something that he hadn’t felt since that summer when he got sick; it was a feeling of fondness not unlike when he’d first held the boy as an infant.

The fall of his eleventh year—1925—Quince asked his mother if he could go hunting. Helen, heavy pregnant, held their other son, a two-year-old, while the two little girls scampered about her apron strings. Helen put the boy in his crib and ran her hand through Quince’s hair; he was tall for his age. She said, “If you want, I reckon I can’t stop you.”

Louise cried out. A cake had run over in the woodstove, wet batter caught in flame.

They decided to go out on Friday, October 2. The moon would be full so they wouldn’t have to worry about the sunset early in the evening. Reggie’s older brother, Marlowe, was going to come with his firstborn, his son, August. August was the kind of boy that Reggie ought to have. Fourteen and already broad-chested, arms thickly coiled with muscle. August had an honest face, square hands, strong legs. He helped Marlowe

with everything out in the fields, carrying sacks and tills on his back. Marlowe had bought August a new gun before the trip, and Reggie wished he'd bought Quince something nicer than the old rifle, but money was tighter than Helen's belly, fit to burst. With the two boys, three girls, and another almost out, Reggie could not afford a gun for Quince.

Helen made oatmeal that morning. The baby was still in his crib in the corner of the main room; Reggie could see both the baby's gentle rocking and his wife moving about in the kitchen area from where he sat on their bed, pulling on his boots. He heard Quince thud down the stairs before he saw him. They shared eye contact for an instant before Reggie looked down to tie his boot. Quince sat at the table, and Helen brought him a steaming bowl and ran her fingers through his hair. "Be safe today, dear-heart."

"Yes, Mama." Quince ate only a little before there was a knock.

Marlowe and August sauntered in. Helen offered them food. Both declined. Marlowe said something about Helen's waistline. August shifted, uncomfortably, as Marlowe chuckled alone and sat at the table across from Quince, leaning on his hand and watching the boy eat. Marlowe's wife—a strict woman with a bird face—had died birthing a third (and also dead) child. Reggie liked to consider Marlowe jealous of his large family, though both Marlowe's children were ideal: the strong August and the demure Estelle, and they contrasted so sharply with Quince, and even Louise, who lacked a feminine softness and had a rough way of handling things. They all lived in a white, plank house with six rooms, a detached kitchen, and an outhouse; much more substantial than Reggie's older home with only three rooms. Marlowe also walked with a

confidence, a surety. Certainly, Reggie thought he loved his brother but he also made his skin itch like fleas.

Quince slid away the bowl—maybe he'd grow if he ate more—and put on his jacket and took the rifle from where it stood propped against the back door. He held it up against his shoulder. He stood by August. August reached over and ruffled Quince's hair. The older boy had only a few inches on the younger. That brought a smirk to Reggie's mouth. One day, perhaps, Marlowe would look at Quince with the same envy with which Reggie regarded August.

Such feelings were sinful. Reggie's father had taught them against that, nearly beat it into all of his children.

After his mother and two sisters died, Reggie's father found religion. He prayed. He avoided drink. He dragged Hannah, Marlowe, and Reggie to church every Sunday. He found one he liked (after trying out a few, including a Primitive Baptist one that served them lunch afterwards) out in the middle of a clearing—a shed really—with only one row of benches and a splintered pulpit that was held together by planks and rusted nails. Behind it was a row of small, pine boxes, like caskets. There were windows, but their shutters were nailed tight and only slivers of light passed into the room, casting odd shadows in corners and making the dust, thick in the air, shimmer almost like stars. Even in the dim light, the balding head of the preacher was a beacon. He was a stocky man and sweated; his loose-fitting cotton shirt clung discolored at his underarms. His voice didn't seem to belong to him; it boomed from his small, round mouth and seemed to

shudder through all who heard him. The congregation was mostly middle-aged couples, though there were a few greybeards and old widows.

Reggie never listened to the words, just the preacher's voice. He had a small moustache that slithered when he opened his mouth. People around him gasped and screamed and fell, convulsing on the ground, foaming in their mouths. Their fingers grasped at the cracks in the hardwood floor.

After the speaking, the preacher took a long, dull colored snake from one of the boxes. It had waves of black and brown across its body and a wide, arrow head. The snake was still as the preacher held it up and walked around the room, saying words that weren't words. He put the snake in people's faces. Reggie slid behind his father a little, but his father caught him by his scruff and dragged him out. So then Reggie slipped behind Marlowe, who held out his hand for Reggie to hold. "What kind of snake is that?" Reggie whispered.

Marlowe's grip was tight and sweaty. "It's a cottonmouth, Reggie. Grandpa Jim stepped on one and died. Remember?"

Reggie did remember his grandfather's swelled face, the tautness of his skin, the shallowness of his breath. Reggie closed his eyes as the preacher passed by them.

After slipping the cottonmouth back into its crate, the preacher opened some others and held up black snakes and corn snakes, all speckled bellies and writhing. He said words over the people, over the snakes, handed the snakes over to empty, begging hands. He handed one to Reggie's father, who cradled it—a peach-hued corn snake with a pale milk eye—like something precious. Then, he handed the snake to Marlowe, who

took it for a moment, and his eyes widened at the wriggling in his hands. Father took it back and handed it to Reggie. The snake, all muscle, pulsed against his flesh like the pressure of quick fingers, pinching and caressing. The snake flicked its tongue against Reggie's cheek, and Father snatched it away with a face unreadable—mottled with pride and jealousy—regarding him as Reggie couldn't understand until years later, when he realized it was something akin to hate.

He offered the snake to Hannah, and she did not take it; she looked away and scuffed at the floor. It seemed like everything stopped then: the preacher, the congregation, even the snakes ceased moving and flicking out their tongues. His father stared at Hannah with hard eyes, though Hannah did not look up. Reggie could see his father's jaw working. He always worked his jaw when he was thinking. Reggie wondered if he was thinking about striking Hannah. He had whipped them before. Once he'd seen his father whip Hannah hard on the back of her neck and his mother stepped out to stop it. His father had struck his mother then. Reggie bit his bottom lip knowing that he would not stop his father from hitting Hannah now. He didn't want to displease him. There was nothing more destructive than his father's displeasure. When he was older, Reggie realized Hannah should've known that as well, and that could have saved her later on.

Father wrapped the snake around his neck and ran his hands over and over its long body. He murmured words that weren't words, though they were more groan-like compared with the preacher. But in his face there was something like love, like how he used to look at Reggie's mother. Everyone else regarded the snakes with a scared

reverence, like something sacred and too powerful. It reminded him of how his mother used to look at his father.

Hannah wrapped her arm around Reggie and pulled him close to her hip.

Marlowe's eyes were wide; he looked like he wanted to vomit.

Back at home, Father told them that the snakes would not bite them because of God. If the Holy Spirit was within them—as it was within him—then the snakes would know and not hurt them. He said that there were verses in the bible that said this, that there was proof in that good book. That if they handled the snakes they were saved. They would all go to heaven together, as a family. He eyed Hannah and said, “Death would be just fine with me as long as all my family was with me. Death is a reward. Freeing us from this flesh.” He told them to wash up, to go to bed. To pray. Reggie knelt and leaned against his straw mattress. He tried to pray, but all he saw when he closed his eyes was a snake which didn't seem right somehow. He opened his eyes to look towards his brother and ask what he should do, but Marlow was already tucked in tight.

That night, Reggie woke to screaming. He saw his father drag his sister out of the house by her long braid. He hooked her to the barn where he chained the horses to be shod. He ripped the back of her dress; her cream skin ghastly in the moonlight. He took the horsewhip and raised it to her, snapped it so it barely seemed to move, the ribbons of blood on her back appearing from nowhere, like a devil clawing up her flesh. He gave her four, paused to let her sob and lower herself almost to her knees—chain keeping her from deeper sagging—and then he gave her a fifth. He unchained her; she dropped like

she was all weight and fell to her side, clenching her dress as it was loose about her shoulders. Father stood over her.

Marlowe, who must have just woken up, took Reggie's arm. "Reggie, step away from the window." His voice was stern and cold.

"I want to see what Pa'll do." Somehow Reggie knew Marlowe was right but couldn't budge. Something held him there.

"No one ought to watch that, Reggie. Come away." Marlowe unhooked the cotton curtain. He put his other hand on Reggie's shoulder, but it was a weak touch. Reggie had never seen his brother so unsure before.

Reggie caught one last glimpse before the curtain dropped, before Marlowe clenched his arm and pulled him away. His father kneeling on his sister, taking the loose shoulders of her dress and jerking them down, the shadow in the divot of her collarbone. Reggie felt a shiver on his skin, the same sensation as a snake's tongue. Later, Reggie would know that he should have looked away. He had seen something he shouldn't have. He realized that he should've listened to Marlowe, but even then he was feeling jealous towards his brother.

August and Quince walked side-by-side in front of Reggie and Marlowe. It was frustrating how Quince's waist was so narrow, even in his too-large, hand-me-down coat. August's steps were sure; his coat—though patched—fit him well. The rifle he carried on his shoulder seemed perfectly balanced. Marlowe elbowed Reggie. "Quince is growing like a tree."

Lanky, branchy, spindly. Reggie punched his brother in the arm, slightly more forceful than friendly. “He’s growing. August seems well.”

“He will be able to do everything without me soon,” Marlowe said.

There would probably never be a time when Quince could handle the fields by himself. He would never have his own farm, future. Perhaps it would have been better if Quince had died from that fever and that other baby boy had lived. “Louise is growing well.” And she was. Louise’s big head fit her body, curving—a little early—into a woman’s. When she tied her apron, her hips were as defined as her mother’s. She would push many strong grandsons through those hips.

The chill of the morning was beginning to burn off, leaving a hazy fog hanging about their heads. The world smelled of decay—downed leaves and mushrooms and damp. Some birds called overhead; their wing-beats audible in the still.

It was a brown fall; most leaves were dirt colored and on the ground, leaving bare bone branches to shake in the wind. The cold had settled in quickly. There were a few flashes of red leaves, made all that more brilliant contrasted with the dun of the other trees. Even going slowly, their boots were loud. Except Quince’s because he walked with a light step.

Quince stopped walking and pointed. August stopped too. And Marlowe and Reggie. Quince looked back at them, the white sunlight pinkening his cheeks. “There’s a doe.”

Following his finger, Reggie saw nothing but thick red leaves and a downed tree trunk, charred black on one edge as if struck by lightning. But Quince’s eyes were good

at a distance. And if Quince could see what August could not then Reggie smirked to think of how Marlowe's face would curl. Reggie put a hand on Quince's shoulder. "Take her then, boy."

Quince swung his gun to its position and steadied his shot. August was not looking towards the red leaves but towards Quince, his mouth slightly open. Marlowe still glared into the distance. Reggie felt himself grin.

When the shot went off, the thicket broke, white tail up and bounding, unevenly. It crashed through the underbrush; only visible as a blur of brown. Quince had hit his target. He lowered his gun. "I got it, Pa!"

Reggie slapped him on the back, hard. "We'll follow until she tires. Good job, son."

They decided to separate to cover more ground: Marlowe and August, and Reggie and Quince. Even Marlowe agreed that—no matter who found the deer—all credit would go to Quince; the meat would be shared. Reggie felt a twinge of pride, even as he watched Quince slowly pick his way through browning mountain laurel, stumbling now and again as he caught his boot on something.

Quince fell forward on his face. Reggie noticed a fleck of red on a leaf. And another. And a splatter beside split limbs. He got next to Quince, who was still on the ground. "Up, boy. I've found the trail." Reggie grabbed Quince by the collar and jerked him up. "See?" He pushed him towards the bespotted leaves.

The boy nodded; he was breathing hard.

Reggie tried to focus on the fluid way Quince had readied the gun, how he'd hit the deer from so far off. Those were things that a son should be able to do. Those were things that Reggie could be proud of. Those were things he'd taught the boy himself, things a father should teach his son. Reggie took Quince by the arm, and they followed the trail.

They found the deer on her side, heaving. The white of her belly stained a deep red. Legs sprawled and pawing at nothing but air. Her eyes were wide, regarding them. But beside her was a fawn. A very late season fawn who still had the shadow of white speckles.

Reggie only had his knife. He drew it and pointed at the doe. "I'll take care of her. You take that fawn."

"Pa, no." Quince had put the gun down. He stepped back, deeper into the clearing. Behind him was a gully. Quince said, voice light, "I can't, Pa. It's only a baby."

Reggie swallowed hard his frustration; he could feel a headache sneaking into his temple. The wind rattled the bare branches around them. He said, "You'd be doing it a blessing. Without its mother, it won't survive."

Quince seemed to ponder this but found it unconvincing. "I want to go home."

"Well, we ain't." Reggie wished he'd brought his own gun with him so he could be finished with it. Quince had sat down beside the gun and was pouting like a child. He was a child, after all, but he was also his son. Reggie had taught the boy how to shoot and how to kill. He had to teach him that sometimes the right decision was hard. Reggie

had learned that one night in church, and he'd lost his sister forever. Quince needed to learn that before he lost something himself. Reggie took his knife and quickly slit the fawn's neck. The warm blood spilled by his boot. The doe watched with eyes wide but dim, as if watching a child die was the cruelest fate and didn't understand, as Quince did not, the kindness Reggie had paid to the fawn.

Reggie heard a crackle of a stick behind him and he turned to meet the butt of the rifle aimed at his face. It hit left of his nose, not hard enough to bruise, but hard enough to ache. It was Quince. He was saying something, loudly, but Reggie couldn't figure the words because he was talking quickly. Something about "how could you do that?", "it was just a baby!", and (clearly) "I hate you!" It was an overreaction—it was just a deer—and ridiculous. That rifle was loaded; Quince could've blown his own head off. Reggie grabbed the gun and told him to stop, that he was a stupid little boy who had so much to learn, and he wasn't sure that he would ever be able to teach him. They tugged for a bit, Reggie felt Quince's grip weaken each time, but somehow he still held on. A gust caught in the clearing and spun up some leaves around them, crinkling and rustling. There was a whistle in that wind too—a sharp noise that seemed to echo. But no birds, no other sounds, only that orphaned wind. Reggie felt his head pounding. If only Quince would've killed the fawn. If only he would be the son—a shot broke.

With a jerk, Reggie won the rifle and Quince fell backwards, down the hill to the gully. It crossed his mind that he should reach for Quince, but he didn't. He let Quince fall. Arms and legs and body all movement, cracks and snaps of underbrush, perhaps bone, but the boy never made a sound. Reggie didn't cry out either. He simply watched

with his hands at his side, gripping the rifle loosely. Quince finally stopped on his stomach, down in the basin.

All was still. Reggie waited to feel regret, waited to know if he'd made the right choice. But he knew that it couldn't have been right; it would have been right to reach for his son.

They began to attend night service. Hannah would wear a white dress that covered her all the way to her ankles, and she would lay on the floor and the others would put their hands on her, rubbing her everywhere with their open palms. The preacher would say words over her, but they weren't really words, more like sounds linked together, pitches rising, falling, rolling. Father carried cottonmouths and once a faded copperhead and eased its short body through ample coils around his arms, his neck, his face.

Reggie and Marlowe stood back when they laid Hannah down. At first, Marlowe always held Reggie's hand. Then Reggie stopped taking it. He watched his sister. Her face was so blank. He wanted to touch her too, though he didn't know where that feeling was coming from. He knew it had to be wrong to touch his sister through her thin dress. The right choice would have been to walk away from them or tell them to stop. But Reggie wanted to touch her; his fingers trembled. His father looked so pleased as he guided his palm from Hannah's head, across her heart, her belly, her hips, her knees, her toes. The preacher uttering, congregation spasming, did the same.

One Sunday, they started dropping snakes on Hannah, and Reggie could see them wriggle around her body, wrinkling her dress, flicking their tongues at her skin. They never bit her. Reggie didn't know how Father convinced Hannah to do this, or she didn't have a choice. He'd never heard them talk about it. His father had grown sterner. Hannah quieter. Her eyes were dim. Oftentimes, Reggie would find her sitting out in the tobacco shed, the leaves hanging down into her hair, running her fingers over her knee, over and over. She told him that she was taking care of Pa how Mama used to do, and that Pa would never hurt them. She said that not all fathers were like this, that God could make them kinder. Reggie had to promise her that one day he would be a kind father. He'd responded how a child should, affirming without thinking. He hadn't realized then how hard that could be.

One Sunday, Father called Marlowe and Reggie over and handed them each long black snakes. He told them to drop them on their sister, that the snakes would take away her sins. The snakes would heal her.

Marlowe handed the snake back and said, "I can't." He left the church, head lowered.

The preacher went back to bellowing his non-words. The people waved in rhythm. Father watched Marlowe go with narrowed eyes. It was the same sort of look he shot Hannah that first Sunday when she'd refused the serpent. Reggie wondered if Marlowe would get a beating too, if that meant that Marlowe would not be saved and would not go to heaven like the rest of them, if they would start dropping snakes on him too.

Reggie had liked the snake that first time. He felt like he'd been special. The snake had given him some sort of gift when it touched its tongue to his face, like a blessing. Hannah could have that too. Reggie still held his snake, who was slow because of the cold night air. He looked down at Hannah, never before noticing how her body was that of a woman, all round and soft. Her face, though, hard; cheeks flushed and mouth set in a firm line. She caught Reggie's eyes and they held. She didn't want him there, to do this, or to touch her. She wanted him somewhere safe, outside with Marlowe, not in the shed surrounded by chants and venom. But Father was there, and Reggie had to please father. He heard his heart beat. The snake curled suddenly in his hand, head shot back, and fangs sunk deep in his flesh. He made no sound, but jerked his hand; the snake swung in an arc.

No one moved to help him, but Hannah. She got to her feet, snatched the snake by its head, and removed it cleanly. To him, she looked divine. Hannah in her white dress, holding the snake in one hand and Reggie's hand in her other. Though she held his hand, she didn't look at him. Her grip was firm and cold. To him she looked as pale as an angel and too far away from him to ever reach again.

Reggie reached Quince down in the basin. At the bottom, Reggie circled Quince once, twice, and said his name. Then his full name. But the boy did not respond. Reggie pondered for a moment if Quince was dead. The leaves under the boy were red, but not from blood as far as he could tell. Quince's head was turned to the left. His eyes closed, peacefully, a long red gnash ran from his temple to his chin. He had a busted lip and a

nose bleed. His left arm extended straight from his body, palm up and fingers curled almost in a fist. The right stretched straight up; his legs all askew. The sun between the leaves, rustling in the late afternoon breeze, caught the gold in Quince's hair, giving him a shimmer. The scene was almost beautiful.

Reggie touched Quince's side with his toe, gently. There was a slight muffled groan. He prodded again. Definitely a moan. His son lived.

A thought flashed across his head: he could leave Quince here to die. The thought was fast but it had been there. Reggie looked down at Quince knowing that those sort of thoughts were the ones that no one should act on. He knew that sometimes thoughts should stay undone. But would leaving Quince now be a hard choice that was right? Could Reggie start over with his next child? No. Such thoughts had to be wrong. Reggie shook his head and knelt by his son. He said, "Quince."

Quince opened his eyes but didn't seem to see Reggie. He groaned again and moved his left leg. Any other movement seemed impossible. Finally, Quince said—timid, "Pa?"

"Here, boy." Reggie put his hand on Quince's back. "Let me get you on your back."

"It hurts, Pa." There was blood dripping from the busted lip, fresh and red against his paling skin.

"We'll get you on your back. You'll be all right." Reggie slipped his hands underneath Quince's chest and torso.

The scream was like a trapped animal, desperate and shrill.

Reggie stopped, mid-motion. The collarbone felt loose in his hand. He covered Quince's mouth with his other hand. "Shut up."

Quince gulped and spat blood after Reggie took his hand back. "It hurt so bad. Don't touch me."

"We need to get you up."

"No. Don't touch me."

The frustration pounded in his temple. He could just leave Quince here for the cold and the buzzards. He tried to keep his voice level. "I'll touch you when and where I want."

The boy wriggled, trying to move his arms but only his right budged; the left still out to the side. He murmured something, and there were tears on his face.

Reggie's father had once told him to never cry—men don't cry. But for a moment, only a space of a breath, Reggie felt what had happened: Quince, his son, was hurt bad. If he stayed in the gulley, he would likely die. His son was scared and helpless. Reggie said, "Quince" softly, like how he'd said it when he held that mass of pulsing, infant flesh, as chill as snake skin.

"Don't touch me," Quince repeated, voice dim with held sobs. His back heaved.

Reggie's head hurt again. He watched Quince's right hand claw at dirt, the near convulsions of his frame making whatever was wrong with him only worse. For a moment, the thought: how rabbits, scared senseless, panted and then their hearts burst. Would Quince's do the same? That little red beating thing in his chest, carrying his father's blood, burst into shards. Reggie would suddenly find himself with one less son,

one less set of hands beckoning him, one less headache. He shouldn't have such thoughts. He shouldn't, but he did. He wondered if his father had ever felt the same while watching Reggie and his siblings. His father had probably felt the same when he saw Reggie snakebit and Hannah holding his hand. That's why it had been so hard for their father to live with them after.

The sun was fading. A crow called out only once; its croak splitting the air, unsettling a flock of small birds that took soundless to the sky.

“Brother! Quincy!” It was Marlowe's voice.

“Quince!” And August's.

Marlowe and August slid down into the basin. Marlowe put his hand on Reggie's shoulder, a firm touch. August knelt by Quince. He reached out, and Quince shuddered even from that slight touch.

“Reggie, what happened?” Marlowe's eyes seemed to consider the scene.

There was a chance that Quince would say what happened: the fawn, the struggle, the gun's report, the fall. Reggie had not reached for him to catch him. Quince could mention Reggie's roughness beneath the wiggle of his bones. Reggie fixed his eyes (he recalled his own father had often regarded him with such a glare) on Quince's face. He spoke, slow, low, “Quince was excited by the doe. He lost his feet and fell.”

“I fell,” Quince echoed. A good boy, after all, or at least one who could learn to listen and heed his father's moods.

Reggie cleared his throat. “He’s broke somewhere. His collarbone. I can’t move him.”

“We got to get him up.” Marlowe looked only at Quince now. “He dies if we leave him.”

August stood. “Couldn’t one of us fetch Dr. Holcutt and bring him back here?”

“Sun’s real low,” Marlowe said. “Might be dark. Might not find us.” Marlowe took a deep breath and puffed out the smoke. “August, take off your coat. We’ll tighten that round Quince. It’ll hurt less.”

Marlowe had always seemed to know what to do—practical like their father—and with a voice as cold. Reggie felt the gnaw of jealousy: Marlowe’s smarts, his big house, his broad son. Not snakebit like Reggie and not dead like Hannah and the other girls. Even Father had looked at Marlowe differently. Reggie had never been able to figure it out. Though now, Reggie figured it was the same as how he couldn’t feel much of anything for Quince and couldn’t say why, save for that the boy was weak and such a disappointment. But to feel nothing? Something had to be wrong. Wrong like his father, and Reggie didn’t want to be that wrong.

August took off his coat and handed it to his father.

Reggie knelt by Quince. He brushed some hair from the boy’s face, a motion Helen used often to calm the children. Quince’s forehead was warm though the dusk was cold. “Quince, we are going to get you out of here. There’ll be pain, but it’ll pass.” Or we can leave you here to die, but Reggie didn’t say that. The tree branches moaned and bowed in the wind. He brushed Quince’s hair back again. “You understand?”

“I do, Pa.”

It was quick and noiseless. Reggie lifted Quince, who sucked in a deep breath and held, while Marlowe laid August’s coat beneath him. Carefully, Reggie put Quince down—the boy breathed out—and tied the coat arms around his shoulders, knotting them as tight as he could. His quick hands reminding him of what was really going on: his first son was hurt bad. Nothing else mattered but that thought. He tried to hold that thought as he lifted his bound son up, cradling him to his chest.

He could see Quince, full face. He had a busted lip and smudge of blood left from the nosebleed. The gnash had darkened to a deeper crimson. The right side of his face was scuffed and dirty, showing already the stains of a bruise. Quince’s breaths were uneven, pulse quick. Reggie caught his eyes once—unreadable: fear, hurt, a motley mess—before his eyes rolled back and finally closed. His body limp as boneless.

Afterwards, Father took them back to the Primitive Baptist church they’d tried before. There were no snakes there. No one in the family ever spoke of the night when Hannah held the snake, when Reggie was bitten. But Reggie remembered it. His father didn’t speak to Reggie much after that day, though he didn’t speak much to any of them (health failing early from consumption). He said, daily, for Reggie to study the bible, to not sin, to be a man. He’d said, “Remember, Reggie, to die is not the end. It is a reward. Heavenly and divine, as long as the Spirit is within you. You need to pray, boy. Just pray.”

Every night for years, Reggie would kneel by his bed and try to pray, but his hand always seemed to hurt, and he could never think of anything to say. He closed his eyes only to see his sister standing farther away from him, seeped in light, but he could never approach her.

When he talked to Hannah, pale and sullen, sunken-eyed Hannah, she said, “We just ought to pray better, Reggie. All us sinners, just pray better. We will get to a better place.” She wouldn’t touch him nor smile at him. She never spoke to him unless he spoke first.

Hannah married three years later at eighteen. She had one child before she died in her kitchen at twenty. He was told that she slipped and stabbed a knife into her chest while home alone. She died on the floor. Years later, watching his own wife and daughter in the kitchen, Reggie knew it could not have been an accident; his sister had killed herself. He asked Marlowe to talk about it, to make some sense of it, but he said nothing, and finally Reggie decided not to dwell on it. He tried to think of her as an angel somewhere, like heaven. He thought of her in a better place, happy and unbroken.

It was a bad break. The doctor pointed to a slight rise in the skin near the middle of the left side of Quince’s collarbone. He set the bones and bound Quince tightly to keep the shoulder and arm still. Quince was quiet the whole time, though his mother gently sobbed, Louise stroked his hair, the other two sisters just regarded him blank—too young to understand. Those little girls were so beautiful in their innocence. And Louise so motherly. All of them could feel something for Quince; all of them loved him. It was

something alack in Reggie. Or, he thought, it was something about Quince. It had to be something about Quince.

Dr. Holcutt said several months of bed rest and taking it easy. He said Quince's left arm might always be weaker than his right, may never be strong; that the lump over the bone might stay too. Constant reminders. Holcutt told Helen she should make marrowbone soup and a tea for Quince from alfalfa, horsetail, and dandelion leaf and make him drink it to help with the pain. He suggested the little ones could hunt for the leaves, how delighted they would be to help their brother. It was also cheaper than anything he could prescribe. Reggie said that they didn't have any money to spare on medicine. Though Helen looked at him, wide eyes framed by tears, she had to know that it was true. Before he left, Dr. Holcutt put his hand on her shoulder and said that all would be well. Helen smiled back through her tears.

Helen stayed in the room to hear Quince, with his weak voice and bruising face, talk about dropping the deer (who was undoubtedly cold and dead out in that clearing still) and falling. The telling was fractured, like he couldn't remember or he didn't want to remember. Or he'd hit his head hard and was still reeling from it.

As night grew deeper, the moon shimmering in the room, Helen had to leave to tuck in the little girls and the baby and to sit and rest her swollen feet. She kissed Quince goodnight.

"Night, Mama," Quince said, voice thick and dreamy. When his mother was gone, Quince picked at his quilt for a few moments before his breath evened out to sleep.

Marlowe slipped into the room. "Thought I'd drop by to see your boy."

Reggie nodded. His brother's shadow on the back wall was huge, looming out from behind him.

"Reggie, he's a good boy. You've a good family."

"Reckon so," Reggie said.

"Good blood. A real blessing."

It could be true. The blood of their father—stern, cold, but decidedly heaven-bound—within them.

"That's a good way to think, Marlowe."

Marlowe put his hand on Reggie's shoulder. Firm. Certain. He nodded once to Reggie and then left the room.

"A real blessing." Reggie watched the rise and fall of Quince's small, bound chest, the fragmented bone beneath. Reggie lowered himself and leaned against the mattress. It was a position he'd not taken since he was a child, when he tried each night to pray like his father wanted. For the first time since the snakebite, Reggie prayed, seeking the comfort that his sister seemed to believe in. He prayed to love his son, but he felt nothing but the frigid air of the room and the loose, itchy stiches of the quilt unraveling beneath his hands.

WHEN THE WINTER CAME

The Jones's had just moved to Germantown, and Lela Jones was not taking to the country. Their new home—large, manorial, towering three floors and an attic—stuck out like a bee sting from the flat row of modest homes that lined the main drag. She could see people walking past the house all the time. Lowered faces, whispers. Lela thought, even at a youthful fifteen, that only the unintelligent spoke so feverishly about other people. She kept indoors, save when she took her hound, James K. Polk, out the back and watched him romp across the yard, dandelion fluff stuck in the bristles of his tail. Her mother kept to the kitchen, producing cakes and breads and biscuits in her new oven. Her father was either in closed in his office, sketching tractor fixtures on blueprint paper, or in the sitting room, reading *The Reynolds Reader* (Germantown itself too small to have a local paper) and nursing black coffee in the morning, iced tea in the afternoon, and a gin in the evenings.

It was in April, 1929, around three in the afternoon, close to a quarter past judging by how the clock clicked at every second waiting to chime. Lela sat on the floor, flipping through a *Vogue*, rubbing her hand absently over James K.'s side. His toes fidgeted against her leg, caught in a dream. Her father already had a gin in his hand—complaining of a headache. There was a knock at the door. It was the first time they'd heard that sound since they'd moved. Lela stood up. Her father put his gin on his side table and opened its drawer. He kept a pistol there.

“Brooks,” her mother said from the kitchen. “It’s just company.”

He closed the drawer. “We don’t know any of these people.”

“Well, perhaps we ought to before we resort to arms.” Her mother’s voice left with a gentle laugh.

Lela straightened out her dress. She checked her breath and accompanied her father to the door.

The family was huge. A middle-aged man stood at the door, hand poised as if to knock again. A young woman stood on his left. She was a broad-shouldered girl with a wide face and an honest smile. Her dress showed freshly pressed pleats but lingering stains of grease; her pumps scuffed. Her hair was dark and carefully curled, she must’ve spent hours on her hair for it to shine in brilliant ringlets in the sun. She carried a square bundle—no doubt a pound cake wrapped in cheesecloth.

A young man on his right. Tall, though in face he seemed Lela’s age. So tall the hems of his pants were too short. His shirt was as pressed as his sister’s, and stained at the collar. He caught her eyes and lowered his gaze. Shyness seemed strange in a young man. Lela smiled.

There were four more children—two boys and two girls—of varying ages of adolescence. Four to nine was a reasonable guess. The smallest three were on the porch swing, rattling the chains and shaking the seat. A heavily pregnant woman murmured almost soundlessly to stop them. Her palms, Lela saw, were hard and rugged from labor, but seemed so gentle waving down her children.

The man introduced himself as Reggie Pickett. He said he lived on down the road a piece, from one of the dusty offshoots from the main drag. He grew tobacco out there. He was pleased to meet such fine folks as the Joneses. He introduced his family. His oldest, the young woman, Louise held out the cake at her name and said, "It's a real pleasure." Her voice had a rough twang of a lineage of little school and plucking tobacco. But Lela liked her instantly. Maybe it was the way she smiled, the delicate way she offered the cake like she gave something sacred.

And Quincy, Reggie's oldest son, who everyone—meaning, Lela guessed, the others in Germantown and not just the immediate family—called Quince. He shook her father's hand. Quince had long, slender fingers. There were nicks on his knuckles from a knife, a whittler, Lela guessed. She noticed his eyes were a dusky blue-grey. Their eyes met and held. Lela smiled at him again.

Reggie introduced his wife as Helen. She bowed her head but did not speak.

Reggie took her father's hand and told him the Picketts attended service at the Primitive Baptist church in Bramble Cove and they were welcome to come join Sunday morning. And went on to other pleasantries. He ended the conversation with a smirk. "I hope we get to be good friends." They weren't the kind of people Lela's parents had kept up with in Virginia. Reggie smelled of stale tobacco and dirt. But it was his voice that made Lela look down at her feet. There was an edge to it, something she'd never heard before. It made her feel like he boxed her ears with each word.

They weren't their kind of people, but Lela found herself with the Picketts again, like she was drawn to them. Though her parents had taught her at home before the move, now they wanted her to attend the Germantown School. Lela did not want to go. She had met very few young people during her first week in town as it was, and, though she didn't say it aloud, she considered herself far smarter than them. Her parents suspected this motive and pushed her even more to make the less than a mile walk to the three room school house. They told her she would make friends, meet someone special, that she would enjoy it and it would make Germantown life easier. When those ideas didn't work, they told her she had to go or she could clean the floors. So she went.

There were three rooms for three age groups, serving children ages 5 to 18. The rooms each had four long desks—two by two—and sat thirty-two students. Each desk had eight small chalkboards and a pencil divot. There were only a few occupied seats in the young adult room when Lela entered. Lela stepped into the classroom, caught the eye of the teacher as she stood before a dusty chalkboard and an old map of North Carolina. The teacher said, "Have a seat. We'll start in a few moments." The school year was almost over for summer, and the teacher looked like she'd been through the trenches.

Lela moved towards a seat in the back row when she heard several muffled snickers. She realized that the room was split by gender and she had been about to sit behind a boy. She felt her face redden. She could step out the door and spend the day wandering the shelves of the general store, and she doubted the kindly owner, Mr. Jefferson, would ask her anything, certainly not ask her to leave.

“Lela, you can come perch here.” It was Louise Pickett; her smile friendly and instantly recognizable. Lela sat by her. “How're you doing, Lela?”

“Doing well, thank you.” Lela almost wanted to take Louise's hand and squeeze it.

Another girl, from the row in front of them, turned around and said, “What a pretty dress.”

It was a tea dress, silk, and pale green. Her mother has said that not many women could pull off such a look because the color had to suit her complexion perfectly. It was pretty; it had been the last thing she'd bought in Virginia. Perhaps people here weren't so dreadful. “Thank you.”

“Makes you look like a cucumber though.”

“Nancy,” Louise said, voice stern. It was a big sister's voice, used to scolding.

“It's fine.” Lela leaned towards Nancy. “Where'd you get your dress? Hand-me-down? You need to let out the waist.”

The teacher rapped a ruler on the chalkboard and the laughing stopped. Then she began to talk about the civil war. Nancy stuck her tongue out before she turned back.

Lela stopped listening to the drone. She looked around. The sixteen girl seats were almost full, but the boy's side was nearly empty—there were only seven of them. It seemed a girl had slim pickings, unless she wanted a boy who left the schoolhouse early to work the land and could not add up figures to check profit or loss. Lela saw Quince, Louise's younger brother, and he saw her. He kept looking up at her and then back at the loose-leaf in front of him. He'd seemed so shy on her porch, it was strange to see him

watching her so closely without seeming to mind her returning the stare. He continued on like that until the teacher had moved on to arithmetic, and Lela had to look away in order to take the book that Louise shuffled to her. Quince had a different book than everyone else, and Lela decided to ask him about that first and the staring second.

Quince remained with that book at recess; Louise left to make sure the littler Picketts in the other rooms ate their lunches. Lela crossed to the other side of the room and gazed into the book for a moment before she had to look away. She'd nearly drowned in numbers and figures. By this time, Quince was eyeing her, so she had to say something. She settled on, "That looks tricky."

"Not so bad, really, Miss Jones. I like your dress and what you said to Nancy. She needed that."

Lela laughed a little. "Thank you."

She didn't have to ask why he had been staring because she saw it. It was a pencil drawing of her—a fair likeness though half of her face was smudged from where Quince had rested his hand while working on her curls. The neck of her dress was low; her collarbone stood out. It was shaded: Quince had pressed and rubbed his thumb on it over and over to create the shadows.

By the summer, they were together. Quince's fingers were long and beautiful but clumsy. He had one hand on the side of her face, the other pressed into the side of the house by her head. She could feel splinters catching her curls. She kept her own hands on his narrow waist, ensuring he still pushed against her, into the back of the Picket

Place. It was their first real kiss—not the brushes at farewells—and it was something uneasy and wonderful. Quince’s spit (were kisses supposed to involve so much spit?) tasted both sweet and like dirt; he’d been sucking on the honeysuckle that wound round his mother’s garden fence.

His fingertips finally seemed to figure what to do and ran through her hair. And then, suddenly, he stopped. Dropped his hands and stepped away from her. His face mottled pale and pink, he was breathing hard, he said, “Pa.”

Reggie must’ve just stepped around the corner of the house. He had a young branch in his hand so fresh it still bled green.

Lela leaned heavily against the house. Reggie was smoldering. Eyes dull but glowing in the hard noon’s light. He’d come back from the fields a half-hour earlier; it must’ve been because of the dying summer’s heat. He pointed the switch at her. “I’ll have none of that in my house.”

Quince stood before her. His breaths were evening out. “Pa, nothing was going—”

There didn’t seem a fleck of movement, but Quince flinched and Lela could see blood on his cheek from the snap of the branch. “I have eyes, boy. Bad enough she’s round here all day. Eating on us. Distracting you and Louise from your duties.” Reggie took Quince by the collar of his shirt and jerked him away. “I need your help fixing the shed.”

Quince pulled away from his father and straightened his collar. “Fine. I’ll be right back, Lela.”

“No, get off my property fore we get back, hear?” Reggie was leading Quince away by his arm.

But Lela didn't leave, she went inside to see Louise. Louise smashed lemons over a pitcher, squirting out juice, seeds, and pulp. “What did your parents say bout you and Quince?”

Lela leaned on the counter and swatted a fly from the near empty sugar bowl. “They said I could do as I liked. But to remember that I'm a lady.” She smiled, though she agreed with them. The folks of Germantown talked enough as it was, she didn't need to give them more.

“You are quite the lady, Lela.” Louise took the sugar and dumped half of the bowl into the lemon remnants. “You have my brother all flustered.”

“I like him.” Lela watched as Louise took some boiling water from the hook over the fire and added it to the pitcher. Louise began to stir.

The door opened and Quince and Reggie were in the center of the room. Reggie's head was bloody, he held it and blood shined between his fingers. He was saying something but no words Lela could discern. Gravel growls, more animal than man. Reggie staggered across the room and sat at the kitchen table.

Louise moved fast, and the pitcher teetered, fell, and spilled the hot, sticky liquid over the counter. Drips hit the floor. Louise kept saying, “What happened? What happened?”

“It was an accident,” Quince said. He stayed planted in the middle of the living space. He had blood on his hands. He held them up, palms open, as if studying them, but his eyes were busy on the room: the floors, the walls, Lela, everywhere but Reggie.

Louise pulled her mother’s apron from its peg by the stove and tore strips. “Pa, let me help. Let me wrap it.”

Reggie waved her off. “Don’t touch me. Don’t.”

Lela took a dishtowel to Quince. He looked at her but didn’t move. Lela carefully wiped his hands with the towel. She wanted to ask what happened. Reggie was groaning again. Louise sniffled.

“I didn’t mean to. It was an accident.” Quince took the dishtowel and continued cleaning his hands. “We were patching the shed’s roof. The board was heavy, and I dropped it down from the ladder. It hit him.”

Reggie mumbled low, “No boy of mine...” before breaking off into groans.

Louise finally got her father to let her wrap his head.

Lela turned away from the blood. She looked at the floor by Quince’s feet. His boots were old and the stitches were coming loose.

“I didn’t mean to,” Quince repeated. Almost like he didn’t believe himself.

Around Thanksgiving, Lela noticed that Reggie Pickett was off. She hardly saw him; she’d tried to visit the Pickett household in the early afternoon, when she knew that Reggie was out in the fields, or she settled for seeing Quince and Louise in class. A few

days after Thanksgiving, Lela was at the house for a visit; Reggie was out hunting rabbits.

Louise twirled about the room in a new dress. It was pine colored velvet and had a plunge neckline. The skirt flowered around her legs despite the material's weight. "It's a lovely dress, don't you think?"

Lela had to agree.

"Better be for all we had to go through." Quince was sitting near them, whittling a dog. He was making a series of short strokes to simulate fur, and Lela held her breath at each one, waiting for him to nick himself, but he didn't. Quince looked up from the wood and nodded towards the mantle.

Above it was a portrait. Quince, Louise, Reggie, and their mother with the baby stood behind the other Picketts who sat on a bench. All of their clothes were neat and pressed; they looked very together. Lela had never seen them look that way. Quince, especially, in a coat and vest that fit him near perfect; the sleeves fell right where they were meant to at his wrists. It could have been a beautiful portrait, but none of them were smiling. The four young ones were looking at the camera, no doubt the photographer had tried to say something charming to catch their eyes. But their mouths remained straight. Helen looked downright tired, and judging by her expression, the baby in her arms seemed too heavy to bear. Louise, too, looked serious. Quince was looking off camera, at something above the photographer's head. That didn't surprise Lela. Quince looked at things closely or at an angle, because she knew he needed glasses that Reggie could not afford. But Reggie was smiling, or smirking rather. He always smirked, every time she

saw him, but this smirk was even more pronounced. Or perhaps it was because his mouth was so dark in the black and white, and it was a little blurred. Lela didn't realize that she had crossed the room and was standing before the mantle and the portrait until Louise caught her elbow and said, "Well, you want to catch fire?"

"Oh." Lela shook her head. "It's a lovely portrait. Were you expecting it?"

"No." Quince joined at her other side. "Pa just got up and told us we were going to Reynolds to get a picture. He said he wanted one since he had the extra money."

"He bought us all new clothes too. Tailored!" Louise clapped her hands together. The dress made soft noises whenever she moved her body.

"We were all dragged out." Quince turned away. "Odd of him to do that to us."

"It was very kind, Quince," Louise responded.

From the way they spoke, it was obvious that they had had some disagreement about the clothes, portrait, and trip earlier. Lela didn't want to pry. It was getting close to noon; Reggie would be back soon. She didn't want to see that smirk in life. "I should be going."

Quince handed her the finished dog. "This is for you. It's James K. Polk." He kissed her on the cheek.

Then, the winter. Lela heard a gunshot. Far off. A shotgun. Someone was hunting rabbits, no doubt, for Christmas dinner. But somehow that single shot reverberated brittle. It almost made her pause. But she was late for lunch with Louise and Quince.

She went carefully, picking her way across the snow. She'd heard it was odd for snow in Germantown. It usually fell mid-January—pure fluff flakes followed by hours of frozen drizzle so all was more ice than snow. But not this snow. It was hard frozen on top but seven inches piled beneath. The icy topcoat was not quite strong enough for Lela's weight, so to walk, she had to press her foot hard, break through, and gain traction. It was slow going, and she was already late.

Another gunshot.

She could see the house. The chimney spewed black into the thick clouds that still threatened snow. Mrs. Pickett would be baking bread (almost better than Lela's mother's biscuits) and Louise would be decorating her Christmas fruit cake. Lela hadn't had the heart to tell Louise that she didn't care for such cakes. "It's fine," Quince had told her, "I don't like those bricks either, but she still loves to make them."

On the porch, at the front door, Lela felt something deep stir within her, like the feeling of the electric current of a storm. Lela paused at the doorknob. She looked in the window and saw: Helen Pickett against the wall beneath the front window, blood pooled where her stomach used to be. Arms limp, her palms beside her body, fingertips curled upwards. The two youngest Pickett boys were under the table, their plates and cups left on top, one spinning then tumbling on its side, on the floor, rolling towards Helen. The cradle in the corner with the newborn rocking slowly. And Louise by the fireplace, her back to the front door, her back to Reggie who stood behind her with a shotgun.

Louise reached for the poker. A scream. Not Louise as her body surged forward and she slammed her chin into the mantle, head back at a violent angle. Lela's mouth

was open and she realized the voice was hers, even though she could not feel it leaving her.

Down the crooked porch steps, catching her boots on rusted nails, stumbling now on the snow. The air so cold it seemed to freeze her breaths in her lungs and burned there, so cold as to be hot. She had to get away. Louise was dead. The Picketts were dead. She would be—

As she ran, she heard two more rapid shots, then a pause, and then one shot. The two little boys and the baby in her crib. Lela kept running; she could feel dampness on her face. How had Reggie not seen her? He'd been too busy killing the others, thinking about killing the others. Then Lela stopped. Quince. Where was Quince?

She could go back. She could go back and find him. He could've been upstairs or out in the fields somewhere. No, he was supposed to be there for lunch—Reggie was the one who should've been gone, out hunting—so Quince should've been waiting for her in the main room. He should've been sitting by the window, whittling, and watching for her. But she hadn't seen him there. He could still be alive. Reggie hadn't found him. Yet. Lela turned around. She was far enough away that the naked arms of the maples skewed her view of the house. It looked like the trees were pinching the house with their bony fingers, squishing it out of view. She could go back.

She couldn't shake the thought of Quince in the snow somewhere, puddling blood, looking up at the sky and the lazy circles of crows overhead, feeling himself drain from the tips of his toes to his core to finally his eyes, a final glimpse of nothing but a black wing, a black beak, and a clouded sky.

If he was dead, there was nothing she could do. If Reggie was going to find him, she couldn't stop him. She would just be shot too. There was nothing she could do. Maybe Quince was somewhere else, somewhere far away. Lela rubbed her eyes. That's what she had to do: get somewhere far away.

Lela listened as the radiator shuddered on. She was tempted to grip the heat of the radiator, let her flesh melt to the metal, to make her hands stop feeling paper-thin and crinkled. When she had gotten home, she told her mother that she hadn't made it to the Pickett Place (she'd only been gone fifteen minutes—only fifteen), and she said that she fell and didn't feel well. Her mother had told her to go to bed and rest. She would call her for lunch in about half an hour.

Lela laid on her bed. She tried to take off her coat, but her fingers fumbled on the large buttons. She gave up and stared at the ceiling. It was in her head—those bodies, Louise's body jerking. She wasn't able to tell her mother; she couldn't even think of a way to tell her mother.

She heard a knock on the front door. It was sharp, urgent, not like the lazy knock of late afternoon gossip. She could hear voices muffled by the floors between her room and the foyer. Quick footsteps, stomps. The door slammed. And quiet.

She must've slept at some point because it became dark. The radiator huffed in the corner, and Lela was sweat stuck to her coat. There was a tap on her bedroom door, and it opened before she acknowledged it. Her parents stepped into her room. Their faces were white. "I'm sorry you don't feel well, on Christmas too." Her mother crossed

the room and sat by her on the bed. She put her hand on Lela's forehead. "You're warm."

Her father stayed in the doorway. He shifted, like he was searching for words. Her father cleared his throat. "Lela, the Picketts are dead."

She nodded.

Her mother rose and went back to her father. "But Quince is fine."

"He is?" Lela stood up then. He hadn't been there. He'd not had to see what she saw, but he had seen his family all dead when he'd gotten home. He'd seen his mother's curled fingers locked upwards like spikes.

Her mother and father were quiet, like they expected her to say something. Expecting her, she knew, to cry or scream.

Lela swallowed. She had to say something to them. She could tell them what she saw. But the bodies on the floor didn't seem so important, not compared to Quince. She asked, "Where is he? Quince? With his uncle, Marlowe?"

Her father put his hand on her shoulder. "We don't know where he is. He ran off. Marlowe was there and said he would take him, but Quince didn't want to go." He said other things, like how there was so much blood on the floor, he thought it had soaked through his boots and into his socks. He said there was a smell. He said that Quince had gone to Louise and tried to shake her awake; he'd just kept shaking her and telling her to get up. Most men had had to leave; he'd stayed as long as he could've. He'd been there when some of the others found Reggie's body out in a thicket, where he'd shot himself in the stomach. Her father's face was affected, what he'd seen there was haunting him. It

was haunting her too, certainly, and she wondered if they saw it in her face. She wondered if Quince would have the same look, all harrowed and haunted. She wondered if she'd ever see him again or if he was faraway, run off far from his father's shadow. But she needed to see him, to see his face. To touch him.

Her parents left her. Lela looked out her window, putting her hand to the glass. It was very cold. Not as cold as the Pickett's window. Everything was black save the sky which was a dark blue specked with the flicker of stars. The clouds had all moved on, leaving room for the moon that was barely a sliver, hooked like a cat's claw. Against that sky, Lela could make out the wave of branches. She couldn't see anything beneath them, but then she saw a figure moving down the main drag. It was Quince. She ran downstairs, opened the front door, and called for him. When he came—he was silent—she let him in.

Her parents moved about him as if on tip-toes, like walking through glass. They offered him warmed leftovers, and he'd taken a biscuit and tore into it. His hands were smudged, and there was black under his nails; he'd probably not washed them since trying to rouse his sister. Her mother offered to take his coat, and Quince let her pull it off of him. She draped it on the back of his chair, and Lela's father reached in the coat pocket, taking out a pocket-watch (a gift from his mother) and a whittling knife (from his father). Her father put the watch back in, but tucked the knife into his vest.

They settled Quince into one of the guest rooms behind the kitchen. Her parents walked her to her room, said goodnight, and then went to bed themselves. Lela waited until she thought she heard her father snore, and then she went back downstairs.

She opened Quince's door and poked her head in before she whispered his name. At first she didn't see him—the bed was still made—but she found him sitting on the floor in a corner with his knees up to his face. She went and sat by him, but had nothing to say.

He was studying his pocket-watch as it ticked loudly in his hand.

Lela could tell him what she'd seen, but didn't think it would make a difference. She could ask him what he saw, but didn't think he'd talk about it. He looked like if he moved, he'd snap in half. So she sat with him, quietly, until she said, "You should get some rest."

"If I'd been there, I'd have killed him, Lela."

Her breath caught in her throat. He wouldn't have. Quince was not a murderer like his father. He was nothing like his father. "No. You need some rest. It'll be better in the morning."

"How so?"

She stood up and offered her hand; he took it. "Because it won't be so dark." He didn't respond to this, so Lela guided him towards the bed and sat there beside him. He leaned over on her shoulder, but he drifted to her lap. She stroked his hair. His breaths evened out. She ran her hand over his shoulders, down his arms, all the way to his hips before she drew her hand back. Her pulse was fast. The room seemed tight and hot, and she felt she should leave. She shifted to stand.

Quince said, "Don't go. I can't sleep by myself."

He'd shared a bed with his little brothers. No doubt he'd grown used to their kicks and touches, their little snores. "I'm sorry. I can't. It's not right." There was so much wrong; Lela couldn't even name all that was wrong, but she couldn't add one more thing. Even though his voice was so soft, and his head fit so well in her lap; her hand felt so natural on his frame. She stood up forcing Quince to sit up. She kissed his forehead; somehow he was very cold. "Good night."

The next morning, Quince was gone early. Her father told her that Marlowe and Mr. Jefferson, who'd always been a friend to everyone in town, including the Picketts, had come by, and that Jefferson was going to be keeping Quince for a while. Marlowe had said that he hadn't the room to keep him up. He said that Quince looked too much like Reggie anyway.

Seven white caskets were in a row down the middle of the main drag, engulfed by a crush of people. Some Lela recognized as the Germantown locals, all clad in black with lowered faces, lowered voices. Others held cameras and bags of rolls of film or small notebooks and pencils they kept in their breast-pockets and pulled out—licking the pencil tip before taking notes. Writing, Lela was sure, descriptions. "Folks out in Germantown in their mourning best," "The Christmas snow has been pushed to the sides of the road, chunky and hard frozen," or "The caskets were open and..."

The caskets were open and people—locals, reporters, visitors from Reynolds or other places near and far—plodded by. They paused. They scrunched up their faces, as if looking for bullet holes.

Lela's wool coat seemed too warm in the sun. A bright Friday morning. If not for the caskets, it could have been a parade. But it wasn't. Lela wanted to take off her coat. She wanted to leave, to go home, back up to her room. Her hands shook. She and her parents were off the road, watching the crowd, the coffins. Lela's father put his hand on her shoulder. "We should pay our respects."

Lela swallowed, tried to nod. She shoved her hands into her coat pockets, even though sweat was sticky between her fingers.

There were things that were not captured in the flashing cameras or headlines: Louise's face hitting the mantle. The tossed room. Mrs. Pickett's upturned palms and curled dead fingers. Quince in the bedroom looking so haunted and lost.

Lela shook her head, closed her eyes, and clenched her shoulders to her chest. "God, I can't. I can't." Eight dead bodies in seven caskets. She had known them. She had seen them.

"It's all well, all well." Her mother rubbed her hands over Lela's arms. "Of course you don't want to see."

"Yes, yes." Her father put his hand on Lela's shoulder.

They were comforting her, trying to comfort her. But her hands still trembled. She should tell them. Then they could make her feel better. She kept her mouth closed. There were no words.

The crowd parted and Lela saw Marlowe and Quince—Marlowe had his arm in with Quince's like he was supporting him. Estelle and August, Quince's cousins, behind them. Lela had seen the cousins at school: Estelle didn't tend to company with Louise,

but August seemed to like Quince and they'd always sat beside each other. August looked up at the sky. Estelle had her face in her hand, covered with a handkerchief. She wore a cloche hat with a black bow that Lela was certain was Louise's.

Marlowe and Quince passed before the coffins. Their arms tightly interlocked, but their paces mismatched. Marlowe slow, almost dawdling, and Quince quick. Marlowe paused the longest at the coffin at the head of the line, Reggie's. He said something, though Lela was too far away to hear and could not see well enough to guess at the words formed on his lips. Quince stood still, with his face angled away from the bodies.

When they finally stepped away, Marlowe's mouth was still moving. Then, suddenly, Quince wrenched his arm free and stomped away. The uncle staggered back and when he regained his balance, he stroked his chin. Quince walked, face lowered, towards the cemetery, where the bodies would soon be heading. Marlowe and his children followed behind him at a distance.

Back at the coffins, the cemetery workers were getting ready to bear the bodies to their grave. A photographer announced one last picture as the caskets were shut. The people angled in towards the coffins, pressing close. That moment captured forever in the flash of a bulb.

Brow Cemetery could be beautiful in the spring, when the dogwoods were in bloom. Vibrant grass. Silk flowers freshly laid, unfaded by the summer light. The stones, speckled greys, browns, reds, nestled with wildflowers and bird calls. But in

winter the trees had bare branches like flayed bones, stilted in no breeze. The ground was muddy where the gravediggers had been working, where they peeled back the grass like an eyelid. Whatever grass had survived the snow and digging was brown. The snow itself had been pushed aside in high stacks, almost as tall as the Pickett headstone.

Lela could not get near the headstone. She'd heard—forgot from where: her mother? Overheard on the main drag?—that Reggie had had a fifty dollar bill in his pocket when they found him that Christmas. Marlowe had used the money to buy the caskets—pine painted white—and the headstone. Just one for all the Picketts. At the top of the stone, stamped in stark letters was Pickett. And then words, a poem or verse or something that she overhead Estelle say came from a book at the stonemason's. Below that was Reggie's name: "Reginald C. Pickett. Husband Father." Helen's name much smaller beneath. The baby's name so small, nearly unreadable. There were two shorter sections flanking the center of the stone. On the right: Louise and the two sisters. On the left: the two brothers.

Lela stayed across from it, yards away, in the cage of a willow's branches. The bodies were interred. Dirt replaced. A preacher said a few words. The folks moseyed off then, no doubt to lunches of steaming chicken and dumplings and cider, to spend time with their families. To love their families. Until only Quince remained—even Marlowe lowered his head and trudged back towards the road. Before he left, he raised his hand as if to touch Quince's shoulder, but he did not.

Quince just stood there. He seemed small before the stone.

"Lela," her father said. "We should go home."

She swallowed. She took a step forward. “A minute.”

Her mother rubbed Lela’s shoulder. “Talk to him. We’ll be at the entrance.”

Lela felt blood in her cheeks.

“What?” Her father put his hand on Lela’s other shoulder. It was heavy, though he did not grip.

“Give her some time, Brooks. All’s aright.” Smiling sadly, her mother walked around Lela and wove her arm in with her husband’s.

Lela’s father relented. He turned and said, “Only a moment.”

Lela nodded, but held her place until her parents were out of eyesight. She watched Quince’s back. His shoulders stooped forward. Then he was on his knees, grabbing, tearing at the ground. Lela ran towards him. “Quince!”

He looked up. His eyes were red, deeply lined with grey. And so pale. And thinner, like she could see the hollows of his cheeks, the ridges of his skull. His hands were full of mud from the fresh grave. “Lela. I didn’t know you were here.”

She tried to smile and swallow but her spit caught in her throat. “Course I’m here.”

He lifted a handful of muck and let it ooze through his fingers. “Everyone’s here, I reckon.” He looked back at the ground, at the mud.

“I’m here for you, Quince. Because,” she knew what he needed her to say, “I love you.” The words seemed heavier in the cemetery, surrounded by the dead who had loved and lost and were forgot. When she said it, her heart seemed to lurch, almost ache. She wasn’t sure if it had done that before. She said it again, “I love you.”

The words hung between them. Quince took a fistful of mud and scraped it over Reggie's name on the headstone. The mud only obscured half the word, so Quince took another fistful and smudged out the name entirely. He repeated the same motions for the words "Husband" and "Father." When finished, he rubbed his forehead with the back of his hand, leaving a line of dirt by his eyebrows, a few wayward drips splattered his cheek. He stood and faced her. "Thank you."

Lela reached up and wiped Quince's cheek with her sleeve. She swallowed. She could hear her pulse as she seized the sides of his face and jerked him towards her. The kiss was not like that first real one—sweaty, summer, children—nor the appropriate softness of a courtship. There was something deep, desperate in the way she gripped his face, the way his hands dug into her back. His mouth was dry and tasted like winter air. She didn't want it to end: him, her, her pulse in her ears.

Nothing was the same. Louise slammed forward, snapping her jaw, most likely her neck. Mrs. Pickett's talon fingers. Those floorboards bloated with blood. The crows probably gathered, not afraid of the far-off shot that Reggie aimed at himself.

Quince's hands in blood, in mud, in her hair.

Lela loosened her grip and slid away, but kept looking at his face. The cemetery was dim, and they stood amidst the fading light with the trees seeming to bend towards them, watchful. They could hear the people leaving, returning to their lives like nothing had changed. A smattering of laughter and a splatter of small talk, their voices rising, wordlessly, buzzing in the air.

SUCH A THING

It was the break of the lifetime, even if it meant that reporter Delancy Hobbs had to work between Christmas and the start of the new year. Delancy was young and didn't have a family anyway, so he really didn't mind much to be out of his room at a boarding house in downtown Reynolds, to miss the leftovers with lonely Mrs. Hicks, his landlady and recent widow, while she kept his mug full of bitter black coffee, and his ears brimming with stories of her son who died in the war. When the editor, Mr. Braddock, called about a real big story out of Reynolds's little neighbor, Germantown, Delancy had his coat on before he'd hung up the phone and was out the door before the old widow could ask where he was going or if he'd be home for dinner.

A few days before, on Christmas day, a man in neighboring Germantown murdered his family. Delancy's friend, Joe Orton, had covered that first story. He'd driven out to the spit of a town, even though the roads were thick with snow, and gotten the scoop. Reggie Pickett, 40, husband and father of seven, seemingly lost it Christmas morning and shot his wife, six of his children, and finally himself in the stomach. Other than the victims' names and a few key details ("the blood on the floor was so deep that you could scoop it up by the shovelful") that was all there was to the story. It was more interesting a concept than an article, but every subscriber to the *Reader* seemed to pick it up because it was so intriguing and frightful. Other state papers grabbed the story in the following days, and by the time the bodies were buried—on December 27—papers from

all over the nation were running stories of the Pickett murders, all with various snapshots and questionable facts.

When Braddock called Delancy, he said, “Hobbs, I want you to get the whole story. I know you’re a young’un, but you should be able to get the folks out there to really talk about it.”

Delancy waited until Monday, December 30 to head out there. His old Ford chugged during the nearly an hour drive. He had his window down because there had been a sudden heat snap that had melted the snow, leaving mostly mud edging the road and slicking shoe bottoms. It wasn’t really that hot, but he was sweating through his coat and shirt. He’d called Joe the day before and asked where he should start. Joe said there were a few interesting characters and that the house itself had been opened up as a sort of attraction, but that Delancy should start at Jefferson’s general store. “That’s where all them seem to plop down. Reckon they’d tell you anything there.”

The store really wasn’t much, but then again the town wasn’t much. It wasn’t more than a road curving between lines of big and small houses, some newer bungalows and some old colonials. The store was small and brick with a small porch out front. Well, small by Reynolds standards, but Delancy estimated that about twenty people could occupy that porch comfortably and that was probably a fair number for this town. Delancy parked in front of the store and made his way up the steps and onto the porch. The door opened and Delancy almost lost his balance because of the bumping of a narrow man who had his hand over his mouth. He smelled of old tobacco and spit and poverty, and Delancy tightened his tie before he opened the door and went in.

He was greeted by an older man with bushy eyebrows and graying hair. He wore an old flannel shirt and an apron. “How may I help you, stranger?” His tone suggested he was used to guests.

Delancy offered the older man his right hand. “I’m Delancy Hobbs. I work for the *Reynolds Reader*. I’m here to talk to some folks about the Pickett murders for a story.”

A man who was sitting in the corner reading an almanac sucked in a deep breath of air. “We talked to enough of those men already. Let the dead stay dead. I got nothing more to say.”

A teenage girl, who’d been in the back with an issue of *Photoplay*, came a little closer and cocked her head to the side. Delancy noticed she was very fashionable in a dotted, dropped waist dress and red pumps. Her hair was long and curled to rest on her shoulders. Her lips were very red. If she were a few years older, Delancy would’ve planned to ask her to share a drink with him, but instead Delancy just focused on the curve of her legs.

“Now, Tim,” the older man said, addressing the man with the almanac. “We knew we would have to keep expecting this.” The old man cleared his throat. “I’m Tom Jefferson. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Mr. Hobbs. We’ll try our best to help you with your story.”

Delancy took his eyes from the girl’s legs and back to Jefferson. “Thank you kindly, Mr. Jefferson. Can you direct me to some folks who may be interested in letting me sit down with them?”

Tim put the almanac back on the shelf and left the general store, letting the door close loudly behind him.

Jefferson's smile never faltered. "Well, I'd be glad to talk to you. Of course, there is Marlowe Pickett, Reggie's brother, and his family. There's Brooks Jones; his daughter was very close to the family. I'm sure Horace Brow would talk too."

"Oh yes. Daddy would be glad to talk." The teenage girl had crossed the store and now stood much closer to them. She smelled like wildflowers. She held out her hand. Her fingernails were as deep a red as her lips. "I'm Nancy Brow. I was in class with some of those kids, you know."

Delancy really wanted to ask her how old she was. He didn't. He said, "That would be very fine."

The men Jefferson had suggested were those who knew the story best. Or as best as anyone could know, considering that no one, save Reggie himself, could have really explained what happened. These men had gone out to the house that Christmas, had seen the bodies, and had already told these stories to their wives, neighbors, friends, passerby, and other reporters. But to Jefferson, Delancy seemed a pleasant enough young man who could write an article that could perhaps help make sense of what had happened. Taking all the fragments together could create a whole that would be clear. Then everyone could understand and stop whispering.

The murders had torn up all their nerves and stuck them in the heart. Or, Jefferson knew, it had done that to all the good folks. He'd seen them at the funeral. They were in shock. They were scared. They were fascinated. They were fascinated by

a man who could do something like that. Some living breathing man just like them who could shoot his own infant daughter in her crib. That's why the *Reader* wanted the article too, because people wanted to understand how something like this could happen.

Others, those who kept clippings of gangster stories and stills of mobsters sprawled shot in city streets, were interested because of the spectacle. There were plenty of those too.

Everyone, though, wanted a piece of it, because they felt it had taken some piece of them just from being so close, and they had all known the man.

"Mr. Jefferson, I would like to talk to you first, if I may. Since I'm here," Delancy said.

Jefferson was busy with the store. Because of the murders and all the other reporters—most of them were gone by now, thank God—the general store had had an influx of business and some of the supplies were running short. He'd put in a few orders, but none of them had arrived yet, though they were due at any time. It made his patience run short, shorter still because he was also keeping up Quince Pickett, who mostly kept to himself up in a bedroom, while Mrs. Jefferson kept an eye on him; they weren't sure how well Quince was coping or mourning, and neither husband nor wife was sure what exactly to do with the boy but to try to keep him comfortable. Despite everything, Jefferson couldn't hardly bring himself to keep quiet to a bright-eyed young man like Delancy Hobbs. He could work and talk; he had to do that all the time. "That'll be fine, as long as you don't mind me working through it."

“No, no. Not at all.” Delancy pulled out a pad of paper and his pencil. He tested the tip’s sharpness on his finger before writing: Tom Jefferson, owner of the general store. An older man. “How long have you lived in Germantown, Mr. Jefferson?”

Nancy put the magazine up on the counter, and Jefferson began to check her out. “I’ve lived here all my life. Right about fifty-eight years. My papa opened this store years ago and me and my sisters all worked here. I got it after he passed. My living sister is up near Raleigh now; my other sister passed back in the summer.”

Delancy kept writing, but looked up to watch the sway of Nancy’s hips as she left the store. If she was in school with some of the Pickett kids, that meant she was under eighteen years old, but she walked like a much older woman. She was shaped like a much older woman. But he wasn’t there to write about pretty legs and hair and pouty lips; he was there to write about a murder. That was more interesting than a pretty girl, anyways. “How well did you know Reggie Pickett?”

“Well enough. They’d lived here ten years last summer. Reggie was always an odd fellow—”

“Odd how?” Delancy paused in his writing.

“You know, just different. He told me he hadn’t known his mother too well and his father was a cruel man. Everyone is a little different according to how they are raised. Reggie tried to be neighborly, but mostly kept to himself. There was a little competition between farmers, you know how that is.”

“Ah.” Delancy scribbled down: neighbors thought Reggie odd before the murders.

Jefferson didn't tell Delancy about the last time he saw Reggie. It had been two days fore Christmas. Reggie had come in for bullets. He had placed three boxes of shotgun shells on the counter and then fumbled in his pockets for some bills. He'd had a good harvest; everybody else in the county had been hit by the wilt, but Reggie's crops had somehow been spared. It was like Reggie wasn't sure how to carry all that money. Jefferson counted the bills as Reggie put them on the counter. "There are a lot of bullets here, Reggie."

Reggie shrugged. "Haven't bought none in a long time. Money's been tight till recently."

"Oh yes." Jefferson opened the cash drawer and gathered up some coins. He handed those to Reggie. "What are you planning on hunting?"

"Planning on taking care of the family." Reggie had pocketed the coins and bowed his head as a thanks before leaving the store. He had always had a slow and deliberate walk, but it had grown slower after an accident out in one of his tobacco sheds.

At that time, Jefferson had figured that Reggie meant the bullets were for hunting rabbits or wild turkeys for Christmas supper. Later, Jefferson had had to take aspirins after he realized what those bullets had been used for; especially as he'd given Reggie a discount since he'd bought so many.

A few older women came into the store. They walked close and whispered, fearfully. That's how everyone had seemed after the murders, like they were scared of something but they weren't sure what yet. The women were regulars (really, Jefferson mostly dealt with regulars, all his neighbors) and widows and always wanted the latest

magazines and bags of hard candies. Jefferson leaned over the counter, close to Delancy, and said, "I've got to take care of these ladies. You should go talk to some other folks. Come back and eat supper with me and the wife, you hear?"

Delancy nodded. "Who should I go to first?" Though the town was small, Delancy wasn't sure where to go; he was especially unclear about the location of Nancy's house.

A young woman came into the store with a large box. "I met the post out there, Uncle. I think this is one of your orders." The woman was a little shorter than average with straight brown hair pulled into a tight bun at the back of her head. She put the box down on the counter and then seemed to notice the stranger. "Who's this?"

"I'm Delancy Hobbs." Delancy held out his hand and the young woman took it. Her grip was strong. "I'm a reporter for the *Reader*."

"You're here about the Picketts," the girl said.

"Mr. Hobbs, this is my niece, Sarah Tesh. She's down visiting from college. I suppose she didn't think her recess would be this eventful."

Delancy wrote down: Sarah Tesh, Jefferson's niece. Seems like a nice young woman. "How long have you lived in Germantown, Miss Tesh?"

"All my days. I don't got much to tell you, Mr. Hobbs. I hadn't gotten in town at Christmas. My train had been delayed."

Jefferson strained to keep an eye on the women still gossiping in the corner of the store and picking through a bin of yarn and the other on Sarah and the reporter. He had

an idea. “Sarah, why don’t you take Mr. Hobbs around town and help him find folks to talk to. I think Horace Brow would be a good choice. Brooks Jones too.”

“I’ll handle it, Uncle.” Sarah took a candy cane from a jar on the counter, unwrapped it, and popped it into her mouth. “I’ll show Mr. Hobbs around and have him back in time for supper.”

They left the store, and Delancy was struck by how many people were milling about. It was a little after noon and folks seemed to be returning to their work either by car or out to their fields to tend their animals and check their soil and think of spring planting. Delancy had heard from Joe that the town had been full up of all types of out-of-towners for the funeral and for the spectacle of it all. Now, most everybody seemed to belong and were as normal as if nothing had happened.

Sarah led Delancy down from the porch and across a brief plot of browning grass before taking him back up on another porch. It belonged to a large, white house. There was some metal furniture on the porch, heavy and new. There was a wreath on the door. From the front window, Delancy could see a young woman with shapely legs—Nancy—and an older, balding man who was reading the *Reynolds Reader* with his specs way down on his nose. Sarah knocked beside the wreath. “This in the Brow’s house. It’s a big, nice place.”

Delancy nodded. “They must be quite wealthy.”

“Yeah. Mr. Brow is an undertaker. He works up in Reynolds and has an office in Bramble Cove, and he serves three or four other counties. I think there has always been

cemetery men in that family.” Sarah took the candy from her mouth and tossed it into the bushes beside the porch. She winked. “Don’t tell nobody.”

Delancy smiled back. Sarah had a splash of freckles across her face that were nearly hidden by a fresh blush. “Your secret is safe with me.”

The balding man opened the door. “Can I help you?”

“Hey, Mr. Brow.” Sarah held out her hand, and Brow took it, tentatively, looking at Delancy and not Sarah. “This here is Mr. Hobbs. He’s from the *Reader* and is doing a story on the Picketts. Figured you’d be a good one for him to hear from.”

Mr. Brow removed his hand from Sarah’s and offered it to the reporter. “I’m Horace Brow. It’s a pleasure, Mr. Hobbs.”

Once he got his hand back, Delancy wrote: Horace Brow. Undertaker. “I’ll only ask a moment of your time, sir.”

“No worries. I took off from the office today, so I have time aplenty.” He guided them into the house. Nancy sat up straighter in her chair. “This is my daughter, Nancy.”

Delancy nodded towards Nancy. “It’s a pleasure again, Miss Brow.” He noticed that she’d changed into a tea dress, all tight in the bodice, not unlike a look he’d seen on a pretty girl on a print that hung in his editor’s office. “I had the delight of meeting this young thing at the general store.”

Sarah took a seat near Nancy. She did not wear as much make up as the younger girl. Her face was set hard.

Delancy flipped to a clean page in his notebook. “You’re the undertaker, Mr. Brow. You worked on these bodies?”

“Oh yes. I had them brought up to an office I keep in Bramble Cove. It was a messy business really. A little much for the ladies in our presence.” Sometimes, late at night, even though his wife was breathing soundly beside him, Horace thought he was lying on one of those metal tables in his offices, the sutures from an autopsy tight across his chest and the embalming liquid tightening his veins. It had been hard to go to work after he’d done the Picketts. He’d known those people.

“You should show him the photographs, Papa.” Nancy crossed her legs over her knee, very ladylike.

Horace regretted the photographs. No doubt had the medical examiner taken careful account of everything about those people. But, caught in the moment, Horace had taken pictures of each body as it was on his table, waiting for its final preparation. He kept them in a manila folder in his study. He’d shown his wife one night afterwards, all in a sweat. She’d fainted. He realized that Nancy had come into the room at some point and had looked. He turned and saw her looking at the black-and-whites with huge eyes and an open mouth. He wasn’t sure how she felt about them, how they affected her. He wondered how this young reporter would regard the grimness of them. “Give me a moment and I will fetch them.”

Most people thought that undertakers were only in it for the money, and the largeness of the Brow’s house seemed to testify to this. Delancy took a note of it. But Horace seemed a hollow man, like looking on death for years had impacted him. Nancy, on the other hand, was wagging her foot, making her shapely legs less attractive.

Brow came back with the folder and sat on the sofa beside Delancy. His hands trembled a little as he flipped it open. He had copies of all the death certificates. “Now, I keep this sort of information on file about all the folks I work on. The pictures are special though.”

Delancy flipped through the death certificates. Terms like: shot through the lung, homicide, caught his eyes. Also how the post mortem examiner’s handwriting deteriorated, how he started to use abbreviations and left some places on the certificate blank because he was no doubt tired of writing Germantown and Tulip County and North Carolina. At the first photograph, Delancy caught his breath and almost dropped the folder. He’d not seen many bodies before; both his parents were still living down in South Carolina and he skipped every funeral he’d been invited to. The body was that of a middle-aged man, it had to be Reggie. He was covered by a long white sheet from his armpits to his ankles; the middle of the sheet, around his stomach, was dark. There were autopsy sutures visible near his collarbone. Delancy looked at the photograph for a long time. There was a pump beside the table and tubes that hung loosely beside it. There was a single tag on Reggie’s big toe. Delancy felt something climbing up his throat. He looked away. This was a good story; the undertaker was a good source. Delancy swallowed hard. “You’ll have to tell me about the process, Mr. Brow. And how did it feel to do this to people you knew?”

“Well,” Mr. Brow began. He noticed Delancy flip to the next photograph, the wife, Helen. No matter how hard he’d tried, he couldn’t get Helen to look quite right in her casket. Delancy went to the next: the oldest daughter, Louise. Horace’s small

Bramble Cove office was not equipped for so many bodies at once and only had two full blankets, so he'd had to reuse the blankets from the parents. He'd pulled the sheet low off of Louise's shoulders, so her neck was more visible. It was bruised. He wondered if Reggie had strangled her. At the scene that Christmas, most of the other men who'd come seemed to think that when Louise had been shot, she'd fallen into the mantle and snapped her neck and that was the discoloration. Under that blanket, Horace knew that her sutures were stark against her white body until they ended abruptly where the shotgun shell had torn apart her stomach. Horace wondered why they'd even done the autopsy: the cause of death was obvious. Delancy spent the longest time on that photograph, as if he were contemplating the tragedy that seemed most obvious in the stains on the blanket that was draped over a teenage girl.

Delancy closed the folder. He wanted to close his eyes and lose the image of the Pickett girl forever. He tried to look back at Nancy's legs, but they seemed all too similar to Louise Pickett's stiff ones. The way Nancy's pump clung to her big toe as she shook her legs reminiscent of the piece of paper tied to the other girl's toe. "Well, Mr. Brow? What were you about to say?"

He tried to be very scientific. "They came to me after post mortem examinations, so they didn't have any effects. I had to get Marlowe—that's Reggie's brother—and Quincy—Reggie's living son—to bring over clothes to bury them in. Louise was a specific challenge because the dress Marlowe brought had a very low neck and, as you could tell, her neck was not in the best shape. I used half my powder on her neck, you see. I thought she looked very well. Marlowe said she did, at least." He realized he

wasn't being scientific at all; he was bumbling and the reporter was taking notes. He took a breath and tried again. "I started with the baby."

Sarah Tesh shifted violently to the side and turned her head.

Horace felt his face warm. "Well, I'm sure you know the ins and outs of embalming. I drain fluids and put in fluids. Then I washed them all. It was very trying, you know, especially with the infant. She was so small. They were all in such rough shape too. It was better when I got their clothes on so I didn't have to see those stomachs. I had Marlowe come in very early to look at them to make sure they were right." He'd wanted them to be very right; so many others were going to look at them. He still thought that they all looked very pale and very dead. Marlowe had said, clapping him on the back, that they all just looked like they were sleeping. Horace realized that Delancy was not writing anymore and was just looking at him. He wasn't sure what to say. "I'm sorry, that probably wasn't useful."

"Oh, no. This is an interest piece so the more emotion the better." Delancy still felt queasy. "This Quincy, the son, what did he say?"

"Oh, he never came with his uncle. They had a bit of a falling out; I'm uncertain why, really. I don't know if that boy even cared. I saw him at the house with the bodies and he didn't cry a lick. He was all calm and solid, like Reggie always was whenever I saw him. I didn't like the feel I got from that boy, so it was fine he didn't come."

Delancy wanted to find this Quincy Pickett and talk to him. Anything to get out of the living room—which had at first seemed so roomy—that had grown so tight as to fit

him like a straitjacket. He flipped his notebook closed and thought he heard an audible sigh of relief from Sarah. He stood up.

“Daddy, tell Mr. Hobbs about Reggie’s head,” Nancy said. “Wasn’t that fascinating?”

“Oh.” Horace scratched the back of his head. “Reggie’s head had been cut open and screwed back together. I never got to ask the post mortem folks, but I think they’d cut out his brain.”

Delancy sat back down. “Why would they do that?”

“To study it, of course. To see what could’ve made him do such a thing.” Horace really wished he had been able to ask, just to know what exactly had happened to Reggie’s body during that examination what they had found. It fascinated and disgusted him how someone could do what Reggie had done. When Horace was massaging Reggie’s arms to make sure that all the liquids got through him as they should, he’d felt like any other man underneath his hands.

Quickly, Delancy rose again. Sarah joined him. “Thank you for your time, Mr. Brow. You were very helpful.”

There was a knock at the door; Delancy just couldn’t escape. The walls seemed as hot and close to him as the sides of an oven.

“Pardon me.” Horace went to open the door.

A small, narrow man stepped in. Delancy recognized him, vaguely, as the man who had pushed past him when he first tried to enter the general store. The man had dark hair that was unkempt and had thick stubble about his cheeks. He handed Horace an

envelope. “Here’s the last payment for your services, Horace. Everything was real nice, real nice.”

Horace opened the envelope and flipped through the bills. He was supposed to be paid twenty-five dollars and he was. He tucked the envelope into his breast-pocket.

“You’re welcome, Marlowe. It gives me pleasure to know that I made your hard time a little easier.” He gestured towards Delancy. “Marlowe, you should meet this man: Mr. Hobbs. He’s a reporter from the *Reader* doing a special story on your brother.”

“Marlowe Pickett.” The slip of a man held out his hand and shook Delancy’s limply. “I reckon you want to come out to the house?”

Delancy felt that sickness seep back into his stomach, but also a bite of excitement. He did want to see the house. Joe Orton had for his story and said it was packed that Sunday with locals, out-of-towners, and reporters from all over. To get to see the house with only Marlowe Pickett seemed like a break too good to be true. “I most certainly would, Mr. Pickett.”

“All righty. I have to head back over there anyways for some repairs after the grand opening Sunday.”

“You are going to open the house up again this coming Sunday?” Mr. Brow asked.

“Reckon so. I made quite a bit yesterday. This money will do my family good. Not like the house is really helping Reggie much nowadays.” Marlowe put his hands into his pockets and brought them back out with a cigarette and a match. He struck the match on the doorframe and lit his cigarette. He took a drag and puffed it back into the room. It

swirled against the ceiling and made everything seem closer and tighter. “You ready, Mr. Hobbs? I can give you a ride out there.”

“Yes.” Delancy took out his notebook and scribbled: Marlowe Pickett, the brother. Made a killing on selling visits to the murder house and plans to continue. He almost laughed at his own pun, but didn’t because the situation seemed too serious for that. He remembered Sarah. “You don’t have to come, Miss Tesh. I’m sure I can find my way back.”

“I told my uncle I’d keep up with you. And I don’t want to be stuck stocking shelves, so I’ll go on.”

The car drive was short and quiet. Marlowe didn’t seem to have much to say. He was on his fourth cigarette by the time they pulled down the Pickett’s driveway, and it had only been a five minute drive. The cigarettes were cheap, and Marlowe Pickett was nervous.

Delancy pulled out his notebook to take notes about the house, but there was nothing too extraordinary outside. Dead grass and an old, slanted homeplace. There was a broad-chested man on the porch, sweeping. He raised his hand to them. “Hey Pa. Who’s that man?”

“August, this is Mr. Hobbs from the *Reader*. He’s doing a story on your uncle. Mr. Hobbs, this is my son, August. He’s helping me clean up. I have a daughter too, but this is all too much for her. You know, ladies are so delicate.” He seemed to notice Sarah. “You want to stay out on the porch and sweep for August while we show Mr. Hobbs the house?”

Sarah shrugged and took the broom from August. Sweeping was better than seeing the remnants of a murder scene.

Marlowe unlocked the door and the three men went in. If the outside of the house was uninteresting, the interior made up for it. The floor was literally splashed with red that had dried and been soaked up by the floorboards. The bed in the corner was unmade. There was a bloody crib, an upset table, and a covered cake on the kitchen counter. “Louise had baked that fresh that morning. We left it out on Sunday and folks started picking off the dried cranberries. There weren’t many to start with; she ran out and that’s why Quince wasn’t here to be shot. I’m covering the cake with glass and nailing it to the counter. There had been a loaf of raw bread in the woodstove, but someone took that.” Marlowe lit another cigarette.

The house was cold. The mantle seemed a blackened mouth. Above it was a portrait and Delancy recognized the living forms of the dead things he’d seen in Brow’s photos. Reggie’s face was all twisted in a smirk. Delancy asked, “How long have you lived in Germantown, Marlowe?”

“About two, three years longer than Reggie. It’s a nice place. Good folks. They’ve supported us well.”

“You and your brother were close?” Delancy moved towards the mantle. The blood was thick there. He remembered the blood stain over Louise Pickett’s stomach and the blackness of her neck. She’d died where he stood.

“As close as men should be.” Marlowe offered a cigarette to August. The son refused.

“Why do you think your brother did it?” Delancy wasn’t really expecting an answer, but he decided to try.

“I reckon only Reggie and God knows. He wasn’t hit by the wilt so he had plenty of money. He had a good family. A good, big family.”

“What would you say to folks who think it’s cruel you opened up that house?”

Marlowe’s response was fast. “I’d tell them to walk in my shoes.” He put his hand on the mantle and looked up at his brother in the portrait. “My brother is dead. He ain’t using this place. I needed money for their expenses. I need money for my family. Family is all you really got in this world, you know.”

Delancy wrote it down verbatim. He couldn’t settle on a feeling towards Marlowe. In some ways, he was disgusting. In other ways, practical and in mourning. What was worse: the house being used as it was or those photos Mr. Brow had taken? Delancy couldn’t be sure. “What about Reggie’s son?” He’d forgotten the name but didn’t want to look back through his notebook.

“Lord, Quince,” August said. He leaned against the counter. “He’s all lost. He’s so pale. I fear he’ll get sick.” August’s voice was lighter than Delancy had imagined given the size of his frame.

“He didn’t want to stay with us, and I ain’t going to force him. He’s old enough to make his own decisions. I don’t know how he’s holding up, but he seemed very stiff at the funeral. I don’t think that boy has cried once. My brother was the same way. A hard man. I fear for the future of that boy.”

“Aw, Pa,” August said.

“You think your brother was crazy and that it’s passed down to his son?”

Delancy wrote: Quince Pickett?

“Wouldn’t surprise me none. Reggie was an odd kid. An odd man. Quince was always a little strange too.”

“Where can I find Quince?”

“He’s staying out with the Jeffersons cause they have the room and patience to deal with him. Or he’s out at his girlfriend’s house. Miss Lela Jones. She’s a haughty little miss. But her daddy came out to the house on Christmas, so he might be someone to talk to for your story.” Marlowe dropped his cigarette on the floor and ground it in. The room smelled of smoke.

Actually, the whole room smelled stale, Delancy was just now noticing. The air had been stagnant for too long, absent of life for too long. He could imagine that it would be cozy with those people in that portrait moving about carrying on all normal. The house would smell of bread and cake and sound like children’s voices talking all at once so they’d blend into one. Delancy was ready to get out. “Where can I find Mr. Jones?”

“He lives down from the store on the main drag. I’m sure Sarah Tesh can show you there.” Marlowe pulled out a tin of snuff, and Delancy wondered just how much tobacco the man carried. Marlowe’s hands were so unsteady he almost couldn’t get the stuff in his mouth. “When will this article run, Mr. Hobbs? Afore Sunday?”

“My editor wasn’t certain. It may run Saturday or earlier.”

“Good. That’ll draw a crowd.” Marlowe spat into the fireplace. He leaned into the mantle. He leaned so heavily, like he would fall if not for the stones behind him.

Delancy found Sarah sitting by a wood pile on the porch, the broom propped in a corner beside her. “You done in there, Mr. Hobbs?”

“Yeah. I got what I needed, I think.” He wasn’t sure how to write about Marlowe Pickett. He was sure the ideas would come when he sat down later with his notebook and his typewriter. “Can you take me to Mr. Jones’s house?”

“I can. It’s a bit of a walk.”

The walk was around ten minutes. On the way, Sarah was very quiet. Like him, she was an outsider to all of this, even though she had grown up in Germantown. Delancy didn’t like the quiet. It gave him time to wander back to those photos. “Did you know any Picketts?”

“I was in class with Louise and Quince for a bit. I’m a few years older than she was.”

“Where do you live, Miss Tesh? When you aren’t at college?”

“With my uncle. My mom died. She got real sick back last winter and she struggled but finally died last summer. She really wanted me to go to college. She was so proud.”

“I’m sorry, Miss Tesh.”

“Really, call me Sarah.” Sarah elbowed him. “I know that one normal death probably isn’t of much interest to someone like you. But her funeral was the last time I saw Reggie Pickett. He came. He was very kind to me. He said that everyone has to die and that we must understand that. I’ve been thinking about that a lot. I wonder if Reggie knew then what he was going to do later.” Sarah laughed a little. Her pace had slowed.

The path was widening as they neared their turn back onto the main drag. “This murder is a hard thing to talk about, but it needs to be talked about, so people can understand. Everyone acts towards it differently, but I think we are all mourning. Even those of us who didn’t know them very well, or at all. You feel that deep sadness now, too, don’t you, Mr. Hobbs?”

Delancy felt like he was at the bottom of a very deep lake and the water was too thick to swim in. “I do, Sarah. I really do.”

The Jones’s lived in a big house that didn’t seem to fit with the others on the main drag. They had a porch swing and clean, wicker furniture. Sarah knocked. A young woman opened the door. “How may I help you?”

Delancy thought the girl could be very pretty. Her face was very round until her chin which was sharp. It made her look intelligent and cruel. Her hair was fashionable, short and curled and blond, and she wore a tea dress similar to Nancy’s except it was newer and fit her even better. Delancy could tell though, by the style of her makeup, that she was probably a few years younger than even Nancy. He shifted and reminded his eyes that this girl was little more than a child.

“Hey Lela. It’s Sarah Tesh. You remember.” Sarah and Lela had only been in the same class for a few months. Lela was so fresh to Germantown.

“Oh, I do. What do you need, Sarah? Is Quince all right?”

Delancy wrote: Lela Jones: the girlfriend.

“He was fine last time I saw him. This is Mr. Hobbs. He’s doing an article for the *Reader*. He wants to talk to your father.”

Lela stepped inside and gestured them in. She asked them to make themselves comfortable in a spacious sitting room. Delancy positioned himself in front of a bay window so that, no matter what, he wouldn't feel suffocated. A dog sauntered into the room shortly after Lela left to fetch her father. The dog put his head in Delancy's lap and wanted to be scratched behind the ears. For the first time that day, Sarah sat beside him. She rubbed the dog's back.

Mr. Jones came into the room. He was a tall man with a more severe face than his daughter. He sat in an armchair across from them. "Mr. Hobbs, is it? What do you want to ask?"

Delancy wrote: Mr. Jones. "How well did you know the Picketts?"

"Well enough. They were our neighbors. Lela knew them very well. She spent most of her summer afternoons out there with Louise. She began dating Quince last summer as well. She's a good girl, and he seems a fine enough young man. I hate this had to happen to him. Lela never really spoke much of Reggie, but she liked the rest of the family fine."

"How did you feel about Reggie?"

Truth was, Reggie had always given Brooks Jones pause. He could never put his finger on it, but it was probably that smirk. Other than that, Brooks and Reggie hadn't known each other much, and Lela never spoke of him. He thought that Reggie was rarely out at the house when Lela visited. "He was a man. I didn't know him much, really."

"I've heard you went out to the house that Christmas with some others to see if anything could be done. What do you remember about that?"

“Not much, really. I remember that August Pickett came to my house and told me something had happened to his uncle and his family. I followed. I’m sure you saw the pictures and stories that ran in your paper. The room was all blood and bodies. It was the most ghastly thing I’d ever seen; I pray it stays the worst thing I’ve ever seen.”

Brooks did not mention all that actually happened. How August had come to the door that Christmas crying for help. Brooks wasn’t sure what help could be given to dead folks, but he’d gone anyway. He prayed so hard that Louise and Quince were alive. He didn’t want to tell his daughter that two people she cared for were dead. She had no other friends in Germantown. Judging by the way Lela spoke of Quince—all light and happy—he reckoned that she really did like him quite a bit. She might even love him. He couldn’t stand to think that he would find Quince murdered and have to tell Lela. Brooks had stopped August on the porch before he left. “And Quince?”

“Quince isn’t at the house.” August shook his head. “I’m going to the general store to see if he’s there.”

Brooks had gone on out to the house. Men were retching outside. Mr. Brow, who should’ve been so used to death, had his face buried in his handkerchief, no doubt smelling herbs he’d rubbed there to keep him from the smells of his profession. Brooks went in the house. He saw Louise first; she was directly across from the door. She was on her stomach and her blood was all on the floor. Mr. Brow said, “Look at her neck, all skewed like that. I wonder if Reggie broke it.”

“If he’d strangled her, why would he shoot her? She fell into the mantle when she was shot is all.” Brooks was surprised by how his voice was so similar to a hiss. He was

surprised that he was almost hot with anger. He was mad at Reggie for what he'd done. He stepped around Louise to see her face. She was staring out to the side. Her mouth was opened and full of blood; she was missing teeth from the mantle blow, surely. She was only a year older than Lela; how could a man do that to his own daughter?

Quince got there in Jefferson's car and was in the house before anyone could stop him. He was on his knees by his sister. He shook her until his hands were bloodied, telling her to get up. He wasn't crying. But if anyone thought that Quince Pickett wasn't mourning, they were as crazy as Reggie had to be. They should see the boy now. He walked like in a dream. His eyes were as empty as he dead sister's. At his first chance, Brooks had taken Quince's whittling knife from him so it wouldn't look too good one day and make Quince wonder how it would feel to draw it across his neck.

"How's your daughter holding up?"

"Hard to say. I'm sure she's fine. It's hard for her. She goes out to see Quince every day. I think she's heading out soon."

Lela was actually at the front door. She'd been so quiet that Delancy hadn't even noticed. She dropped her hand from the knob. "It's going to be a short visit, Father. I just need to see him."

Brooks thought it brought Lela comfort every day to just see that Quince was still living. He wasn't sure if they ever talked or if sometimes Lela just passed through to see him.

Delancy couldn't miss this opportunity. "May I come with you?"

“No,” Lela said. “You don’t need to see him. He’s nothing to say to you.” Lela opened the door. “I’ll be back in less than an hour, Dad.”

“Be careful.” Brooks turned back to his company. He wondered if he should apologize for his daughter, but he didn’t. “That’s really all I know, Mr. Hobbs. I wish you luck with your article.” This young reporter wouldn’t be the first to benefit from the murders. It was a strange thing—everyone seemed scared and sad and yet they kept on talking about it.

Delancy took supper—salt ham and biscuits and green beans—with the Jeffersons and Sarah Tesh. They were all very quiet. Finally, Mrs. Jefferson asked, “Did you get what you need for your article, Mr. Hobbs?”

“I believe so, ma’am.” Truth was, Delancy wasn’t so sure. He’d have to look back over his notes when he got back to the boarding house. He wished the ham wasn’t so pink; it reminded him too much of human flesh.

“Helen was a kind woman. Very quiet and kept to herself, but she’d help anyone who needed it. Last summer she had the loveliest garden plot. She gave me these green beans, you know.”

Delancy swallowed the dead woman’s beans hard and didn’t eat anymore. He remembered the way her face had looked so unnatural in Brow’s photograph. He remembered her hands on top of the blanket. His skin felt like ants were on him.

“She worked hard to keep her children clean and in school though they had so little up until this last harvest. It’s such a shame. Bless her little heart. And those children.”

There was some noise upstairs. Delancy had been told that Quince was up there, alone after Lela’s visit. Sometimes he did take meals with the family, but sometimes he stayed up there. Delancy figured that Lela had told Quince about him and that’s why there was such a noticeable absence. Delancy took a sip of tea and let the sweetness slosh about in his mouth until he swallowed. “Yes, bless them.”

Sarah smiled at him. In the dimness of the room, Delancy thought she may have been the most beautiful thing he’d seen all day. “You’ll do good, Mr. Hobbs.”

After dinner, Mr. Jefferson took him out on the porch for a quick whisky. “It’s a hard thing to write about.”

Delancy nodded, glad for the warmth of the alcohol. “I’ll try my best to make it good. It’ll suit this place. It’ll serve this story.”

Mr. Jefferson finished his drink. “That’s all I ask. I’m sure that’s all any of us want. Some type of closure.”

“Closure,” Delancy repeated. He threw his drink back.

No words came at the typewriter. Delancy tore the pages from his notebook and scattered them about the room. There were names and a few details: Jefferson, Sarah, Mr. Brow and Nancy’s shapely legs. Those photographs. Blood. Lela Jones and her father. The murder house. Marlowe, a murderer’s brother. Quince, all those snippets

about Quince; the murderer's son who Delancy hadn't even seen. Or maybe he had. He'd seen a figure at an upstairs window at Jefferson's house watching him as he left.

Just details, nothing solid about how a man could do such a thing to his family. That's what everyone had really been talking about. They'd been trying to find meaning in their own ways. But they wouldn't be able to. Delancy couldn't write it because there was nothing to write. The story was too complicated. Humans weren't to be understood.

He decided to call Braddock in the morning and ask for a new assignment. He would say that nothing in Germantown panned out, and the people weren't easy to talk to. Some jabbered and some were tight-lipped. That wasn't really lying. He turned off his desk lamp and settled into bed.

When he slept, he dreamed he was on Brow's table, the machine and pump and wires already plugged into his neck. A shadow stood at his head. Nancy's voice came from somewhere: "Cut out his brain. Look at all the stuff in there. Try to make sense of it. Such a thing to understand."

THE MURDERER'S SON

It was May, and everything was alive. From his bedroom window, Quince could see birds busy at nests, darting into the branches of blooming trees. In this sun-drenched world, what happened two years ago seemed tucked far behind him, and his future seemed aright and ahead.

For the first time, he was about to leave Germantown. He'd been there for twelve years, since he'd moved there with his family when he was a child. This would not be like the jaunts for tobacco markets or that November when Reggie, his father, dragged them all to a photographer in Reynolds to have a portrait made. This was leaving and living somewhere else; not far away, but he would still be gone.

Quince had never really given his future much thought, and he doubted that most young folks really did. Except those like his girlfriend. His future had seemed very important to Lela. She'd stuck close to him during the past two years—these hard two years—and, when they were about to finish up at Germantown school, she'd prodded him to apply to college, like she was. “You're clever,” she said. She helped him fill out the applications, ensuring he spelled every word correct. He'd been accepted with a scholarship. The letter said it was not only because of his academics, but also because of his “unique situation.” In other words, it was because he was an orphan. It had stung him, though he didn't tell Lela that. He let her be happy for him. How could it be fair, he asked himself, for his siblings to be dead and buried in the cold ground while he

flourished like a sapling left in light and unharried by undergrowth? Like his brothers and sisters had been weeds. His father had plucked them out.

So, he lived with Lela the summer before college—she'd convinced her father to let him stay on and balance the books of his farm equipment business. Over time, the small bed in the guest room seemed not so hard, and he was finally used to the sounds of Mrs. Jones starting breakfast (his headboard was on the other side of the stove in the kitchen). The new glasses he'd gotten really did help him see better though he wasn't sure he'd ever be used to their slipping on his nose. He was almost accustomed to seeing the family throughout the day, even Lela. No more simple visits; he saw her yawn over oatmeal in the mornings, read books in the afternoon while he poured over numbers, and even in her robe as the night grew thick with the laments of cicadas.

In this house, he couldn't settle. Not that he had settled much during the past two years. Right after the murders, he'd boarded with the Jeffersons, and they kept him busy with their general store, stocking shelves and sweeping dirt that folks just kept dragging in. He kept to himself, except to see Lela. The Germantown folks seemed to give him a wide berth, like they weren't quite sure what to make of him. They quite didn't know how to behave towards the murderer's son.

At Lela's house, he had leisure time. He decided to try whittling again right after he'd been accepted to college, back in March. He'd avoided the hobby until then because the knife had been given to him by his father. The knife was old and scarred and remembered too much. When he'd taken up whittling again, he liked the way the knife felt in his hand, kept him busy and focused on his strokes. He liked even more how it felt

to hit his knuckles with the blade. He'd done it on accident countless times as boy; his mother had scolded him that he would have scars. She had been right in so many ways.

When he took the hobby back up, he'd cut himself while working on the point of a rabbit's ear, slicing up the side of his right index finger. He hadn't seen much blood since the puddles on the floor of his house. When he was younger, the bleeding always gave him pause, though it never hurt much; it was strange to see it oozing from him. It seemed unnatural, a body spilling blood. But when he'd cut his finger working on the rabbit ear, there had been no pain and little blood, and the blood he did see was slow and bright and, though he couldn't explain it, made him feel light. He couldn't name the feeling. Whenever he whittled from then on, he'd make one or two arrant strokes, splitting his knuckles afresh or the sides of his fingers. It was never enough to give Lela's parents pause, though Lela had noticed and told him he should be careful, he'd grown clumsy. Her face had betrayed her worry. Quince tried to make the cuts smaller but deeper after that.

Then, that May, the day he finished at Germantown school, Quince got his knife out while he was alone in his room at night. It had to be near midnight—he never slept much anyway—because everyone else in the house had long since retired, and he thought he could hear Lela's father snore every few breaths. The ticks of his pocket-watch were very noticeable in the quiet.

He looked at his hands. The flesh tight over his knuckles was ridged from all those times he'd cut himself before; whether on purpose or not, the damage on his skin all looked the same. He carefully, gently dragged the blade (barely pressure) across the

pad of his forefinger, splitting his fingerprint in half. Not much pain—his hands were cold—and he wondered if he were to carefully flay each fingerprint, peel them off like postage stamps, would he somehow cease to be Quince Pickett, the orphan? The murderer’s son? If he cut deeper to see the sinews—

His right hand bloodied, he switched his knife to it to begin working on his left. He wasn’t as good with his right hand, and the hilt was slick. He didn’t stop until each finger was split open. He still didn’t feel anything. Quince dragged his knife across the base of his hand, right at his wrist. It bled badly and hurt. His breath caught in his throat. His palm filled with blood, a fistful of blood.

It wouldn’t stop. Quince tried to cover it with his other hand—he dropped his knife somewhere—but there was just as much blood there, so it felt worse. He got up and grabbed an old shirt and held it tight. The light feeling was back, but he also felt sick; he didn’t know what to do. The blood pooled quickly on the shirt, blossoming there like a gunshot wound. He kept the shirt and moved to the far corner of the room and sat. It would be hard to see him there. It was very important that no one saw him like that. “Stop, stop, please.” He kept his voice low. The light feeling had shifted into lightheadedness. The shirt was heavy from the blood. It looked like something that belonged to a murder. It reminded him of all those things he’d tried to forget—those bodies—

He could cease being Quince Pickett. He could die in the corner of that room. He couldn’t though. Lela could find him in the morning. She’d knock on the door and call him for breakfast, and then she’d come in when she had no answer. She would make

some sort of joke about him being a sleepyhead. And then, she'd find him, bled out in the corner, the shirt beside him and his hands stiff with blood. She would scream, and she'd never forget that sight. She'd never shake it, like how he could never shake it. He couldn't do that to her. He smashed the shirt into his wrist and willed it to stop. He closed his eyes and prayed for it to stop. He couldn't remember what he'd done with the knife afterwards; it could be getting his blood all over the floorboards.

The bleeding finally did stop. Quince went to the washroom and dunked his hands in the basin. When he finished, he found some gauze and messily bound his wrist. It was hard to do with his numb fingertips. He tidied himself as best he could. He found an old laundry bag in the cabinet and put his shirt into it. When he got back to the room, he pushed the bag under the bed as far as he could reach. He found the knife under there—it must have skidded across the floor when he dropped it—and he took it to the basin and washed it before he went back to his room and put the knife back in its regular place on his nightstand.

He slipped into his bed and fought the urge to grip to sheets to steady his hands; he was afraid he would get smears of blood on them, despite the gauze. He was tired. He wanted to sleep. He had trouble sleeping. He usually had bad dreams and tossed and tumbled and awoke all sweaty, even when it was cold.

Quince closed his eyes, tight. He did not clench the sheets, though he did make fists; the gauze felt tight and itchy against his skin. Sleep, sleep, he told himself, it will seem better in the morning. Everything always seemed better with sunlight. He tried to remember earlier that afternoon, when he'd seen the birds in the trees.

He remembered something else.

He had snippets that bled with each other to form a whole of what had happened that Christmas. He was at the general store, dried cranberries were on the counter before him, and Mr. Jefferson counted out the change. The nickels and dimes chimed against other as Jefferson dug through the cash drawer. He was talking about something—the snow most like—and Quince nodded in return. His mind had been elsewhere. Jefferson handed him some coins; Quince jingled them in his pocket.

Someone came in. It could have been his cousin, August. The voice was light, breathless, and unyielding. Quince understood only, “You must come home.” And August took his hand. August had big hands, strong hands, but they trembled. Quince got in a car—Jefferson’s car?—and it took no time to get back home. Quince checked his pocket-watch; he’d been gone for less than half an hour. He couldn’t figure what could have happened in such little time.

There were men in the yard. They looked ghastly and pale. They had hands or handkerchiefs pressed over their mouths to hide gagging. They must’ve looked at him, spoke to him, but Quince remembered feeling a sort of hollowness within him. Grown men did not pale at easy sights. He was across the yard and on the porch before his mind affixed on what he should expect: someone is dead. And, shamefully, he’d hoped it was his father.

It was cold. He could see his breath burst out in puffs as he mounted his home’s steps. He tried the door, but it budged only slightly. Someone was on the porch—August maybe, or his uncle—talking, telling him to stop, but Quince didn’t. He forced

the door and stumbled in. Something slumped in front of him; there was a wetness at his feet. It was his mother's body. There was a hole in her stomach; her eyes were mostly opened, and her palms faced upwards as if in entreaty. Across from him, before the mantle, lay his sister, Louise. He crossed the room and knelt by her. He shook her. She felt stiff and cold and was in a puddle of blood. Quince shook her and kept saying her name and, "You can't sleep here; you'll catch cold. Louise, you can't sleep here." He knew she was dead, but he couldn't stop. He wasn't even crying. He didn't feel anything. No, Quince wasn't unfeeling; it was like he was feeling too much, like everything in his life was crashing around him and all he heard was his voice over loud scratches and rambles. All that noise would have stopped if Louise had just gotten up. Everything would stop crashing around him if she would just get up; if they'd all sit up and say that everything was all right. He had to shake her more. Really, Quince knew it wouldn't help, but he couldn't stop. He didn't stop until August pulled him up. He saw his little brothers. One was under the table on his belly and the other near the back of the room on his side. His baby sister's crib dripped red. His other sisters lay by the back door. They were frosted; they'd' been killed out in the tobacco shed, and the men had found them and brought them in.

Quince had asked, "Where is he?"

Someone answered, "Your father's dead. Shot himself."

He woke at a knock on his door. His hands ached. He sat up as Lela came in.

“Good morning, sleepyhead. Mom is making pancakes.” She remained in the doorway, smiling at him.

“I’ll be there as soon as I’m dressed.” Thankfully, he had his hands underneath the sheets so Lela could not see them nor ask about them. After he was dressed, he unbound his hands. The cuts on his fingertips had not been so deep, so they had faded away to slits. The slice over his left wrist was an ugly smirk there. He had to keep it covered. Though it was warm, he rolled down his sleeves and buttoned them at the cuff.

At breakfast, Lela said that she wanted to get out of the house. It was a beautiful Saturday, she was right. “The first day of summer. We really ought not to waste it.”

Quince nodded as he finished his fifth pancake. “Where do you want to go?”

“I don’t care. You can choose.”

Quince felt stirrings to do things; he wanted to say goodbye proper, at least to his mother and siblings. “I’ve been thinking on my family lately. I think they ought to know that I’m going away. I think Ma especially would be pleased. Don’t you think?”

That worried look; Quince lacked what exactly to call it, but it was like Lela’s cheeks lost color for a moment. The look passed quickly, and Lela offered her smile and reached across the table to put her hand on his. “Of course she would be. I think it’ll be fine a thing to do.” He figured that she thought that the brightness of the day would offset whatever came. “Do you want to go to the grave?”

The grave singular. There was only one headstone for eight people. Quince remembered—vaguely—painting mud onto the part of the stone that bore his father’s name right after the funeral. It had looked so right that winter, all surrounded by bare

trees and mud and dirty snow, so he couldn't fathom how it would sit in spring. Flowers and trees could not bloom—surely—over the grave of a murderer and his victims.

Nature could not have gained normalcy in such a place. But Quince wasn't foolish, and he knew that the ground there would be firm and grassy and there would be shade from full tress (well fed from decay, of course, including the decay of those he loved) and there would be birds. But it was as close as he could get, aside from going to the old house, to them, so he agreed. He didn't ask Lela what he should expect.

He'd loved his siblings with a begrudging affection. Really, that was all a teenage boy could muster. Emily and Zora pestered him to whittle them dogs and squirrels and rabbits. He still shared a room and bed with John and Richard. At night, when Quince busied his hands with thoughts of Lela, he dreaded that his brothers would hear and ask questions about such innocent vices and eventually they would tell his parents. So Quince was always quiet, nearly holding his breath.

The gravestone had been freshly polished and shined in the day-bright sun. There were coins—nickels, dimes, quarters, and a few fifty cent pieces—on the headstone and on each family member's marker. There were many flowers. There were a few clusters of forget-me-nots, and some fresh looking begonias and poppies. Quince guessed that folks still frequented the grave, or maybe they just brought extra flowers to leave after they'd visited whoever they'd come for. On each of his sisters' markers was a clutch of daisies. Whoever left those must've known them. It had probably been Jefferson or his wife. Quince could remember how his little sisters had loved the wild violets and daisies in their front yard; the daisies had escaped their mother's bed one summer and took root

all through their grass. The girls would weave the stems together until their fingers were green, and they had a crown for everyone. The feel of the waxy petals on his forehead and the flowery smell.

Quince slid his hand in his pocket and felt his knife. Lela slid her arm inside his. She gave tender pressure. She'd brought lilies—seven of them—and they smelled sweet against her. When they'd stopped to gather them from her mother's hothouse, she'd said how they were very elegant flowers, and she thought his sister, Louise, would have liked them. He removed his hand from his pocket and took a flower from her. He laid one on each marker, save his father's. He stepped on that one.

There was some mud at the edges of the stone, from the rainy April they'd had, no doubt. Quince recalled his little brothers when they were digging in fresh mud, rubbing it over their faces like war paint. They were giggling and flinging dirt at each other. Quince came up from working in the fields, all muddy and tired, but his brothers caught his hands before he got up on the porch and asked him to build a house. Of course he said he would, though his legs were tired and he could feel a headache coming on. The boys squealed with delight.

Quince helped them make a strong foundation. Then construct the walls and finally the sticks as the roof. Quince's sisters and mother came out on the porch as well. His mother had her hands in her apron pockets. She smiled and said, "That's the finest house I've ever seen."

"Do you need to say anything?" Lela asked, flowerless though still smelling of flowers.

He shook his head. His family didn't seem there. Maybe their bodies were, their flesh once, though that had all rotted away by now. The caskets—if they'd managed to hold up over the years—would house now little more than skeletons in musty clothes. Their warmth was not interred with them. He could think of only one place where it still might be. The house.

That night in bed, Quince was more dead-set on the house. He had to see it before he left. He didn't get out his knife, but left it on his nightstand. He thought hard about what the house had looked like before the murders, but he couldn't really recall. His brain felt all muddled. The rest of him felt empty.

If not for the spectacle, maybe he could've shaken it, could've lost that hollowness that had settled in him that Christmas when he stepped into the room. If they'd been left to pass quietly and peacefully. But they hadn't been. Quince felt a little bad for hating the onlookers, but he felt like he could strike each one of them over and over until their faces were ground away and his hands were torn and bloody. When he felt that way, he tried to tear off a fingernail to the quick to feel a sharp something else.

The house was still his. Though his uncle kept it up, certainly the house would've passed to Reggie's child. But there was nothing to do with the house; he couldn't live in it. What he did remember of it was how cold it was that Christmas afternoon; how everything was cold and still in that room. He liked knowing the house was there though, like a living memory of his family, even though that memory was corrupted. His uncle had opened the house for a profit. He'd been a poor and pitiful man, so everyone around

seemed to forgive him. Quince did not, could not. He hadn't seen his uncle much in over a year, and had no plans to change that. At the funeral, Quince had almost struck him when he mentioned the plan for the house. And when his uncle had stopped at Reggie's open casket and mumbled a little prayer and said, "He looks so natural, just like he's asleep. At peace, you know. Poor Reggie." It had taken everything in Quince not to pull away from him or spit. His gut feeling had been to push his father's casket over, spilling all the contents and leaving Reggie there on the ground in the cold mud. Still, everyone around seemed so interested in Reggie like they needed to know—to understand—what had happened that Christmas. Maybe Quince was the only one who didn't. He didn't want to understand because it wasn't possible to understand why Reggie did it, why Quince was left. He'd hear ideas floating around making the air heavy and ripe with gossip. But if Quince understood his father—

He couldn't think like his father. Ever. He could never understand him.

For about a year after the murders, the house was open for tours every Sunday, but the numbers did start to dwindle, Quince heard. He eavesdropped on folks in the general store while he swept around them and got all sorts of gossip. No one seemed to know what to do about the house. It shouldn't be destroyed, but they weren't sure if people should still be going up there. His uncle had ended up closing the house for tours, except once a month. Those tours were still fairly well attended, though mostly everyone had already seen all there was in there. They seemed to need the reminder.

Quince had come alone. He could've asked Lela to come but when he mentioned it in passing, how maybe he should go out there, Lela had said no. She said there was nothing there but pain and loss and hate. She could've meant Reggie or she could've meant the visitors, but Quince didn't pry. He didn't talk about that Christmas with Lela. Right afterwards, whenever anyone would mention it before her, she would rise and scramble from the room. He found her once retching over the porch rail. He could not put her through it. He'd told her that he was going to Bramble Cove to buy more paper for class and she had seemed to believe him and told him to be safe and have fun. But she'd licked her lips, and she only did that when she lied.

The trees seemed thicker, and they were all full of weeds; poison ivy wheedled up their trunks so tight as if choking them. There were children running around in the front yard. None of the children seemed to pay him much mind. They were busy playing at something. At first, he thought they were innocent, charming, like his sisters and brothers who'd chased each other, chased anything that moved across the grass. He heard their voices and realized that the chaser was calling himself "Old Reggie" so it didn't take much to reason out the game. Quince closed his eyes, and he felt fingernails ripping across the ridges of his brain.

He looked away from the children and towards the house, but couldn't make himself study it. He closed his eyes. He tried to picture the room how it would've been on a normal day, like this day. But he couldn't recollect anything aside from that cold afternoon and the feeling of his sister beneath his hands, except for the family portrait

that hung over the mantle. That portrait had been taken the November before. That portrait had probably been the last thing some of his family had ever seen.

The portrait was black and white and smudgy because Reggie hadn't wanted to wait until it was fully developed. Quince was looking off camera, at something out the window behind the photographer's head. He couldn't recollect what had distracted him. His father had looked proud, smug, and he was smirking. A face of an insane man or one of a man who knew exactly what was going to happen, like a fortune teller who knew what to do to make a fortune come true.

Quince knew his father had always been hard, all edges—on edge, an edge to each word. In later years, his father had taken to calling him “boy.” It was said with an air of distaste. When he'd said, “Quince” it sounded like a spat of tobacco against porch boards. But as a child, Quince had tried to please him. That was what little boys were supposed to do. Quince didn't know to think that Reggie was cruel; he thought that all fathers must've behaved like his and were all so hard. Reggie taught Quince to whittle because Quince always wanted to use his hands; his fingers had grown long before the rest of him could catch up. Reggie gave him the knife. “This belonged to my grandfather. You're named for him. He could make wood into anything.”

Quince held the knife gingerly with his fingertips. “Is it alright for me to have it?”

“You are my son.” Reggie sat by him and took the knife back. He demonstrated some strokes. His hands were big and strong, and there were fine hairs on his knuckles. He held the blade and a piece of wood towards Quince. “Now, you'll try.”

The wood was harder than he expected—it had looked so easy for his father. His first stroke bounced off the grain and sunk into his knuckle. He cried a little.

Reggie groaned and took the knife. “Spit on that. It’ll be fine.”

Quince stuck his knuckle into his mouth. He ran his tongue over the gnash. It didn’t really hurt.

His father sighed. “I got planting. You keep at it.” He handed back the knife. “You’ll get it.”

Reggie had been right; Quince did pick up whittling, and he grew and got even better, and his siblings would pull sticks and ask for animals. One of the last ones he’d worked had been for his little sister, Emily. Reggie had recently killed one of their egg hens for supper (he hadn’t told any of them about it until after they’d all eaten it), so Emily wanted a whittled Ava the chicken.

Quince had sat out on the porch, forming the chicken’s narrow neck, as the children scampered in the yard, chasing each other; they were laughing too much for him to pick out their game.

One of the children, running about, screamed and fell as Old Reggie jabbed her with the end of a brittle stick.

The Old Reggie child ran close by him, and Quince snatched him by the collar, unthinkingly. Once the wriggling thing was in his hands, Quince had to reckon what to do. He could take the switch and beat the child till he was hot with tears. He could scream at him and curse and tell him what he was doing was wrong, so, so wrong. Or nothing. He could put the child down and walk away. The child would go home and tell

his parent that some crazy boy out at the Pickett Place had grabbed him by his scruff.

The child's father would either scold him for playing out at such a place or say that that young man was probably Quincy Pickett, and no one really knew what he would do.

Old Reggie squirmed and said, "Let me go!"

The child was just a little thing; maybe seven years at most. Just a little boy. Just a child who wanted to play no matter what or where. To these kids, there was nothing so tragic about the house, only a story their parents told them. Quince said, "I caught you."

The boy frowned. "No fair! You're bigger than us."

The other children had stopped running and were watching the scene. Several of them were laughing. Quince cried to them, "I caught him! Get away!"

They laughed and squealed and ran about the yard. Quince put down the Old Reggie child, who went off after his friends. The yard was all alive with laughter. It was like the house was alive again, like nothing had ever happened. His family was there; he could hear them again.

After they'd ran themselves out, the children asked Quince to lay with them in the yard. They could almost be his siblings, some of them were probably near the right ages. The Old Reggie child poked Quince on the wrist. "What happened to you?"

Quince had forgotten that he rolled up his sleeves before he'd left Lela's house. The cut was visible. "I'm not sure," he said, and he wasn't really lying.

A girl beside him picked a dandelion and reached over to put it on his chest. "What's your name?"

“Quince.” He didn’t give them his last name. He didn’t want them to know. He wanted them to be happy. He plucked the flower from his chest. His siblings used to pick them to make tea, because they liked it, but also because Reggie said dandelions were weeds. Quince rubbed the stem between his fingers. If he closed his eyes, they could almost be his siblings. It could almost be like nothing ever happened. But he could tell the sun was about to go down; it was late. He stood up and dusted off his pants. “Come on, let me help you all home.”

A WOMAN'S STORY

It was the story of a young woman's death. Lela gathered that much just from watching the shift in the faces of the girls around her. Even though the basement was dim—lit only by a handful of flickering candles, atmosphere suited for ghost stories—she could see their wide eyes and parted lips, hear their short gasps. Not really from fear, more like interest. Really, Grimsley dormitory's Friday night ghost stories were a performance. A time for the hall residents, one senior and two juniors, to hold attention while all the first years sat and listened.

At least until Lela had come to Osterlein College and had been assigned to Grim dorm. She'd listened intently to the first few tales of the woe-begone delivered in the dull drone of Dorcas, the senior and resident on Lela's own first floor before she finally stood up and told a story: one made up off the cuff and borrowed heavily from the details (sparse as they were) from the senior's story. After that first time standing up—all eyes on her, the words in rhythm leaving her mouth, the applause afterwards from all but a handful—Lela and her roommate, Astrid, spent Thursday nights scouring the old school archives in the basement of the library, reading about the lives of the young women who had come before them by the dust-bitten light of a flashlight.

After Dorcas finally finished her story and sat down, Lela stood and cleared her throat. It was mid-November, and the air in the basement carried the weight of cold and moisture, almost like a day before snow. Behind her, the broken elevator, stuck forever

on the basement floor with its doors agape—seemed to breathe blackness. She could feel its breath prick up her legs, back, all the way to her neck, settling finally on her scalp.

Most girls still turned towards Lela after the senior's story, conditioned to the transition between speakers from months of practice, but some of the girls left the basement; others, like Dorcas and one of the juniors, crossed their arms and leaned back, faces set firm. Some were jealous, some didn't like her, but Lela didn't care. She liked to tell and the rapt faces of the others brightly regarding her even in the dimness prompted her to open her mouth. About ten girls clambered up the stairs before Astrid reached out to flick Lela on the back of her knee. Lela took a deep breath. "He didn't love her enough." It was a story Astrid had found. A paragraph really. A blip. A young woman killed herself. No other details, no why, no guesses, no meaning. Not even her name. Only that she hanged herself by jumping out Grim's attic window. Astrid wanted Lela to tell a story about it because it was so empty, she said, more room to embellish.

Every story needed embellishment to have meaning and be remembered. The only story worth telling was one that had meaning. "She really thought he loved her with his all. She really did. She was so sure that she spent every moment thinking of ways to please him, to keep him. Because she thought that women were nothing without men." Lela let the words settle as a murmur ran through the girls. "So, when he asked, she gave herself to him fully. She made her choice, and he took her offer. Greedily. But afterwards, he left her. He'd taken what he wanted and left her. So, she decided to show him, prove his error and loss."

Another pause. Their faces were open, waiting and wanting. Even Dorcas, despite her crossed arms, had leaned forward. Lela had them and held the power a bit longer. The darkness seemed deepened, at some point one of the candles had gone out.

Astrid flicked Lela in the back of the leg again. Lela grinned at her. “She went up to the attic. She’d seen an old dowry box—an exchange between man and woman, manifest of a love, how perfect—and some old rope.” Lela skated quickly over the plot-hole (how or why did the girl know the attic’s contents?) though she knew that most of her audience was too caught in the telling to realize any errors. “She tied one end of the rope around the chest and the other she noosed about her neck. She opened the window, felt the gasp of wind hit her face, and jumped. The chest slid behind her, screeching on the floor, till it hit the wall under the window and caught. It was all a rush: the sound, the damp, night air on her bare legs and up her gown. And then the snap.” Lela paused again. Someone had cried out and covered her mouth. There was a rustle of movement. “They found her in the morning, all white legs dangling and billowing nightgown.” Lela took a small bow. “And, of course, her ghost still haunts these halls. Some nights, very late, you can hear the box sliding on the floor, the taut snap of the rope.”

There was clapping, less than there had been at the start of the semester, but still more than was afforded Dorcas. If Lela could give a story to the unnamed young woman who had jumped from the window, she didn’t much care about the amount of applause. Though, she didn’t like to think that the girl really haunted Grim. Lela hoped she had gone with no regrets, feeling her actions were her own, and finding peace. All those

regrets had been bound up in her discarded body. Those thoughts made Lela feel heavy, so she told herself it was just a story, something she'd made up after all.

Dorcas clapped her on the shoulder, hard. "My, my, that was *fine*, Lela. You are such a little yarn-spinner." She gripped, her nails digging into Lela's flesh. "That's enough for tonight ladies. Head to bed." Dorcas pushed Lela a little as she walked away, back up the stairs.

The others dispersed, some thanked her for the story, others barely looked at her, a few spoke in muted whispers, so soft Lela could not pick out the words but the sideways glares told her enough. She told herself not to care, she didn't care, she liked the stories, and others—close to a majority still—liked them too. Astrid linked her arms in with Lela's. "I *loved* it. It was tense and beautiful and true."

"I don't know about all that." Lela smirked but felt proud.

Astrid was a head shorter than Lela so it was hard to climb up stairs arm-in-arm to their room on the first floor. It was the only room in Grim to have a door that opened inwards. Back in the early days, Grim was a one floor infirmary, and Lela's room was the first sick room by the entrance. Sometimes, she wondered how many people had died in that room, but Lela had seen enough real bodies to dwell only brief on such thoughts. When the building had become a dormitory about twenty years prior, a staircase had been added along with the additional floors and the attic, and there hadn't been any place for the stairs other than right by the sick room's door. So, the door was taken out and redesigned to swing inwards. Incidentally, jimmying the crystal knob could open the

door even when locked. It had helped Lela and Astrid, as the latter lost her key during the first week, and then lost Lela's key after she lent it to her.

Lela opened the door to the room, and both women fell back onto Lela's bed because it was directly across from the entry and made while Astrid's was about four feet away and rumped. The room was clean in general and sparse. Two desks, two chairs, two small lamps, a bookcase, and one wardrobe for both of their clothes. Astrid had a bible on her desk, a copy of *Jane Eyre* (unopened), and several ragged copies of *Photoplay*, dog-eared on exercise spreads. Lela had a mythology book, a volume of Shakespeare's tragedies, and *The Scarlet Letter* (all for classes), a leather bound notebook, and a framed picture of herself, her boyfriend, Quince, and his sister, who was dead.

"I'm excited for tomorrow," Astrid said, still with her arm in with Lela's.

Lela was also excited. Despite all her talk and tales about women and men, Lela had a boyfriend. Currently, Quince attended Gray University where he studied math and business and occasionally stumbled upon a book he enjoyed. He wasn't like the typical Osterlein boyfriends: he did not roll cigarettes or farm or practice law up North. Quince was the son of a sharecropper; a sharecropper who had eventually bought his own farm plot. Quince was one of seven children, destined to pull and hang tobacco for the rest of his life. Until Quince's father had killed those other children and his mother. That was probably the only story Lela thought she could never tell. She hadn't even told Astrid, save for the barest of details. There never seemed a time nor place for that story.

Thinking of the telling brought up too many memories and made all the words she knew seemed choked and meaningless.

Lela and Quince had seen each other a handful of times since the start of the semester. Though, as their friendships with their respective roommates grew, they began to feel guilty about neglecting their friends for each other. Not guilty enough to stop seeing each other though. Lela had been at Grey University a week prior. Grey had a strict visitation policy, so they had walked around the campus for an afternoon stretch. Lela told Quince about a bird flying in a window and landing on Astrid's desk during their Shakespeare class. She omitted that Astrid had screamed at the bird and waved her hands around frantically. Everyone in class had laughed. Quince said that really must've been something. "Astrid sounds like a nice girl."

"She is." Lela wished she could say something similar about Quince's roommate, Simon. She didn't know very much about him; she didn't know him well enough to praise him. Quince had never been much of a talker, and his stories for Lela were mostly about what he thought or saw, not so much about Simon. Lela cared more to hear about Quince. She had noticed that since starting college, Quince wore his shirts well-pressed (she had no doubt that he did them himself) and had lost a little of the dark look he seemed to always have in Germantown.

Quince led her under the branches of a large magnolia tree. Its branches were so long that the farthest leaves touched the ground, enclosing them. The trunk was knotted, bulged at places and smoothed in others, almost looking like human bodies locked

together in an embrace. “I found this the other day when I was walking back from class. I had seen a cat and followed it.”

Lela brushed some of the waxy leaves from her face. “It’s lovely.” She sat on one of the branches that that grown from the side of the trunk, almost like a bench. Quince sat beside her. For a moment, they were both quiet. Then, he laced his fingers in with hers.

He kissed her and pushed her back into the tree, gently. His face was on her neck, and Lela was looking up into the dark green canopy. There was hardly any light. Quince’s hands were on her shoulders; hers on his back. Both their hands were going lower, lower. Quince’s mouth was at her collarbone. Lela shook her head. She bit her lip. She said, “Quince, stop.”

His breath and mouth were still at her throat.

“I said stop.” Lela moved her hands to Quince’s chest and forced him back. His face was red. She said, “I’m sorry.”

He said, “I’m sorry.” He put his hand on the side of her face. “I just—”

“I know.” She shook her head. “But not right now. We have so much else to do. There’s classes, and we’re young.” Lela’s hands were shaking. “Someday. I promise.” But the more they were apart, the more Lela wanted that “someday” to come faster, and the more she didn’t. Quince’s body sometimes reminded her too much of that Christmas, when his family was murdered. Sometimes when she touched him, she thought about his sister’s body twitching on the floor after she was already dead. His hands could look similar to his mother’s hands, and while Lela could not recall how his mother looked, she

could remember her bloodied palms. She couldn't get past that, though she wanted to. She needed to. "I love you."

He kissed her forehead. "I love you too."

They didn't speak again until they were out from under the tree and back in fresh air. Things didn't seem so desperate or heated out there. Everything seemed more alive and even Quince's face was brighter. They planned on when to see each other again. Thanksgiving was approaching, which meant both of them would be back in Germantown, but that was still too far out. They decided to meet the following Saturday at Osterlein. They decided to have their roommates meet. Either the two wouldn't like each other, or they would become friends which meant more time for Lela and Quince to be together without any lingering (though slight) guilt.

It was decided that Quince would drive to Osterlein and bring some food. He would also bring Simon. Lela and Astrid would have water and a picnic blanket, and they would have a picnic in the Square out from of Osterlein's main academic building.

"Tell me about Simon," Astrid said, giving Lela's arm a squeeze. "Charming?"

Lela shrugged, weakly so maybe Astrid wouldn't notice too much. She had never actually met Simon. She knew some bare details from Quince: Simon was from Connecticut, his parents were rich through inheritance, and Simon was not sure what he wanted to study. But Quince seemed to like him. Thought him clever or at least funny. "You'll find out tomorrow."

Simon had suggested hotdogs. There was a place in town that sold them, smothered in chili, slaw, and onions. The hotdogs themselves were bright pink. When Simon and Quince arrived at the Square, they both carried brown bags heavy with grease. Crass food. Lela had wanted something a little less smelly, but Quince said that Simon had practically begged. Lela had a pitcher of water and some glasses, and Astrid had a blanket. The four met in nearly the middle of the Square, on a patch of thick grass, sheltered by swaying, leafless trees.

Quince looked well. His clothes were freshly ironed, and Lela imagined him standing in his dorm room with the board and iron, carefully pressing his collar and seams. A little sweat on his forehead. His sleeves pinned up because of the heat and steam. Simon was different. Lela had heard his voice before—he worked in the dorm’s phone room and was responsible for answering and handing off calls. Though, as the months passed, Simon had rambled on to Lela longer and longer before he would hand the communal phone to Quince. Lela couldn’t name one thing he talked about though; she never paid much attention to him. Simon was a head shorter than Quince and stockier. His hair was slicked back, his collar was unbuttoned, he wore loose-fitting pants, and, even above the smell of the hotdog grease and onions, he reeked of musk. He caught Lela’s eyes and winked.

Quince leaned towards her, awkwardly angling the damp bag away, and kissed her gently on the cheek. “Good to see you.”

“And you.” Lela felt her mouth curve into a smile; it felt so broad as to be almost embarrassing. She could feel her face warming, even in the slight November breeze, and

Quince's face was splashed pink above his cheekbones. Like children stammering affection in a schoolyard. Lela liked it though. The way she felt a little flustered inside when she saw him. Before college, when Quince had been rooming with her family, she felt they had fallen into a comfortable routine. She'd liked that too. But the flustered feeling she got when she heard his voice over the line or now when she finally saw him again in the flesh was nearly euphoric.

Astrid spread out the blanket. Her face was cherry. "Nice to meet you both."

They all sat, nearly in unison. Quince and Simon across from Lela and Astrid. Simon handed out the hotdogs; his fingers found Lela's on the foil wrapper and lingered a bit too long. Quince did not seem to notice since he was trying to wrangle fat, crinkled French fried potatoes from his bag.

The food wasn't so bad. Simon rambled about one of his professors (who he called "prof") and the way he always wore his tie crookedly. Lela watched Astrid. Her fingertips trembled as she lifted her food. Was she nervous or excited? Eventually, Simon stopped talking, and Astrid began. Lela tried to listen. "A bird flew into the window in English class. It landed on my desk."

Astrid had screamed and panicked when that had happened. Lela wondered if Astrid would tell that part.

"I spoke to it, and it cooed at me. She was a mourning dove. Maybe she was looking for her mate. I told her she should fly, and she looked at me—looked at me really—before she flew back out the window."

Quince raised an eyebrow at Lela. He remembered the story as she told it.

Lela tilted her head. No harm in changing the story. After all, Lela hadn't told the whole story either; she hadn't been trying to impress a boy.

"Oh, really?" Simon leaned towards Astrid. Then he bit into his hotdog.

Astrid nodded. "Yes, yes. So fascinating, right?"

"Oh yes."

Quince rolled his eyes. He'd only eaten half his lunch, but he covered the rest with his napkin and sat back against a tree. He stretched out his legs in front of him and folded his hands in his lap.

Simon finished his food. "So, Lela, what are you up to, doll?"

Utterly unlikable. Lela opened her mouth. Quince smacked Simon's arm.

"Don't call her that."

"I didn't mean anything, Quince."

"It's not respectful." Quince added, in a voice that was almost a whisper, "She's not one of those girls you can play around with, Simon."

A returned whisper: "Because she's yours, I get it. No harm meant." Then, Simon smirked. "Ah. Your girl is quite polished."

Lela kept her eyes on Simon. She wondered if Astrid had paid attention to the exchange, but her roommate remained silent beside her. Simon seemed the typical boy; she wondered if he even notched his bedposts after every unlucky girl to wander too near him. Troubling too how Quince defended her so quickly. In a way, it was good: since he cared for her, he should step up, but also she was more than capable to put Simon in his place.

Then Simon said, honestly, “You’re lucky.”

“Yeah.” Quince looked back at Lela.

She tried her best to smile at him.

“So, Quince,” said Astrid. “It’s nice to meet you.”

Lela was aware of her roommate at her side again. Astrid had finished all her food and was sitting with her legs crossed out to her side, very ladylike. Her red face had mellowed out to pink, and she looked pretty. Lela hoped she was relaxed. Lela hoped she wouldn’t direct her relaxed gaze at Simon.

Quince smiled. “You too, Astrid.”

“You’re from Germantown, right? That’s a small place.”

“Yes, it is.” Quince put his leftover food back into one of the greasy bags. He kept looking from Lela to Astrid. Lela realized that she had told him very little about Astrid so he most likely had no idea what to say to her. He asked, “Where are you from?”

“Rural Corridor in Virginia. I heard about your town in the newspaper. I’m sorry about your family.”

Sometimes Lela forgot that everyone in the South, and not just the ones she knew or told, seemed to know about the Pickett murders. The murders were something that Lela felt she had to offer up front though, be honest about, despite that she didn’t talk about them. When it came to it, there was nothing much extra she could add, she told herself, that hadn’t already been printed to death in the papers. When she spoke about it, she felt the same chilled sensation as the black from the elevator’s mouth. And she

remembered certain details, like the snap of a neck and blood and dead hands more starkly. She swallowed hard to stifle the urge to retch.

Quince took it in stride (as he had had to for two years). “Thank you.”

“Horrible thing to happen. I can’t even imagine how horrible.” Astrid’s voice had a slight tremble to it; her nerves were getting the better of her. She had nothing left to say.

“Horrible thing to mention too.” Quince drew his legs to his body and hid his chin behind his knees.

Astrid shut her mouth.

Simon said, “Let’s not talk about such things while surrounded by such beautiful scenery.”

Astrid let out a relieved sigh and smiled at Simon. Perhaps he was not as dreadful as Lela had thought. Astrid stared at him. Really stared.

Quince looked distant. Lela reached over and put her on his knee. “Why don’t we go somewhere quiet for a bit?”

He nodded. Simon and Astrid scooted closer together as they left. Lela guided Quince to a shed at the back of the Square, her version of his magnolia tree. Back before Osterlein was a college, it was part of a broader Moravian settlement. Single Brothers and Sisters would meet in the Square to court under the watchful gaze of their parents and religious guardians. Even the trees, long trunked red maples, were too narrow to hide behind. What did those heartsick Brothers and Sisters do when they needed to talk without the threat of being overheard? When they needed a little more?

In 1805, a fire shed had been built at the end of the Square. If it had ever had doors, by 1931 they were long lost. It was a small shed that held (and still held) old water buckets and barrels of fine, grey dirt. The idea had been that if ever a building near the Square caught fire, those buckets could be pumped full of water from the nearby communal pump, that dirt could be tossed on the flames, flames doused, and structures saved. The fire shed had never been used as intended. Single Brothers and Sisters, later Osterlein girls, met lovers there, shielded by four walls and a roof, keeping their voices low if they ever heard someone at the water pump.

Quince sat in one of the corners of the shed and stretched out his legs. A water bucket hung on a rusty nail behind his head. Lela stood in the doorway. With the two open doors—straight across, shotgun style—even the smallest breeze seemed intensified. The wind caught her dress and swept it around her knees. It was a fairly new dress—more for spring than fall—but the light blue of the cotton complemented the blue-grey of Quince’s eyes. The dress belted around her middle and was decorated with black polka-dots, which seemed all the starker contrasted against the blue’s paleness. Lela had also picked the hem up a few inches—her only sewing abilities: sewing on buttons and shortening hemlines—and wondered if Quince would notice. Judging by the way his eyes never left her knees, Lela figured that he had. When she sat by him, Lela took his hand and rubbed his knuckles, which were scarred from years of nicking himself with his whittling knife. His fingers were narrow and long. Good fingers for holding a pencil to balance numbers, and Lela had some other, less ladylike thoughts about what Quince could do with those hands.

“Lela, Simon wants me to visit his family over Thanksgiving recess.”

Lela hadn’t expected that. She took a moment before she answered. “Do you want to go there rather than back to Germantown?”

“I’ve never been to Connecticut before. Simon says that they even hunt wild turkeys for their spread.”

“You don’t like to hunt,” Lela said. Quince had been a good shot, back before. He and his father used to hunt rabbits in the woods around their house. Quince could hit anything far away but nothing up close, because he needed glasses and his father never invested in any. The hunting—which had been sporadic anyway—stopped, of course, after the murders, and Lela knew (or guessed) that Quince would never hold a gun again, considering his father. She certainly hoped he never would.

“I don’t like to hunt, but I do like to eat.”

Lela laughed under her breath. “Our turkey will be bigger, and you won’t have to watch it get plucked and trimmed, and recall that you were the one who killed it.”

“Suppose so.” Quince was looking at her now. He reached over with his free hand and brushed some loose hair behind Lela’s ear. His thumb lingered on her cheek for a pulse.

Lela rubbed a callus on the side of his index finger, where he held his pencil too hard when he worked. Lela said, “I would rather have you. But, I know that Connecticut is an adventure.”

“They went on safari last summer. Simon said they have a mounted lion head in their house. And some sort of tall bird.” Quince pulled his hand from Lela’s and wrapped his arm around her shoulders.

“He’ll take you on safari and you’ll hunt a lion. You’ll wear it like Hercules and the Nemean lion.”

“The what?”

“I thought you were in Greek mythology with Simon? A classics course?”

Quince laughed. “Oh, I am. But being in a course and knowing anything about that course are completely different. I can’t remember any of those names. They’re too long.”

“You will pass it though?”

“I should. I do study or try to. Simon can be really loud. He likes to listen to the radio. I like to hear the football broadcasts. Other times, Simon talks about” here Quince paused as if searching for words; he settled on, “He talks about other people he’s met and what he’s done with them. He’s popular.”

Lela nodded. She could see that. She kept quiet though. It was still good (right?) that Quince had a friend to talk to, even if it did prompt a neglect in his studies and conversations about shooting ostriches.

Quince poked her cheek. “You don’t care for him.”

She had to say something, so she shrugged. “He called me doll.” She decided not to pry into those whispers about Simon and girls. If it was something to be discussed,

Quince should bring it up himself. If he didn't think it was important enough to talk about, then Lela wanted to respect that.

"He says that to a lot of girls." Quince brought his hand down from her shoulders to her waist. "And he's not wrong."

"Still rude." Lela thought again about asking about all those other girls that Simon had called *doll* to see what exactly she'd left Astrid batting her eyelashes at, but instead moved to sit on Quince's lap, facing him. She took off his glasses and reached up to put them in one of the old fire pails. She put her forehead to his. "You never call me such things."

He didn't answer her but put his mouth to hers and tightened his grip of her waist. He always held her so tightly, almost desperately. That was love felt like.

Lela had her hands on his shoulders, his neck, the buttons of his collar. Quince pressed her harder. His hands on her back, brushing the buttons of her dress.

She felt something deep inside her ache. But she had to stop. She remembered the night after the murders. Quince had come to her house and she'd comforted him. He'd put his head in her lap and he'd wanted her to stay with him all night. She'd run her hand over his body, and she would have done it again and again, and she would have stayed with him. But that night, everything had been so wrong, and now she couldn't believe that she'd done that. Her feelings towards him could not be so knitted in with the death of his family. It was disturbing. She hated thinking of that time when she was with Quince. Lela dropped her hands, gathering fistfuls of dirt to ease the ache. She freed her mouth. "Quince, stop."

With a deep intake of breath, Quince drew his face away and lowered his hands. He was flushed and his farsighted eyes narrowed to focus on her. “I’m sorry.”

Lela stood up and offered him her hand. “Nothing to be sorry for. Nothing at all. I began it.” Once Quince was on his feet, Lela reached into the bucket and handed him back his glasses. Then, she straightened her dress and straightened Quince’s tie. Then, after a deep breath, “We should check on Astrid and Simon.” She felt that she was being unfair. She wondered if it ever frustrated Quince that they were so close but she always stopped them. She wondered if he knew that she wanted him as much as he did her. She could tell him, but it would get complicated. She couldn’t tell the story. She’d muddle it up and make everything worse. They had to be content with what they had. Certainly, Quince would stay with her through it all. He would. She needed him to.

Quince nodded and offered her his arm. “You’re right.” They stepped back into the Square. The sun was lower; it had probably been close to half an hour.

They walked slowly, as if each step was dragging the sun farther down and bringing their visit to its demise. They saw the roommates sitting together, still on the blanket, sharing remnants of Quince’s potatoes. Astrid laughed and looked happy. Simon was smiling, self-confident. Quince was right: Lela did not care for Simon though she could not pinpoint why and felt slightly (only slightly) guilty for it. But Astrid seemed to like him just fine.

Lela didn’t worry that Astrid wasn’t in the room when she woke up the next morning. It was late—after ten—and Astrid would likely still be at the Moravian service

on campus. Lela pulled on a dress and pinned back her hair that was heavy with tangles. She never went to church. Quince seemed to find comfort in it. Lela was certain that Astrid only cared for the Moravians because of their love feasts, with their black coffee and potato buns. That and the term “love feast” sounded like a service of endless eating and orgy. Or something that would be mentioned as a scandal in one of her Hollywood magazines.

Lela still didn't worry when Astrid wasn't in the refectory. Sometimes, Astrid would eat Sunday lunch with one of the older couples of the congregation who were friends of her grandmother. As Lela walked back to Grim after her late breakfast, she stopped beside a car that was almost identical to Quince's. He drove a fairly common type of car, but Lela noticed it had the same dent in the driver's side as Quince's, from when he accidentally hit the side with a rake while he was working in her yard. There were several other girls (and some of their boyfriends) wandering near the square and cars, so Lela thought she shouldn't study it too closely or for too long.

When she got back to the room, the door was closed and locked. Lela had left the door unlocked since neither girl had a key, and while the knob-trick worked, it was sometimes unreliable and it was always stressful to think that—even for a brief minute—that she would be unable to get back into her room. Lela hoped the senior hadn't happened by and locked it. Lela tapped on the door. “Astrid?”

There was some rustling in the room but nothing else.

Lela tapped again, a little faster. “Astrid? Let me in.” She placed her palms against the door and pressed her ear to it. She felt something heavy forming in the pit of

her stomach. It was the same feeling she had when she saw the Pickett Place from the road all lost in snow: something bad had happened. She seized the handle and began to jerk it back and forth; the crystal knob knocking against the mechanisms in the door. Finally, the lock clicked out of place and Lela opened the door and half-stumbled in—the problem with the knob trick was that one was never sure when the door was going to give way. She fell into a body. She found it to be Simon. Her hands were on his chest, crumpling a shirt that was unbuttoned. He put his hands on her to steady her. He said her name; his voice was pitches higher than normal, and then, “What are you doing here?” He turned his head.

Lela pushed away from him. He was looking back at Astrid, who was in her bed, blanket clutched and held up to her chin. One shoulder was visible and bare. Lela felt her hands clench; she felt because her brain was stuck on the images: Simon’s chest and crumpled shirt, Astrid’s hands on the blanket, the one shoulder, and Astrid’s face, colorless, like all blood had been drained from it and she was empty. And then it hit her: Simon was in their room. Not even Quince had been in her room. Osterlein had a strict policy: no male visitors in the dorms. If anyone saw, both of them could be expelled.

She realized that Simon was speaking (had he been speaking the whole time?) but she didn’t care. He had to get out of the room. Lela grabbed him by his open shirt and dragged him towards the door. “Get out,” she whispered, urgently, so that no one could hear. No one could know. Lela could not lose Osterlein because of this rude boy. She didn’t even take risks for Quince. Astrid was soundless and motionless in the bed. Lela pushed Simon out of the door; his mouth was still moving, and closed it (quiet and quick)

in his face. She prayed he wouldn't dawdle in the hall, that no one would see him. She heard footsteps and then the front door opened. Lela took a breath and it felt like she hadn't breathed in a long time.

Finally, she looked towards Astrid. She could have been mad—after all the risk that Astrid had taken in getting Simon into the room—but one look stopped all that. Astrid was still under the blanket. Lela could see a grape-colored stain encircling her eye. There was a little blood at the corner of her mouth. Her exposed shoulder was red and raw at its peak. Lela had always known what had happened, but she hadn't realized until then what had really happened, what all Simon had really done to her. Lela could not begin to guess the extent, and she didn't want to. So she said all she could manage, “Oh Astrid.”

“It's not what you think.”

It was like Lela was still catching her breath from getting Simon out of the room. She took a step towards Astrid and another and another until she was by the bed, until she was reaching out, and Astrid recoiled back.

Lela needed to know what had happened to Astrid but had no one to ask. Astrid stopped talking. She couldn't ask anyone on the hall if they had seen a man because there was a chance that the senior could find out and then the news would reach a dean and both she and Astrid would be expelled. But she had to figure out something because professors and others were asking if Astrid was all right since she'd been missing class and skipping meals, and Lela had to say that Astrid was under the weather, and she didn't

know when she would be better again. She tried to figure out the story but missed the details: had Astrid asked Simon to come? What had Simon done? How could he have hurt her so badly? She could have embellished to figure some details but this was Astrid, not some nameless girl in the archives.

There were two people who could answer her questions. One was Simon. Lela couldn't even recall what he had looked like during the picnic. He'd looked pleasant enough then, she thought, but all she could think of was him half-dressed in their room. Though shocked, he seemed to have a smugness to him. He'd stood there like he owned the place, like he belonged.

The other person was Quince. She couldn't ask him. He liked Simon and was stuck with him for at least another semester as a roommate. But how could she let him live with someone like that? Someone who could beat a woman who thought she loved him? And there was something else. The car. Simon had taken Quince's car. Quince had to have given Simon the keys. That meant that Quince could've known what Simon was going to do. Lela thought about calling him but could never dial the number. Simon could answer the dorm phone, or worse, Quince could admit that he knew what Simon was going to do. He could say that it was all fine. He could say that was what men could do to women. His answer could change what it meant to be them.

It went on like that for a week. Lela felt tired and torn by the end, but she knew that Astrid felt worse. She didn't ask Astrid if she wanted to go into the archives on Thursday. After all, there wasn't much point as there was a story right in front of them. On Friday, Astrid spent the whole day sitting up, even though she didn't have class.

When night fell, Lela asked, “Do you want to hear that senior butcher another ghost story?”

“No, Lela,” Astrid said, voice light. “I don’t want to hear Dorcas tell a story.”

Lela nodded; the answer expected.

“Maybe you can tell me a story later, though.” Astrid smiled. “What time is it?”

“A little after eight.”

“I’m going to turn in.” Astrid laid down and curled into a ball, tugging the blankets over her head. “Night.”

It was too much. Lela crossed the room and placed her hand where she thought Astrid’s shoulder should be in the body-shaped lump. Astrid’s body shook in a spasm. Lela almost pulled her hand away.

“Please don’t touch me.”

Lela pulled her hand back. Astrid’s voice was defeated, tired. Like there was nothing that Lela could do to help. She couldn’t think of what she wanted to say, so she said, “Good night.” She tucked herself into bed.

Almost in a dream, Lela heard the door open and click closed. She sat up. Astrid was gone. Lela pulled on her robe, opened the door, and left it open behind her. She saw the hem of Astrid’s gown pass over the landing of the staircase. Lela followed.

After a week of looking like a corpse, in her gown, Astrid looked like a ghost. It was dark. Astrid stopped at the attic door and didn’t proceed until Lela had almost caught her. Then she went opened the door and went up the stairs.

Lela found her in front of the elevator. The moon shone through the window behind her. Too much like a ghost story. Astrid faced the doors. “Lela, do you think a fall from here would kill me?”

A fall all the way to the basement. She would probably be impaled on the rigging of the elevator cab stuck at the bottom. Lela licked her lips. Remain calm. “Perhaps not. You could just break your back or legs.”

Astrid turned and smiled. “I think I’d die.”

Lela felt bile in her throat. “Let’s go back to bed and talk about this.” She took a step forward.

Astrid pried apart the elevator doors and placed her foot between them to keep them open. “You kept asking, but you do know what happened.”

“I don’t. Tell me.”

“I really liked him. I invited him back.”

Astrid had invited Simon.

“It was okay at first. We talked. He was charming.”

Of course he was.

“But then he wanted to...to do.”

Lela swallowed.

“I told him no. I told him to stop. I told him we could get in trouble and that it had been a mistake, and I was sorry. He was mad. He grabbed me and forced me back.”

Lela thought of the feeling of Quince's hands on her back. He was stronger than her. He could have forced her down in the cage of magnolia branches or against the boards of the shed. But he hadn't.

"But he didn't."

Simon's smirk and that wink. The way he called her *doll*.

"After he was done, he told me I had done well. He called me *sweetie*, and he offered me a cigarette. He left." She swallowed, audibly. "I tried to stop him. I did. I really did."

There seemed to be a chill from the elevator door.

Astrid had started to cry, heaving sobs from her core. "Now what? It's like that story you told. What can I do?"

"You can't let him get away with this." Lela's voice surprised her; it seemed to reverberate through the attic.

"How can I stop him? If I tell anyone, I'm expelled. No one would do anything to him anyway. It's my fault."

"It's not your fault."

"I invited him over. I let him in the room. I *liked* him."

All true, but that didn't excuse his behavior. Any reasonable person could see that. "You tried to make him stop."

"You only understand because you're a woman!" The words were nearly a scream. Astrid shook her head and looked back towards the elevator shaft. "No one else would understand. You know that!"

Lela closed her mouth. Astrid was right.

“You’ve seen all the clippings in the archives. You know what happens to women like me.”

“Maybe no one will find out.”

Astrid snorted a laugh. “I don’t care. I know what happened and how it felt. Like I was a dog. Like I was nothing.” She grabbed her chest. “You don’t know how it feels to be treated like that. I can’t look at myself. And for what? Nothing. He wasn’t worth all this.”

“Astrid, you’re right. He’s not worth you dying.”

“No. But I have to make a point so others aren’t like me. That shouldn’t happen to anyone else, Lela. So, you have to tell my story. You have to tell exactly why I did all this.”

Lela imagined Astrid’s body falling down the shaft and the thump as she hit the top of the elevator. The snap of the bones and the blood blooming on her nightgown and Astrid as a corpse. She couldn’t let her fall. She had to stop it. She’d seen enough bodies. One thing came to mind: “I won’t tell the story.”

Astrid turned back, her brow furrowed; her lips parted slightly. “What?”

She licked her lips. “I won’t tell your story. People will just think you went crazy and jumped. Or I’ll tell them that you were pitiful because your boy didn’t want you anymore.” The words seemed so callous, Lela almost wanted to smack herself. She knew she would never be able to tell Astrid’s story.

“You would say that about me?” Astrid let the doors close, and she took a step away from the shaft.

“Oh yes. Certainly. I would say ‘Oh, Astrid jumped down the elevator shaft because she was a stupid, silly woman.’ Not: Astrid died because she is a woman and men are men and nothing seems to be able to change it. Not an Osterlein education, not money, not class, not kindness or character. “It’s your choice, Astrid. You choose what will happen. Just like you chose Simon.”

Astrid stomped across the room and slapped Lela, hard, so hard that Lela’s head jerked to the side and her lip burned. She tasted metal and felt the warm burst of blood from her busted lip. She captured Astrid’s arm and pulled her close. She embraced her as tightly as she could. She kept saying “Astrid” over and over. Then, “My god, Astrid. I am so sorry.”

Astrid crumpled, dead-weight. “What can I do? What can I do *now*?”

“We’ll think of something, Astrid. It will be just fine,” Lela lied. She had no idea.

Astrid was asleep. Lela left the dorm room and crossed the hall to the phone room and opened the door. It was past curfew—almost midnight—but the door was never locked. Lela dialed and waited for the connection. Her lip was stiff from the dried blood. “Gray University, Maine dorm. How may I help you?” It was Simon. He sounded nasally on the phone.

“I want Quince now, Simon.”

“Lela, it’s late. Quince is asleep.” Simon sounded tired. “And hours are almost over. Wait until the morning.”

She wanted to tell him that she knew what he had done. But would he feel bad? Or would he be pleased to remember his conquest? She didn’t want to know. His voice made her cringe. Lela bit her lip. “Now.”

“Fine.” There was some shuffling.

“Lela, what’s wrong?” Quince’s voice was tight with worry. She imagined he wasn’t wearing his glasses. Maybe his eyes were closed, avoiding the adjustment to the light. “Are you all right? Your parents?”

Lela felt herself smile. The scab on her lip ached. “I’m fine. Everyone is fine. I just wanted to hear your voice.” She couldn’t tell him. He liked Simon; they were friends. He’d suggested letting Astrid and Simon meet. He could feel responsible. Lela could not burden him with this story.

“Oh.”

They were quiet for a few heartbeats.

He said, “Lela, if something is wrong, you can tell me.”

She had to know what he knew. “Quince, did you let Simon borrow the car last Sunday?”

Long pause. Lela counted the seconds under her breath.

She asked again, “Quince, did you?”

“Yeah. He wanted to go do something.”

He'd known then. Lela wasn't sure what to think. "He came to see Astrid, did you know?"

"I knew he was going to go see her."

"You know what he was planning on doing with her?"

"He was" a pause and Lela could hear Quince lick his lips a few times as if searching for a delicate way to say what Simon had most likely told him "He said that Astrid wanted him to come to her—your—room."

Lela cradled her head in her hand. "You know what he did to her?"

"He said that they had fun, but they weren't right for each other." Quince took a quick breath. "People do that Lela. He said he was sorry it didn't work out."

"Quince, he raped her." Lela almost covered her mouth and probably would have if she'd been facing him. She was glad she could not see his reaction.

"He didn't. She invited him over. She was into it and then she wasn't. How could he be blamed like that since she changed her mind?" His voice was loud. She imagined that his face was red and flustered. She bet his hands were clenching and unclenching or he was fiddling with his pocket-watch. If he was with her, he would be looking anywhere but at her.

Lela didn't respond right away. He'd given her the answer that anyone else would give. All the blame would fall on Astrid, the one with the bloody lip and bruises, the one who couldn't look at herself in the mirror. Lela finally said, "You stopped when I told you to."

"That's because I love you."

Lela didn't know what answer she had wanted or expected. Somehow the answer made it worse. It meant that Simon hadn't cared anything about Astrid beforehand or he would have respected her too. It meant that women could really be used and nothing was wrong. Lela shook her head.

"Lela?"

"Quince, please don't go to Connecticut for Thanksgiving."

"I'll think about it," he said. "I'm sorry. I'm so sorry about everything. I'll talk to Simon, really."

She almost wanted to tell him that Astrid had almost killed herself, but she couldn't make him feel any worse. Simon was the one who needed to suffer, though she didn't know how to make him. For now, only she and Astrid seemed to be suffering. She pressed her mouth closer to the receiver. "I'm sorry too. Go get some rest. We can talk more later."

His response was fast. "Yes. Goodnight." He added, almost in a whisper, "I love you."

"I know. Me too." Lela hung up the phone and felt as empty as the elevator shaft. She sat on the floor in the phone room and pulled her knees to her face. The floor was frigid through her nightgown. She focused on the idea: he was a man and she a woman. So often the distance between them was sheer, like the thinnest white gauze of a veil, but sometimes it was a thick wall of clouds before a storm, bringing heavy rain and the rend of thunder.

AMBER IN THE EMBERS

“We should talk about something,” Quince said. He wasn’t wearing his glasses so he didn’t bother to turn his head towards Lela because her face would look like a blur in the dim light. A cricket chirped from outside the slightly open window and another croaked in response. A heavy May humidity hung in the room, and Quince almost felt the pressure lowering itself closer and closer to the bed. Such a pause in conversation was strange for his girlfriend. “Lela?”

They were in his bed, a tight single; he on his back and Lela on her side, one arm draped around him, fingertips gripping his ribs lightly to keep her balance. She wore a nightgown, and he was still in his shirt, pants, and tie. She tucked her hand beneath his chin. “What time is it?”

Quince laughed a little. “What does it matter?” He decided not to change the subject back.

She kissed the side of his face. “I have to get upstairs soon.”

They’d been talking about their day-to-day. Quince was a teacher, and Lela sat at a typewriter and wrote for *The Reynolds Reader*. Quince really tried to be interested in Lela’s work each day—after all, she asked countless questions about his students—but the gossip columns “Can Beeswax Really Enhance your Complexion?”, “Hair-Curling for the Lady on the Go”, and “How to Look Classic in Summer 1935” barely interested Lela so how could they interest him? He did laugh as Lela described how pointless it all

seemed, how sometimes ladies really did write to her, addressing her like an old friend, telling her “Dear, you know that I’ve heard that vinegar can add a bounce to your curls. Write about that?” and “Your column, honey, is my favorite part of the week” and “I really should not be saying this, but my husband cannot keep his hands off of me since I started sprinkling those herbs in his coffee.” Inevitably though, by the time the moon was high in the sky—after ten, in Quince’s estimation—conversation had settled and all he could focus on was the feel of Lela’s bare leg against the fabric of his pants. There was something wonderful in how comfortable they were. But also something less. How each night they whispered and muffled laughs and that was it. They were both in their twenties. At some point, wouldn’t they have to move forward? Another reason to talk. To try to move on. But, it was late, and such talk could wait.

Lela got up. Quince flung out his arm to feel her warmth on the sheets, and he caught her wrist. “You don’t have to go yet.”

“My parents like you, but if they knew about these late nights, I’m not certain they’d be so keen on you staying here anymore. And then where would you live?” She rubbed her foot across the belly of her hound, James K. Polk. The dog’s tail pounded the floorboards. “Let’s go out, boy.” The dog grunted before getting to his legs.

Quince sat up. “Even James K. isn’t ready to go yet.”

Lela opened the bedroom door, and the dog trotted out. “Good night.”

Quince heard the front door open and, from the side window, he could watch Lela on the porch. Her arms crossed, pressed lightly to her core. She stood that way for a moment. Then, she patted her thighs and the dog returned to the porch. The front door

opened, and Quince heard the girl and the dog going upstairs. He heard her father ask, “Lela? What’s going on?”

“The dog needed to go out.”

“Oh. Good night, then.”

“Sleep well, Father.”

More steps and then Quince heard Lela’s bedroom door close. Typically, at this time, he would occupy himself by thinking of Lela, but somehow he couldn’t conjure a satisfying image of her. He hadn’t told her about the letter from his uncle: Nephew Quince, your cousin, Estelle, is getting married this summer. Because of your recent boons, we wanted to talk to you about some arrangements. Family ought to stick together, you know. Signed, Marlowe.

Quince had almost laughed, almost tore the letter in half. But he hadn’t because he had ripped the last letter he had received from his uncle, and that letter contained information about the death of his cousin, August. Quince had liked August, and August had always been kind to him; there was guilt that he’d missed the funeral, that he hadn’t even known that August had been sick enough to be dying. But this new letter was too much. His boons? Mr. Jones let him live in his house, as long as Quince balanced Jones’s books. He had used his teacher pay first to buy an old car, and now as savings towards a ring for Lela. In truth, Mr. Jones should not have had to do anything for Quince; that should have been Marlowe’s job. When Quince was alone, fifteen, the rest of his family dead, Marlowe had offered momentarily to take him in, but dropped the offer fast, claiming he was too poor to take on another mouth to feed, another growing

boy to clothe. He whimpered that having Quince at the table would remind him too much of his dead brother, Reggie. He couldn't handle his brother's son; there had been bad blood between Reggie and Marlowe at the end. Reggie had had a tobacco boom—the likes of which Quince had never seen before and hadn't seen since. Coins and bills on the table, jingling in his father's pockets. The cold feel of a quarter in his palm as his father had sent him away to buy more dry fruit—raisins or something—for his sister's Christmas cake.

When he'd gotten back with the fruit, the yard had been full of people. They kept saying the same thing: Reggie killed them all. Reggie killed them all, and then he killed himself.

Quince should've told Lela about the letter. Forced her to talk about it. The letter and that Christmas. But she wouldn't. It was the one thing she would not talk about.

She had been there. Not *there*, like he wasn't there, but there afterwards. He remembered her at the funeral. She wore a black velvet dress with a high collar and kept her hands in her coat pockets. She'd stood close to him; she'd kissed him. They had been seeing each other for a while by then, and he had liked her for so long—liked her since he first saw her sitting at her desk the first day of school after she'd moved to Germantown, with her Virginian manners and her low-cut dress—but after that Christmas they seemed always together. Yet they never talked about it. Like it never happened. But it had.

Quince settled in bed. He tried to think of Lela's warmth against him, her shoulders or the knots of her kneecap, but he could only see her in that funeral dress

against a backdrop of blowing snow, breaths smoky in the air, showing him that she was facing in the other direction.

The next morning, Quince found a note on his door from Mr. Jones asking him to get some gas cans at the general store for some work around the property that weekend. Quince felt the heaviness of lack of sleep, though he thought he had slept and he didn't remember any dreams. He went out on the front porch. The sun was bright, and he sat by Lela on the swing and yawned. The dog lopped across the yard.

Lela turned to look at him. "What did the letter from Marlowe say?"

Of course Mrs. Jones would have told her daughter about the letter as she was the one who collected it from the post. Quince should've just talked about it the night before. "I was going to tell you last night. I—"

"Just had to reason how to bring it up," Lela finished his sentence with a grin.

"What did he want?"

"Estelle is getting married. He wants me to provide her with something."

Lela rolled her eyes. "God. I'd tell you what I would tell him. But the neighbors might overhear and we don't want any rumors started about my poison tongue."

"I don't know what I want to do about it. Yet." He couldn't shake the image of his father handing him that quarter that Christmas. It had been six years; there were still things he couldn't misremember. Because they would always be there, as they were a part of him now. He just didn't know what all that meant about him and his future.

“Quince?” Lela took his hand. “You’re always troubled when you have that faraway look.”

His father had had a faraway look in his eyes for so long. Quince shuddered at the comparison. “I haven’t talked to Marlowe in years.”

“Don’t worry about Marlowe until Monday. Make him wait.”

Reggie’s face seemed seared on the back of his mind. He had to rid himself of Marlowe’s letter. “No, I have to go today.” He added, “I have to go get your dad’s gas anyway.”

“Then, I’ll come with you.”

Quince was not a storyteller. He’d rather listen to Lela talk. He thought she had a talent for stories. He liked the way her face changed throughout the telling. The pitch of her voice at serious moments, tense parts. Her skills were really wasted on the gossip column. Wasted in Germantown. Maybe even wasted with him. He was stuck there, just like his family in their graves. Even when he heard her tell (always in brief) about what happened that Christmas, it was always somehow hauntingly beautiful. He would be captivated by it if hadn’t happened to him. For Quince, it was always the same:

It had happened like this: it was Christmas and cold. There was snow. Snow glazed with thick ice so hard frozen that it could cut bare hands. His sister had baked a cake and was mixing icing. Pasty white frosting. Quince reached into the bowl for a fingertip full, and Louise had smacked his hand with the back of her spoon. She said she needed more fruit to decorate with. He went to the cabinets and found rows and rows of

jars and boxes. His mother had bought and canned cranberries. His father had bought dry meat and salt crackers—things they'd never afforded before. Brightly colored labels stared back at him. The bounty of his father's good harvest. There was no dried fruit though. He would be sent to buy some.

Looking back, Quince should have known. He should have known after Reggie had bought so much extra food, spent so much of the money. Everything had seemed so together then. Content then. Before.

As he drove to his uncle's, Quince's tired mind wandered through newspaper articles about that day. Some were so wrong, misnaming his siblings, stating wrong ages. Some were eerily accurate and featured photographs: a row of caskets, onlookers leaning in to be within the frame; a splash of blood in the woods; the living room floor, pooled with thick, dark liquid. None mentioned what he remembered: Louise's playful smack on his hand. A streak of flour across his mother's forehead. The streak was right below her hairline. Even as the rest of her features faded out—had her eyes been his shade of blue?—he could see that streak of white and hear her humming a song that didn't have words.

Lela was agitated, Quince could tell. She didn't want to see Marlowe. She'd been supposed to visit that Christmas, but couldn't make it because of the deep snow. He was thankful she'd not been there. But though she'd not seen blood or bodies, the memories must haunt her as well. She kept one hand on his shoulder and massaged gently.

The quiet was stifling, like sitting a little too close to the woodstove. Or like those summer evenings when Quince would be hanging tobacco so low it was in his face and his father would push the shed's door closed—he always said it was to keep out the bugs. Quince remembered the hot stick, his hands grimed from leaves, and the breathless heat. He took a deep, audible breath.

But Lela spoke first, “Your uncle is a cruel man. You shouldn’t give him the time of day.”

“I need to hear what he wants. And, he’s not so cruel.” It was hard to admit, but while Marlowe had neglected Quince, Quince himself hadn’t been accommodating. After the murders, Marlowe made the offer to take him in through long pauses of chewing tobacco out on the porch of the house where the bodies were still within. But the offer had been, in hindsight, mostly sincere, and Marlowe had held out his hand which seemed so white against the dark house and sky. Quince had pushed his uncle away, told him he was disgusting, and had left the porch and wandered for a few hours before he ended up at Lela’s house around dusk. He’d stayed there for the night—he remembered the way her parents moved cautiously around him, like he would break at any noise or breath—and by the next day, Marlowe had dropped his offer. Instead, Marlowe had the house reopened as an attraction, charging a quarter for admission to walk through the scene. So many people came, locals, out-of-towners. All of them wandered through his house. There was talk of the murders and of him on every porch in Germantown, on every corner. He remembered hearing his cousin, Estelle, say that it

was for the best they didn't take him because they couldn't be sure what he would do.

They didn't know just how much of Reggie was in him.

“You were young. He should've understood.”

Lela had a point. Quince conceded but said, “I need to be done with him. Move on.”

Lela seemed content at that and kept quiet.

Marlowe's house had once been small. Two floors, five rooms. But Marlowe, with the money from *the* house, had built off the back, expanded his kitchen, and connected his outhouse to the rear. The porch at the front was marred by chipping paint and splintering wood so bad that Quince could see it from the car. He saw Marlowe's old truck, rusted red from countless days in the rain and sun. His uncle was on the porch with a young woman. Marlowe was smoking.

Quince parked. “I'll be back in a bit.”

Lela said nothing. She looked at her hands in her lap; she bit her lip.

Quince got out of the car. The air seemed heavier. Crossing the brief yard seemed to take forever, like the ground tugged on the soles of his shoes. Quince should've been rehearsing what he was going to say, but he couldn't figure anything. He hadn't spoken much to his uncle since the funeral. Marlowe had mentioned making money from the house that day—to support both of them, he'd said. Quince had wrenched his arm free, almost struck him. But he didn't. He remembered: the cold, the snow, the faces of all those people, whispers of his father's name, and God, and all those poor souls in heaven.

Then suddenly, Quince was on the porch. He recognized the woman as his cousin, Estelle, and she had a baby on her lap.

Estelle lowered her head and bounced the infant absently on her knee. “Why, it’s Quincy Pickett.”

“Hey Estelle.” Quince had never seen such an ugly baby. Pig snout and a head as bald as a possum’s tail.

Marlowe embraced him. “My boy!” He stepped back and then shook and held Quince’s hand. “You got my letter?” He smelled musty and like spent tobacco, not unlike how Reggie had smelled.

“I did.”

“Who’s that out in the car? Lela? I see an education didn’t spoil her looks none.” Hand squished tighter.

Quince almost jerked away. “Yeah, that’s Lela.” He had to keep his composure. He needed to know what his uncle wanted. He had to get his father and that day out of his head. “The letter.” The first step was to deal with the letter. He would deal with whatever else came later.

Estelle stood up. “Lace is hungry. Pardon me.” She went inside.

Marlowe released Quince’s hand and guided him to sit on the bench Estelle had recently left, and Marlowe sat beside him. “You see Estelle’s situation.”

Quince nodded. It was hard to sympathize with his cousin. A baby on the knee hardly seemed to compare with a family in the ground.

“The man *will* marry her. He gave me his word. But they can’t live here.”

“Why not?”

Marlowe tossed his cigarette over the porch rail and lit another one. “They can’t live under her daddy.”

Quince laughed under his breath. This close his uncle’s smell was almost too much. “I *do* live with Lela’s folks. We manage it.”

“Ya’ll aren’t hitched, and you work for her daddy. It’s not the same.”

It was almost worse, but that was not the conversation he needed to have with his uncle. In fact, he barely wanted to talk about Lela to his uncle at all. He might try to get money out of her as well.

“Oh.” Marlowe took another long drag. “That’s a fine thing. I wanted to ask, and now I feel like I know you’ll answer aright since you have a home.”

Quince’s stomach knotted. The house. Marlowe meant the house.

“I want to clean up the old house and give it to Estelle. But I wanted your blessing.” He put a fresh cigarette in Quince’s breast-pocket. “Honest, I met some legal folks and they suggested I get you with it so nothing comes up later.”

Estelle’s baby crawling on the floorboards that had swelled with his mother’s blood. Estelle burning food in the same kitchen space in which Louise had laughed and smacked his hand with the back of a spoon. Laughs of his cousin’s child and future children where he had laughed. Them playing in the bit of trees where his father had finally ended it. Too much. It was too much. Opening the house to the public was sickening, but passing off the place like nothing had ever happened? Like his family had never existed. They were gone from all but his faltering memories, like the flour smear

cross his mother's forehead but he could not recall the curve of her face. "My *blessing*? Lord, when did you ever ask my blessing?" His voice was loud, almost sounding like it was outside of him.

Marlowe stood. "Now, Quince. Calm down."

Quince was on his feet. Hands fisted. He heard the car door open and close. He needed to stop. Stop before something he would—regret? No. He felt the blood before he realized he'd punched Marlowe in the mouth. Marlowe staggered back and slumped onto the bench. He held his face and muttered curses between spits of blood.

Estelle was in the doorway without the baby, a dinner knife in its place. She looked at him, wide-eyed. She screamed something at him; he didn't understand or he wasn't focused enough to realize what she said. He felt the warm blood on his hand, his knuckles slightly ached from contacting teeth.

Lela was on the porch, wielding the pointed heel of her pump.

How had it come to this? His cousin with a knife, his girlfriend with her shoe, and his uncle spewing blood and black language into his palm.

The house. It was all because of the house.

Marlowe stood. "For Christ's sake, Estelle, get back in the house!"

Estelle made a tiny gasp and retreated back inside. She stayed by the window.

Lela put her shoe back on and wove her fingers in with Quince's. Her grip was firm. She kept her gaze steady.

"Good afternoon, Miss Jones." Marlowe rubbed his chin. He watched Quince.

Before now, Quince had not realized how short and round Marlowe was. Or how Marlowe regarded him so warily, like how he used to look at Reggie; somehow, Marlowe could figure that they were the same. But Quince was not the same as Reggie. He almost felt pity for his uncle. “My apologies, Uncle.”

“You have a good deal of Reggie in you, boy.”

The words penetrated Quince like copperhead venom in his veins. Lela increased her grip.

“You’d do well to ponder on my request. Not like you’ll need that place anyway. Estelle’d use it. None of us ought to let a good house waste in days like these.”

“He’ll mind your words, Marlowe,” Lela said, voice low.

“I’m nothing like Reggie,” Quince said. “Nothing.”

Marlowe spat pink dribble. “You owe it to us. Family’s all you can count on in this world. It’s just a house.”

Family. House. Quince’s body felt of fire, like there was a flame in his center that fed on his insides, blazing and raging. Burning for a home he knew he had to hate. He owed Marlowe nothing. “I will consider it,” Quince said, trying to cool himself to an ember. “Perhaps Estelle will have the house.”

“Fine, fine.” Marlowe made a gesture like he was going to pat Quince’s shoulder but reconsidered. “Be talking to you soon then?”

Quince shrugged.

Off the porch, Lela stopped him. “What was that?”

“Nothing.” He tried to forget what Marlowe had said: the house, Reggie, all of it. He focused on Lela’s face, the curve of her cheek, the frame of her curls, lips tight, green-hazel eyes betraying her concern. She’d been ready to maul someone with a shoe for him.

She took his hand, danced her fingertips over his knuckles. “This may bruise.”

“Don’t matter.” He could feel Marlowe and Estelle watching them from the window.

Lela pressed his hand onto her heart. Rapid pulse. “Let’s get back home. Don’t think about your uncle. About that house.”

The house. “I need to buy your father’s gas cans first,” he said, as he moved his hand from her chest to her cheek.

Quince waited until three, counting the hours by the ticks of his pocket-watch and the chimes of the kitchen clock. He left his room. For a moment, he thought about going up to Lela’s room, but didn’t. He imagined he would see her outline in the darkness and hear the deep breaths of sleep. He could stop now, stretch out beside her, and, as she stirred, say, “We need to talk about it” and maybe she would. Or maybe she wouldn’t. There was no getting by it now. The house would go to Estelle. Whatever was inside would be sold—he would see the house again with his cousin in it, her husband, her children. Something had to be done. He could tell Lela about it later.

Quince drove slowly, gravel crunching muted against his tires.

What all had his father said to him that last day? They'd spoke, standing across from each other. His father had his hands in his suspender straps; his pipe crooked in his mouth. The smoke hazy around his features. What had he said?

Quince turned down the familiar driveway. He used to play in the thickets that lined the sides, chasing the little ones. Pulling sticks to whittle into animals.

The house loomed from the shadows, grey and dark. He'd never noticed how the house slouched to the left. He parked where his mother used to garden. Once she'd grown rows and rows of sunflowers that hung their heads, heavy with blossom and seed. The yard had been full of birds and squirrels that summer.

Quince left one gas can beside the car and carried the other with him to the porch. He tried the door. It was locked. It had never been locked before. He paused. It felt like someone was taking fistfuls of his brain and squeezing them between their fingers. He could turn around. But Marlowe and Estelle and the house. He had to get in. Quince put his hands on the door and pushed hard; the old hinges shuttered then gave way. Quince put the door to the side and picked up the gas can.

The air was stale and still. Dark. But even in the dim, Quince could see the bloated floorboards stained a faded red. The first floor was one room and had been his parents' bedroom, the living and eating areas, and the kitchen. His parents' bed was unmade, like they'd just gotten up. The table was set. There was Louise's cake, covered with a glass bowl that had been nailed to the counter. The woodstove was cold to the touch. Floorboards creaked instinctively.

He dragged his hands over everything. He poured gas over everything. The structure seemed to moan and mutter around him. His siblings laughing, his mother humming. He stopped in front of the mantle. The family portrait was there. All of them standing there, a moment—less than a month before that Christmas—locked in time. All of their faces. Quince took down the portrait, tucked it under his arm, and emptied the rest of the can. He left the house.

The air seemed sharp outside. A dry wind ruffled the trees. Quince stumbled down the steps, suddenly feeling nausea. He covered his mouth with his free hand and held his breath. He had to finish.

He sat by the other gas can and laid the portrait beside him. His father smirked. Always the smirk, like he was laughing at something or someone else but not himself. There was a bitterness there. A judgement on everything and everyone. Quince remembered the last thing he'd said that Christmas had been, "Get out of this house, boy" followed by that smirk. He'd been sending Quince to buy the fruit for Louise's cake. Or he'd sent him away for another reason. But Quince didn't care to figure Reggie's logic. To think like his father was something he never wanted to do.

Quince scratched at his father's face until his nails broke the surface. He tore the face out, carefully avoiding his mother's. He crumpled his father's face and put it in his shirt pocket with Marlowe's cigarette and a lighter. He took the gas can and saturated the ground all around the house.

Then he sat on the hood of his car, lit the cigarette, and took one drag. It smelled like his father's pipe. Quince threw the lit cigarette at the house, then pulled out his

father's face and lit it as well. It crippled and cracked, blackened in his fingertips before he tossed it at the house too. Finally, he snapped the lighter until the flame stuck and chucked it towards the gas-soaked home.

A moment and nothing stirred.

The house groaned before the fire started licking up its sides. Some slats fell from the walls. Cracks as loud and sharp as screams. Like something dying.

Quince watched. "It's my house," he whispered. He watched a few moments longer as the house writhed. He'd loved it once. He must still. Or at least the memories of his life there. The flour streak, laughs, hums, wood shavings at his feet from the things he carved for his sisters and brothers.

The porch had fallen off when Quince got in the car, placing the portrait beside him. He sped out of the driveway, throwing mud and dirt behind him. Someone might notice the smoke though it was hard to see against the night.

Quince smelled like dying house. It was done, and there was nothing left to talk about. He watched the blazing light grow smaller and smaller in his mirror. Smoke billowed blacker now than the night sky, choking out the stars.

TILL DEATH PART

There was much to discuss before marriage. Their engagement hadn't been unexpected. Lela had known her fiancé for years—six years precise, since they were fifteen and as confused as bees skittering between flower buds. The ring had been her grandmother's—a simple band with a single diamond setting, all in white gold. Ever since she was a little girl, she'd known that ring was going to be hers. It could have been her mother's, but her father had decided to buy a ring of her choice; money hadn't been an issue for him, not like it was for Quince. Quince had probably been relieved when her mother had offered him the ring, telling him that Lela had wanted it, nearly expected it. The ring had looked lovely in Quince's open palm as he offered it to her. It had been a grey April and windy, and a few raindrops scattered behind him as he knelt before her on the porch.

What choice had she had but to take it? Him there on one knee, glasses slipped down his nose, his face corpse-palored as if he considered for a moment that she might say no. She wanted to say yes, so she did, and she plucked the ring from him, and slid it on her finger herself. It was a little loose, Lela had narrow fingers no doubt from her days of typing up articles for *The Reynolds Reader*. Afterwards, Quince had perched by her swing, wove his fingers in with hers, and they sat quietly for a few heartbeats, thinking about what had been done. What would come. What would be expected.

And sitting there, their fingers locked, Lela thought of what she needed to tell him. The feeling was like a drill, piercing her and getting closer and closer to killing her. But, because it could corrode what they had, Lela had to tell him about that Christmas afternoon, about what she had seen: his father murder his sister, his mother's dead body. Relating the images could bring her peace or bring him peace. Or could it destroy them. But, Lela kept her mouth closed, liking the feeling of his long fingers pressing hers, pressing the ring into her flesh. She had already held this secret for as long as she loved him—those six years—and could remain unspoken for a little longer.

It was a tick-bitten summer. Lela walked into the office of *The Reynolds Reader*. She'd only been there once since the engagement, and no one seemed then to know or notice the ring on her hand. But her father had opted to run an announcement of the engagement in the paper—mostly for her mother and father to save the clipping; there was no one, really, who would look for Quince's name—so she felt certain she'd hear the secretaries in the office, flitting and chitting like hummingbirds in spring. As a specialty columnist, she was barely in the office. Her father had gotten her the job after she graduated from college—so she published every other week. She was still paid by the word (a maximum set at two-hundred-and-fifty) and dropped by the office once or twice a month to pick up her paycheck from Mrs. Brownson at the front desk and to speak to the editor, briefly. Always the same with him: can I have a real column? Something with meat? Thinking, not speaking: Something meaningful? Something she could be proud of and call her own. His response, always: Miss Jones, your column is well-

regarded. The other day, my wife commented on the uses of vinegar you suggested (or whatever else the column had been about). Her hair, my girl. My god! It's so full, and she is so happy. Lela always smiled the same blushing smile and giggled, thanking him for his compliments, not looking at the barely dressed woman on the poster on the far wall of his office. Sometimes she had trouble not imagining jabbing his eye with a fountain pen.

The urge for the new column had increased once she'd gotten engaged. It was as if, since she was about to become permanently attached to someone else, she wanted to still have something uniquely her own. Quince had told her that he didn't expect her to stop writing, and while she didn't think she needed his permission, it meant a lot that he was giving it to her. She knew of other men who would not be so open minded. Men like her editor whose words struck her with the patronizing qualities of a head pat.

But, this time, after the engagement, after the announcement, Mrs. Brownson caught Lela's hand instead of placing the paycheck within it. She studied the ring as a vulture watches the death throes of a rabbit in a trap. Her own wedding band was plain, yellow-gold (probably plated, not solid). "My, Lela. Such a pretty ring. He must rightly love you."

Love should not be represented by an item, though it did seem like the ring held some sort of power. Lela found herself rubbing her other fingers against it often—a nervous tick she'd only recently acquired?—and even Quince, when he held her hand, seemed aware of it. "It was my grandmother's. Quince is saving for a house." Though he was a schoolteacher in Germantown, he also did the books for her father's supply and

farm equipment business and was paid in board, since he'd had nowhere to go since that Christmas with all those bullets. And, Quince had said that day on the swing, that he was saving his money to buy a house. He'd told her, as she was nearly lost in thought, that he would not marry her and bring her back to her parents' house. They could not live that way forever. There were many things, Lela knew, that they could not keep the same forever. The ring on her finger encapsulated their bond, and made it clear (to her, at least) that were things that could not remain unspoken if they really were bound forever.

The secretary didn't let go of her hand. "Marvelous. When's the wedding?"

"We haven't decided." There was so much to talk about beforehand. The location, the food, her dress, the house. All else.

"Fall in the mountains! Or a Christmas wedding."

Lela took a sharp intake of breath, like a knife tip slamming her throat.

Mrs. Brownson reddened. "Of course not. I misspoke. I'm sorry I mentioned that."

It was still a well-known fact—throughout the state, really—that Quince's family had been murdered on Christmas, 1929. It was always there, out in the open, like an exposed wound to a salt sea. The murders had been printed in all the newspapers in the state, everyone seemed to have read the articles about how his father had gone crazy and killed the rest of the family, except Quince. Quince himself had never talked about it to her. Lela never mentioned anything about it to him. But it was always there. Always somewhere written on his face, printed in his blood. Lela decided to say something simple to the secretary: "Quite all right."

Mrs. Brownson handed her the check. “I suppose this’ll be one of the last ones. You won’t be writing when you are married. You’ll be housekeeping. Then children.”

It was hard not to laugh in the old secretary’s face. Lela was not a smiling housewife with coifed hair and depthless dimples from innumerable, forced smiles. Not the type of lady who lived and died by the bi-weekly Ladies Concern Corner that Lela wrote. “Oh no. No. I plan to keep on writing.” She hadn’t decided on children yet either and thought that was something personal between her and Quince, and not for the ears of an aging busybody. Lela took the check, a touch too fiercely. “Is Mr. Braddock in?”

The secretary nodded with her mouth open, as if dumbfounded. Or appalled.

Mr. Braddock welcomed her to his office with a broad sweep of his arm. It was a tight space, crammed with his massive cherry desk and equally intimidating leather chair. He had four typewriters on his desk and scattered papers like autumn leaves. The whole place smelled stale of dust, spilled ink, and sweat—not the outside kind of sweat smell but the kind that comes when a body is trapped indoors with no breath of air for hours. Mr. Braddock moved, quickly but with a flourish, a stack of papers from a smaller chair across from the desk and offered Lela the seat.

She’d never been in his office so long before. Typically, she only poked her head in, asked about the new column, was told no, and retreated back into the lair of clicking keys and Mrs. Brownson and the other secretaries, one who was Lela’s age and the other younger.

Mr. Braddock leaned on the front of his desk, directly in front of Lela. His arms back, supporting his weight, legs crossed casually at the ankles. “Congrats are in order, I hear.” He motioned purposefully to the ring. “Mrs. Pickett, it’s to be then?”

Lela cringed. She’d called Quince’s mother that. That name belonged to someone else, long dead, someone who had bled out on a floor, her palms facing the ceiling, as if asking for something, something other than stiff fingers and a long sleep. Lela shook her head. “Sir, about my article—”

“Of course you won’t be expected to write anymore once you’re married.”

“I do not plan to stop writing,” Lela said, even-voiced. Braddock’s stupidity pushed the image of Mrs. Pickett’s body back to the corner of her mind, where it belonged, unspoken.

“Oh. Oh.” He had to pause. That hadn’t been the answer he must’ve expected. He seemed to need to rethink the conversation. “You’ve talked to your husband about this?”

“Yes.” She remembered how Quince had said that he figured she’d be so bored without the column, though he did wish that she could get something she was more interested in. Like how she used to tell ghost stories in college. She’d acquired both her hobbies in college: storytelling and knitting.

Braddock was silent again; his mouth was open.

Lela decided to help him. “I want to switch my column. I’m tired of writing about the” trivial was the word, but Braddock’s wife liked the column, so “soft news of the Concern Corner.” Lela took a deep breath. “I heard last time I was in that Mr.

Whitscomb is going to retire. I wanted to take over his column.” Whitscomb, a rotund man with bead eyes, wrote an article called Heinous Happenings. It ran Tuesdays and Thursdays weekly and carried stories of strange and cruel crimes (murders, killings, and suicides mostly) from around the country. The story went that Whit had a contact—a bespectacled gent who had connections from the Atlantic to the Pacific—who shared the news he found with a select few reporters around the country via telegraph. Lela didn’t believe in the bespecked fellow until she’d seen a telegraph on Whit’s desk on her way back to the editor’s office. The telegraph was about a man from Montana who’d shot off his leg and then was eaten by a brown bear. From experience—Lela still had the clippings from the Pickett Murders (ten articles in the *Reader* alone)—she knew that at least the folks around this area buzzed with a good bit of darkness. Lela also thought she could manage better than old Whit, who had, for example, said in the Montana article: “The bear then proceeded to eat him quite hungrily.”

Braddock stared at her, as if lost again. Finally, a small sound, like a groan, passed his lips, followed by: “Miss Jones, you’re a lady. Why would you write such things?”

Being a lady had nothing to do with writing. Lela had seen plenty of blood puddled on the floor. The snap of a neck. The way a body wrenched after being struck fatally, dead before it realized it. “I think I’m as capable as anyone.” It would also be good practice for talking to Quince. If she worked on getting details just right, maybe she could tell him what she saw without hurting him.

He released a huff of breath. “No one would read Whit’s article if it was written by a woman.”

Lela sensed she was gaining ground. “Perhaps they could learn to. I’d be a married woman at the least.” She had no doubt that the hungry consumers of the *Reader* would devour anything with the name Pickett near the headline.

Braddock’s shoulders sagged. “We can try. I’d hated the thought of losing Whit’s article. But you have to have a good story at the start. Make your name for our subscribers. If it doesn’t knock their socks off, you’re back to the Corner, all right?”

“Thank you, sir.” Lela had a hard time keeping her voice level. “I’ll check Mr. Whitscomb’s information.”

“No, Lela. Whit wrote his first article without the telegraph. You’ll have to do the same. Find a good story, write it, and have it here in a week.”

From the tenor of his voice, Lela figured Braddock planned on her failure. Lela thanked Mr. Braddock and left the office, clutching her paycheck to her chest, feeling her blood pounding beneath.

The typing was harder than she’d expected. Her typewriter clenched the paper tightly as a fist, and Lela’s fingers rested lightly, no pressure, above the raised and rounded keys. But no words came. Only one story came to mind, and she wasn’t sure she could tell it yet. She’d wanted to start small—or at least start at a distance from her own experience. But the murders kept surging at the front of her mind, and she decided to try it. Perhaps typing could be easier than talking. At least Quince would have to read

the whole thing before he could respond, and she wouldn't have to watch his face change as she spoke to him about how she had kept something like that from him for years. Lela wasn't even sure why she hadn't told him before, except that she had been young and scared and he had been young and scared, and it seemed so much bigger than them. Maybe at one time she thought that she could get through the rest of her life without ever talking about it.

When writing, she could start at the beginning. One beginning when she first met the Picketts. But no reader would be interested in that—an exchange of pleasantries between neighbors, really—though knowing what happened later, she could linger on certain details. The way Reggie, Quince's father, had regarded them all with a smirk. How he stood, leaning towards one side: everything about him crooked, his mouth, his nose, his stance. How maybe she'd seen something in his eyes. Something a reader could recognize as seeing his murderous intent. But she couldn't type that either. She'd be fabricating to fill in the gaps of her memory. She'd have to add details that might not have even been there to make it all more ominous, more dramatic, more akin to what a reader wanted to read, more like a ghost story whispered in a room full of listeners and darkened corners.

She could start with the gunshots. Lela typed, "I heard gunshots." The hard, black letters stared back at her. They were ugly, stupid, and meaningless. The words did not capture it. The snow beneath her boots, the way her breath puffed—aching—smoking in the air. How she heard one shot. Just one. How it echoed in that empty morning. How she thought, instantly, that it was someone hunting rabbits for Christmas

dinner. How she had thought it was Reggie, in particular, who hunted rabbits for stew. Not that he aimed the shotgun at his own family. The blood on the floor so similar to that which ran red in his own veins. The thought of it caught her breath in her throat, stifled her hands over the typewriter.

All of that and she had only the words: I heard gunshots at the top of a plain piece of paper. Those words that did not tell the story. Lela plucked the paper a bit too roughly, like plucking a petal from a freshly opened flower. She balled up the paper and chucked it towards the prone body of her sleeping hound, James K. Polk, an old dog, grey around his muzzle, who lifted his head and sighed at her as the paper bounced off of him.

Lela did not set a new piece of paper, though the arm of the Royal seemed to ask for it. The dog snorted, stretched, and went back to sleep. Her father was upstairs in his study. Her mother had had a spring fling with a sunflower field and was pulling out the weeds. Quince was still at work—the school day almost at a close—so she was alone with the creak of the house, her typewriter, and the sleeping dog. And a story she needed to write (for so many reasons) but somehow she could not get the words from her head, to her fingers, to the rounded keys of the Royal, to the blank pages stacked by her side.

She could start with the facts. How the whole thing had been efficient. How Reggie had had enough bullets only for the family members there—he'd sent Quince away beforehand, a detail Lela must include—which is why, she decided, Reggie did not shoot her even though he must've heard or seen her there. How he shot them all in the back or stomach so their faces were intact; they looked good in their caskets. Or at least that's what people said, what journalists theorized. But writing the facts now would be

too similar to the articles at the time. Articles that mostly everyone still had tucked in their dresser drawers. Lela dragged her fingers over the keys.

Lela stood and rubbed the dog's side with her foot before leaving the house and walking down the road, towards the school. Maybe seeing Quince would start something. If she could think about him as the audience maybe words and meaning would follow.

The sunlight was pale and the breeze was stifling. She could feel the blood stir in her cheeks, her fingers; she could feel the ring. She had to pass three churches and a smattering of closely tied farmhouses, all plank and splintery, eroded bricks with holey grout, and the general store. There were a few older men on the porch, who seemed to pause in their conversations and place their cigarettes firmly between their line-thin lips.

Lela considered waving at them but decided against it. She followed the road as it curved to the left, and the houses grew sparse and the land flattened to farms and pockets of trees. She paused and let the wind catch her skirt. The ring on her finger loose; she pressed it against her finger with her thumb.

A car passed her, going too fast. It stopped yards away—a hard stop—and backed up. “Lela?” Quince leaned across the seat and opened the passenger-side door. “What are you doing out here?”

Lela got in. The car was very warm. The leather of the bench seat crinkled beneath her. “I wanted to get out of the house.”

Quince started to drive but he kept looking at her. “How did Braddock go?”

“He told me to write a story, and he will consider giving me Mr. Whitscomb’s column.” Lela put her hand on his knee. She massaged his kneecap, feeling the knots of his bone. She knew Quince did read Whitscomb’s column, late at night, after he finished checking assignments and her father’s finances. He held the paper very close to his face as if devouring the words before him. She knew he did not read her article. He turned to the page but he never pulled it towards his face and he only spent seconds there. She did not blame him for this.

“What are you going to write about?”

Lela licked her lips. They had never talked about it. It was hard to bring it up. She would almost rather see him read it than have to speak it. “I haven’t decided yet.”

“Hmm.” He sounded thoughtful. “You lick your lips when you lie.”

Lela smirked, half pleased he knew her so well, other half worried about prying questions. She decided to play on her pleasure. “I can show you something else I do with my lips.” She leaned closer, slipping across the bench seat, moving her hand from his knee, to his arm, to his shoulder and lower. He’d broken his collarbone as a child, and Lela could feel a slight raise where it had healed. She liked to think that she was the only woman (aside from his mother and sisters) who knew about it.

“I’m driving. You’ll make me wreck and kill us both.”

“It’ll be quick. Just tap the brakes.”

The car slowed for a moment, enough time for Lela to take his face between her hands—his eyes on hers and not on the road—and give a firm, albeit hasty, kiss. When it

was over, Lela pulled her face away and smiled at him before he turned back towards the road. “See, we aren’t dead.”

Quince kept his eyes on the road after that; there was a hard swerve onto the main drag, but Lela could see the smiling corners of his mouth. “Something could have happened in that instant to change everything, you know.”

Things could change in an instant. Like that instant—perhaps ten, fifteen minutes—when everything changed for him. For her too. Lela twisted the ring on her finger. She had never said it out loud, but she knew that it was true: she hadn’t loved Quince until then—until his family was dead and he was alone. She’d liked him, liked the way they held hands, liked the taste of his mouth, liked the way he listened to her, seemed to hang on her every word. She’d figured he’d liked her because she was different—not from Germantown, not a farmer’s daughter—and that, by the end of a few months, stumbling and fumbling as teenagers on the cusp of adulthood, they would break, amicably; Lela finding someone with a bit more class, and Quince settling for a pretty-enough Germantown girl.

Until that Christmas. That day, for a moment, she’d thought that he could have been dead. When he wasn’t, she felt tightened to him. Then they were always together. She felt that they were more than children playing at affection. Suddenly grown up. And soon, after a few words and solemnity, she would find herself his wife. Her name would change. Everything would change. She wanted this, but there were things that made her pause. People would treat her differently. Quince could treat her differently. That’s why

she had to get the story out, so they could start out together completely honest. So that if he didn't want anything to do with her afterwards, she would not be legally bound to him.

Quince pulled his car in behind Lela's house because, as the number of cars increased in Germantown, the amount of space for parking out front was shrinking. Quince parked his car on a slight incline in front of the shed. Lela got out and slid a brick behind the tire to keep it from rolling down the hill and into the shed. She waited by his door as he got out and wove his arm in with hers. "So, what *are* you going to write about?"

Lela bit her lip to keep her tongue from moving across it. "I told you I'm unsure." She squeezed his arm tighter. "How was your day?"

"I believe at least half of the students picked up long division. A few others slept through the entire day. I suppose I ought to talk to their parents." He wouldn't though. The last time he had a talk with a set of parents they told him they didn't want their child learning from a murderer's son anyway and they needed an extra hand with the tobacco. Quince said that it didn't bother him, and he was used to the stares and the comments and that he knew that others would not be like that, but Lela noticed how his hands twitched. That evening, he couldn't seem to get her father's book to balance, and he retired early. Much later, Lela had tapped on his door, and she had opened it when he hadn't answered. She found him sitting in a corner of the room with his knees up to his face. He didn't say anything; she didn't say anything. She left the room that night and almost went back in to see if he wanted to talk, but he hadn't taken the opportunity then, so she didn't want to push him. Or she didn't want to push herself to see him that way.

Lela nodded. They mounted the back steps, still intertwined, even though the steps were narrow. They did not stumble.

Her parents were in the sitting room when they entered. Her mother cross-stitched a cushion. Her father read the *Bramble Ramble*, a smaller paper than the *Reader*, printed in Bramble Cove. Her father maintained, even though he read it, the *Ramble* was a far less than superior paper compared with the *Reader*. When he helped her get a journalist job—stressing her education, her class, her skills—he only approached the *Reader*. Though, Lela thought, what could the *Ramble* have that was so much more meaningless than her Corner?

Her father sighed and noisily turned a page. “How went the meeting with Braddock?”

Lela hugged her mother and sat beside her on the loveseat. Quince slipped out of his shoes—heavily polished wingtips, a hand-me-down from her father—and sat in an armchair across the room. He took off his glasses and rubbed the lenses with the loosened tail of his shirt.

Lela looked away as he put back on his glasses and towards her father. “Braddock said I could have a new article. I have to write a real good story to earn it.” The story would run Tuesdays and Thursdays, weekly. Meaning less time for Lela to wander the house, taking the dog to the backyard. It would give her something else to do. She’d picked up knitting her senior year of college. She liked the soft pull of the yarn between her fingers, the tautness of her stitches. She’d started with squares, then scarves. Last year, she’d made Quince a pair of socks out of a soft wool yarn. She gave them to

him—they were blue—and he took them, gingerly. He never wore them, but when she had to put something in his room, she saw them on the top of his dresser. A snapshot of him, her, and his sister was beside them. His diploma was propped up behind. It was like something akin to an altar or a shrine. Once she took down the socks and smelled them—her smell: lily-esque and his: inky and something earthy. Then she'd put them back on the dresser and hoped he'd never wear them

Her father asked, "What are you going to write about?" He motioned his head towards the corner table. "Was that crumpled paper by James K. part of it?"

The corner table was beside Quince, and he took the paper before Lela could move to stand, cross the room, and take it. She didn't want him to see yet; she still wasn't sure how he would feel if he knew she was writing it, that she had to write it. She stood up, crossed the room. "It's nothing."

Quince unfolded the paper. He looked at the words. He looked at her. Then back. He didn't say anything.

It wasn't like he would know what she was writing about just from the three words about gunshots. "It's nothing," Lela repeated. "I don't know what to write about." It was true, in a way. She hadn't been able to write it as she'd sat at her typewriter. She twisted the ring that was slick from sweat. Lela's head pounded. She needed to change the conversation before Quince could figure it out on his own.

Without looking at her, Quince asked, "What were you starting to write about?"

“Just thinking.” The words were so vague. Quince could not possibly think that “I heard gunshots” would mean that Christmas, that she was writing about it. Talking about it. But again, what else would he think but that?

Still he didn’t look at her. “I heard gunshots too, you know.”

He knew her too well. Lela felt her knees buckle but she kept standing in front of him. At this, too, her parents seemed more present in the room, like she could feel their eyes, feel them trying to figure out what was going on. She had to say something: “It’s important to me.”

“So you were going to write about *that*.” Quince stood. His words were thick, dripping with an emotion Lela could not place, but was nothing that had come from him before. “Using their deaths to get your column.”

“No.” Lela wanted to reach for him, but her arm wouldn’t budge. It wasn’t only for the column. It was for them, her *and* him. The column would bring more money, give Lela more to do, help their marriage. More: it would get that Christmas out into the open. It would help them move on. Surely, it would help them move on. She tried to say that, but managed nothing else but another weak: “No.”

Her father was poised on the edge of his seat, watching Quince. Her mother stood, quickly. She touched Lela’s arm, a touch like she understood something was going on. “Brooks, I’m going to start supper. Come help me peel potatoes, please.”

Her father said something and then got up. He paused before heading to the kitchen. Lela almost didn’t want to be left in the room. She should’ve never tried to write the article. They could have just stayed as they were forever. But she didn’t think

she could've kept it hemmed up forever. It had to come out. She could not be with him—till death parted them—and have to keep a secret. Lela managed: "Listen to me. I wasn't doing it for the article—"

"You thought it would get you the job. I'm sure it would. Doesn't seem like anyone will ever tire of reading about Reggie." Quince shook his head and crumpled the paper and threw it at her feet. "My family is dead; they're all dead. I guess they don't care what gets written about them. And it don't matter how I feel about it."

"That's not true. I understand." There were no words; she hadn't had the time to figure out the words. The drill in her chest felt faster.

"No, you don't. Look at you, at that." He gestured towards the paper. "What *is* that? How could you write about that?"

Lela felt tears on her face. She wanted to wipe them away but didn't bother because she could feel the pressure behind her eyes; she was not going to stop crying. "We never talk about it. Never, not even back then. I thought you didn't want to talk about it, so I respected that. But if we are going to be married—"

"I don't need to talk about. *We* don't need to talk about it. We've made it six years—"

"We're getting married, Quince. I feel like we have to talk about it. I have to tell you, I—"

"Printing certainly won't help anything."

Lela clenched her fist. It was strange to hear Quince speaking for both of them like he knew what would help her and what would not. "We don't know that. You won't

talk about it, so I had to do something to get it out there.” Then she covered her mouth. Her voice had come out a little too sharply.

He stepped towards her and grabbed her arm. “Don’t make this my fault.” His grip was too much. “I will not let you write that.”

Lela swallowed and wrenched her arm free. “You can’t stop me.” He could have said that as her husband he *could* stop her, but he didn’t. He respected her too much for that. But somehow that made it worse. He respected her—loved her—and she could tell by the way his face was both hot and pale that she had hurt him and was still hurting him. In a way, he was hurting her.

And they stood there, close but not touching, eyes locked, unreadable. Lela could still feel the damp on her cheeks and her face was boiling. They needed to talk about it. She needed to tell him. But he wouldn’t listen. Everything was captured in that ring on her finger. They were bound by that sweat-slicked thing on her finger.

She heard her parents go upstairs. Then the house was quiet. Even the dog was somewhere else.

She should’ve written about her emotions that day. She had things that none of those articles had, because she’d felt things that no other person had felt—not even Quince. He hadn’t been there to watch those things. He hadn’t seen them actually die and felt helpless and scared. If she could get those things out, she could make Quince understand why the story was so precious to her and why she wasn’t able to tell him for years. She needed him to know she was really like him, all haunted by it. But something good had come from that day: them.

Quince turned and left the room, out the back. The car door slammed and the engine started. Lela stood still for a moment before she followed him, finding him still parked. The brick was still behind the tire, keeping the car in its place. She tapped on the window, and Quince leaned over and unlocked the door. Lela slid in and shut the door but stayed close to it. She was far from Quince who kept his hands firmly on the steering wheel, staring forward.

Lela swallowed hard, audible. “Quince, I have to tell you something.”

He looked at her then. A look Lela could not express. Not that she didn’t have the words but because giving them thought would make it real: his look, devoid of all affection, all love, barred straight at her, through her, at something dark he must thought lingered there.

That was it then, he hated her. He lumped her in with all those reporters and cameras that had snapped at the house afterwards, the funeral, in his face. But that was not her. She wasn’t using the murders, not out of any cruelty. Though she was, but she also wasn’t, never for her own gain. Lela kept her mouth moving and tried not to think of what she was saying and what that meant about her and him. “I was there. I saw it.”

The words tumbled from her in fragments. How she was there, what she saw. How on the porch, from the porch she saw his mother all bloodied. How she saw his sister shot in the back so hard she hit the mantle and broke her teeth, neck snapped. How she had run home and then thought about Quince, about how he could’ve been dead, how she wanted to turn back but didn’t, couldn’t. How she never told him about her being there because she thought it would hurt him, how it wasn’t meant to be a secret and had

become one as it went unspoken throughout the years. But now she had to tell him because she'd loved him since then. Since that day and he needed to know before he married her. Because if they were really going to be together forever there she could not bear any secrets between them, especially not about something so important to both of them.

At some point during the telling, Quince had slid towards her, had her in his arms, pressed tightly to him, so hard she could feel his pulse against her. Lela closed her eyes and stopped talking and took fistfuls of his shirt.

Quince said, "You could've died. God knows what he could've done to you." And that was it. Nothing about the secret, nothing about her and him.

"I'm sorry, I didn't mean—"

"Shut up," he said and stroked the back of her hair.

She needed him to say more. She took off the ring and held it up. "I understand if you want—"

He took the ring and put it back of her finger, pressing it down with a sort of finality. "I don't want that." His voice was light, full of thought. It was hard for him, she realized, to even think about it. How she had been there, how she had seen what he had not, and how she had kept it secret, but, even though it was hard for him, he didn't let her go. "We should talk about it. Everything. If we're to be married—"

"We are." She pressed her hands onto his chest. It was a start. More than that. It was like everything was all right. She felt light and fresh, and she did not rub against the

ring on her finger. It was almost like she didn't even feel it, as if it had been there for years. What happened had happened, but they could get through it.

Lela remembered that Christmas night. Quince had wandered up on her porch, and she'd let him in. That night, she went into the guest room where he was sleeping. She'd sat on the bed and he'd put his head in her lap. She'd stroked his hair, felt his warmth, and had, for a breath's pause, forgotten the blood and snapped bones she'd seen hours before. That was peace. And wasn't that love?

Lela said, "Quince." There was more to say, but it could wait. She'd said all that she needed to now. She unbuttoned his collar buttons and all down from there. She'd never done that before, but her fingers seemed practiced from years of thinking about it.

Quince's slender fingers were fast on the buttons of her blouse. His fingertips chill against her skin. He said her name. His voice was quiet, like a fading wind after a sudden storm.

A few soft rustles. Then quiet. Her hands were on his bare back, on his shoulder-blades. He pressed her down, the leather of the car seat embracing her, sticky against her flesh. She took off his glasses and dropped them in the floorboard. They pressed closer and closer until there was nothing left between them anymore.

KICK IN THE GUT

He'd been the one who'd said they should try for a child. They'd been married last September and with marriage came expectations. They could handle the comments from neighbors; Lela would smile and say, "Maybe one day" but Quince could tell that she was only saying that from the light way she said it and the way that smile could easily become a grimace. But, when Lela's mother finally, quietly, asked them if they ever thought about starting a little family, Quince knew that they would have to talk about it.

Quince remembered that fall day, starkly now. At the time, it had seemed like any other day. They'd been happy, whispering and nearly laughing on the loveseat. Now he remembered what he thought had to be the truth: they sat on the loveseat, and he had his hand on her knee, and she had her hand on top of his. The room was quiet, save for the hollow notes of the grandfather clock in the corner. It, like all their furniture, was a hand-me-down from her parents. Quince had spent most of his savings to buy their house, a small cottage built up on top of one of Germantown's hills by an old widow with a fondness for bay windows and sunshine, and hadn't enough left over for any furniture. Her parents were the only option. There was nothing left of his house; not after he'd burnt it to the ground. And even if it had still been there, he didn't think he'd want any of the furniture his father had bought.

They'd never really talked about children before. He'd always figured he'd wait until Lela brought it up. She was the careful one who worked to make sure that they

hadn't had any before. He wasn't sure what she thought about children—one of the few things he did not know about her. She'd been an only child. She wore short dresses, held a newspaper job, and had a college education. She wasn't the typical kind of woman, he figured, so she might not have wanted all the trappings of motherhood.

Quince, on the other hand, remembered his large family, especially his siblings. Though his memory of them sometimes faltered (they'd been dead for seven years, after all). He remembered his little brothers and sisters taking his hands, asking him to play with them. When he'd had them, they'd annoyed him with their pestering and needs, but without them he realized how much he had really loved them, and now how he felt like he might have a little hole in him that maybe Lela by herself couldn't fill. He'd been thinking lately, especially after Mrs. Jones asked, that maybe he should have a child of his own.

Lela spoke first. "You want a child?"

He said the first thing that came to his head. "Yeah."

She nodded. "I thought you did. I suppose we do have the room. And we are in a good place with finances."

Lela could be very practical. Quince nodded. "But how do you *feel* about it?" He did really care how she felt. After all, he thought it would be far more trouble to her than to him. He remembered his mother's pregnancies. He remembered how tired she always looked.

“I think I do.” Lela patted his hand. “I’ve read about many women who have families and careers. I think I could try that.” She put her head on his shoulder. “You will make a wonderful father.”

Quince’s skin itched then. It was that word: father. He tried not to think of his father. Quince barely remembered the sound of Reggie’s voice, like jostled gravel muted in a pocket. He didn’t like to think that he had Reggie’s blood in him. He didn’t like to think what that could mean, and he’d made it seven years trying to ignore that part of him. Lela always told him, had been for years, that there was nothing of Reggie in him. He didn’t need to worry. She always sounded so convinced, like it was true, or like she’d told herself so many times that it became a truth. She said that whatever came, Reggie—dead and buried Reggie—should never be anywhere in his thoughts.

Months later, when they found out that Lela was pregnant, they went to visit her parents. Mr. Jones took Quince out on the porch for a gin and an imported cigar. Quince hadn’t smoked often and almost choked on it, but kept his composure enough. Mr. Jones congratulated him and clapped him hard on the back. He called Quince “son,” but it was said with the familiarity of an older man to a younger one, not like they were blood. Quince still called him “Mr. Jones” after all. He didn’t think he could call another man “father.” Whenever he talked of his own, he always called him Reggie. But in his head, when he thought about him, he did always think of him as his father.

About five months later, everything was getting under Quince’s skin. His hands would shake so much, worse than they’d ever done before. Lela was heavy and sick all

the time and weak. He realized it wasn't only Lela acting on his nerves. At first, it had been strange but exciting. Lela put his hands on her stomach to feel whatever stirred within. She looked happy; she smiled all the time. She was still writing for the paper too, so she could get ahead and still have articles to publish even when she started feeling unwell. While she typed, he would sit beside her and grade assignments. He would ask, "What is your article about?"

"A small town out in Virginia was wiped out last week because of a flu. It started with one of the preachers and got around to everybody. No one even knew that they were all dead till a few days ago when someone went out there to visit his grandfather. Apparently, even the county doctor caught it."

Quince was used to Lela writing about awful things. He guessed it was because, since she'd seen his family get murdered, nothing could really get under her skin again. He never asked her why she liked to write such things, but he thought it must be because it helped her understand how so many bad things could happen in the world. He tried not to talk much about deaths and sicknesses.

Lela added, quietly, "A pregnant woman died too."

As things progressed, Lela got very sick. Despite the brittle air, Lela sweated and panted. She did not write anymore and one of her coworkers, Delancy Hobbs, was covering for her. She was pale, and she couldn't keep still. She began each morning sick and hardly ate, and somehow it seemed like she was getting thinner. She said she didn't want a doctor.

Around February, Quince started needing to be alone. He would help Lela sit up in bed or get her down to the living room. He couldn't bear to watch her labored breathing. She would try to knit but muck up all the stitches and pull out all her work. In the end, she just wound up thick yarn balls as the dog played with the loose tails on the floor by her feet. So, Quince would go up to the spare room that was completely empty. Except in the closet, he'd tucked a portrait of his family behind a tear in the wallpaper. He was fairly certain Lela did not know it was there. He'd kept it since he burned his homeplace down; he just couldn't get rid of it. He'd torn out his father's face when he burned the house, so it wasn't too painful to look at. His eyes seemed drawn to his mother. He had been around for six of her pregnancies. He recalled her slow amble; he'd seen one stillbirth, though he hardly remembered it, but he always thought his mother was fragile and would shatter like a dropped pitcher or her belly would burst with blood and bit everywhere. His father rarely helped his mother. He was always busy with himself, important things, Quince had to admit, like planting and picking, but it had bothered him that his father had barely helped the women he was supposed to love.

That was the shaking: Quince also didn't help his wife. He couldn't. He was scared now, and so was she. Everything was more pressing.

It was getting on to late March, and Quince spent so much time in that spare room, looking at that blank where his father's face had used to be, and he wondered now if he saw that face if he would see resemblance there. He'd been told that he looked more like his mother, but that could have been kindness too. No one wanted to look like a murderer like Reggie. Quince found himself saying aloud, "I'm a good man." And

wondered why he chanted it, but knew. He had to know if whatever had lurked in Reggie held sway somewhere deep in him. Had Reggie snapped, been sick or crazy, or was it something about being a Pickett. He had to know. In months, Quince would be a father. Before then, he had to know. He was all nerves about what he would find.

He would go days seeing Lela very little, sometimes only at meals that he would muddle through; mostly soups that all he had to do was warm and throw in vegetables and some leftover meat. She would barely touch her food. She'd speak even less. He thought for certain that she wanted to ask him what was wrong with him, but it was as if she feared the answer. He didn't know what answer he could give. They still slept together, but Quince knew Lela was never sleeping. It wasn't just the grey under her eyes, he would hear her each night.

That used to be him, tossing and turning, drowned in sweat. He always dreamed about his father, but they weren't dreams, but recollections. Like: the little boys had not been old enough for much farm work. They could pick up and that was that. They would bring basketfuls of leaves to Quince for him to hang and then return, laughing and pinching, to the field to gather more, leaving Quince behind in that shed all sweat-stained and dirty. There was a cruel hornet that hung in the back of the shed and buzzed him every once and a while but never stung him. His hands were sticky and grimy from the leaves and he'd left traces of the juice across his forehead when he wiped away sweat. As he was hanging, his father passed by and paused in the doorway. He was quiet for a bit and just stood, and Quince could see the lazy lopping of the June bugs in the grass behind him. "We got to keep the pests out," Reggie said. He carefully stepped from the

threshold and let the door close, slowly. Their eyes met the whole time, until Quince was left in the dark—only a hole of light flicked from the shoddy roof, and the heat tingled on his scalp. He wasn't sure that that had ever happened. He could have made it up. He'd wake up, and Lela would have him in her arms; she was always awake, holding him, bringing him back.

Now she shook and cried in her sleep, sometimes so loudly that the dog would scurry from the room. Quince would lay stiff beside her. He wanted to cradle her, but he was afraid he would hurt her somehow. He wanted to touch her, but he was unsure if that would bring comfort. She dreamed of him. More than once, he heard her moan, quite clearly, "Quince, no. No." What was he in her muggy nightmares? Quince could settle on only one answer: he was like his father in her dreams.

He should've thought more on his father before they'd decided on children. He should have tried to find an answer.

A Friday afternoon, Lela knocked on the door to the spare room. Quince didn't get the portrait slid back into the closet before she entered. She said, "I want to get out of the house." She noticed the picture. "Where did you get that?"

Quince had no answer other than the truth. "I took it when I burned the house down." He knew she had to know that it had been him who burned down the house. No other person would have set that fire and to believe that there could have been an accident like that on such a clear night was sheer ignorance.

Lela sat beside him, hard with her girth now, and cocked her head a little. “I’d almost forgotten what your mom looked like.” She reached out to touch the picture but stopped only inches from the image.

Quince remembered the feeling of that new suit he’d worn for the photograph. It fit him well, but the jacket was made of a heavy wool that itched and rubbed his wrists near raw as they had to hurry from the clothier to the photographer. Louise had loved her new dress. It had been very soft, and she’d nearly skipped down the road. He hadn’t seen her that happy in years. Later, she’d shown off the dress to Lela.

“I remember that dress. Louise loved that thing.” Lela’s voice was very soft. They both remembered that Louise had been buried in that dress. They both remembered that the dress’s low cut gave everyone a good look at the bruises that had settled after her neck had been snapped. Though there was powder on it to keep it looking natural, the casket had been kept open a long while and it was very noticeable. It was a shame that the clearest image of her was when she was long dead.

“She did.” Quince ran his finger across the top of his sister’s head.

“What should we do with it?” Lela asked.

Even now, she was trying to help him. She’d always been that way, as long as he’d known her. She could be biting to others, but she was quick to defend him. She must really love him. He shook his head. “I keep it in the closet now.” He had nothing more to say. He didn’t want to say that he wasn’t sure what made him keep it. He didn’t want to say that everything, even this empty room, seemed as clenched around him as a fist. He didn’t want to talk about the pressure. He didn’t want to worry her. But he was

already worrying her. He changed the topic and the room seemed to open a little.

“Where do you want to go?”

“I want salt crackers from the general store.”

He pushed some hair from her face. It was getting longer, almost to her shoulders. He wanted his gesture to feel compassionate, but he was afraid it felt stiff and lifeless. “You feel well enough to do it? I can go for you.”

“We haven’t done anything together in weeks, Quince. I feel fine enough.” She stood up, holding her stomach, and wobbling a little. She steadied herself. “I’ve barely seen you this month past. I’m also tired of soup. You should pick up some other things while we are there.”

It was a beautiful day outside. They drove because of Lela’s condition, though in the past they would have walked, hand-in-hand, at an ambling pace so it would take longer. Even in the sun, Lela was pale. She had her hand on his knee, and Quince could feel the heat of her through the fabric. Lela took a sharp breath and put both her hands on her stomach. “You all right?” Quince asked, though he had to look away from her as he turned sharply onto the main drag and had to watch for cars and a few walking locals. Some waved as they passed.

Lela licked her lips. “It’ll pass. It’s all slight now, really. I’m just not used to it yet. Mother said it will get much worse.”

Quince took her word and parked. When he looked at her, she was even paler; face like a skull. He’d done this to her, and now there was all the pressure, and he was almost certain he should regret this decision he made for the both of them. He couldn’t

let himself think him capable of killing Lela and their child. He threw himself from the car to kill that thought. He helped Lela out of the car. He never used to help her out, but he had to now because she seemed so unsteady. After she was out of the car, he headed up the steps and opened the door for her and watched as she made it into the store. Quince went to speak to Jefferson about any fresh meats and produce while Lela made her way to the crackers.

Jefferson talked, but Quince couldn't listen; he was trying to figure out what all was wrong with him—Lela was the same to him as always, always taking care of him and worrying for him—it was him. He was failing her somehow fierce. Jefferson put a pack of meat on the counter and Quince couldn't get past all the blood that was pooled in the plastic. He remembered that murder—his mother's shot stomach, really—was reminiscent of raw meat. Quince clenched his fists.

Something hit the floor, and Quince looked away from the meat and saw Lela leaning heavily on Mr. Peake. There was a tin of crackers on the floor in front of them. "Whoa now, Mrs. Lela. Be careful," the man said.

Lela thanked him and didn't pull away. She seemed to really need his support. Quince felt his fists unclench. He went to his wife and took her arm; he thanked Peake. He was gentle and Lela leaned heavily into him. Her hand was fevered and tight. He held her closer. "Are you all right?" He knew the answer. Of course, she wasn't all right. He could see that. He was able to see that.

Lela licked her lips. "I'm fine."

He knew she always licked her lips when she lied. He supported her and picked up her crackers. He kept a hand on her as they bought some chicken that seemed absent of blood and some potatoes and apples. He would have held her as they drove home too, but he couldn't. She was very quiet.

Back at home, Quince put Lela in bed and went downstairs. He decided to peel some of the apples. He started, the knife scraping the red from the flesh in clean even strokes. He played with the idea of carving the apple like how he used to whittle animals for his sisters and brothers. He'd even made a dog for Lela. He'd worked hard on it—to this day, it was his longest project—and had gotten all the details right. The dog had been a hound with flopped ears and a black tip on his tail, so Quince had taken the time to get the lopsided ears and even singed the tip of the whittled dog's tail. He'd given it to her right before that Christmas, handing it to her quickly before she left his house. He'd been embarrassed, but her face when she took it was so bright and happy. But those memories passed quickly. He had to try to focus on the future. That past only brought him problems. He had to focus on Lela and what she needed and that child in her; he had to focus on how he was good, not how he was like his father. He would take care of them. They would be safe. His father had not—all those years ago—taken his life, and he wasn't going to let him steal it away now.

Even as he cut, his hands had a tremor. The kitchen seemed to press his sides. The dishes clinked in the shelves as they edged closer. The stove had turned itself on and was spewing heat, and the curtains dropped themselves to cover him in a stuffy dimness.

The apple was cold in his hand, but his fingers indented the flesh deeply. The paring knife was light, much lighter than his whittling knife had ever been, and the little blade made him more precise. The room had closed in, leaving him only the span of his shoulders. He dropped the apple.

The room opened as he dragged the knife across the middle of his palm. At the sight of the blood, Quince dropped the knife, which hit the floor, and seized a dishtowel. He smashed it into his palm. “Stop, stop. God.” He slid down to sit against the counter. He hadn’t done anything like that in years. A room hadn’t closed in, his hands hadn’t felt that twitch in years. The blood wasn’t stopping; the blade was very sharp. He wanted Lela there to press his hands and to tell him that everything was all right and would be all right. She’d always been there in the past. But she was upstairs, and he was alone. It was all his fault. There was something wrong with him. At that moment, he wondered how he ever could have thought that he could have such a life, such a normal, happy life when he’d come from such a place.

He couldn’t be a father. Lela—he loved her—he wasn’t good enough for her. He had failed her so much. He was selfish: he wanted her to always help him and wasn’t able to help her. He fumbled and was useless. He thought of old things, buried things, like the picture he kept pulling out. He should’ve left it behind to burn back then. He should’ve left it with his father’s face. His father. There was something wrong with him because of his father. He was just like his father, fated to be so. He couldn’t believe that he had thought that he could have a normal life. Or that he had been so happy for years, with Lela, with this house. Or that he thought that he could have a family. But he knew,

he'd figured out finally in the pit of his gut that he wasn't a good man because there was something wrong with him or he would have not felt those tremors or split open his hands.

He was all selfishness. The Pickett Place—that remnant of his old life—was a testament. He burned it because it was his, and he didn't want his cousin to have it because he didn't want those memories to be covered up. When he burned it, he'd told himself he was moving on, choking off that past of his and leaving no trace of it but cinders on the wind and the smoke in his lungs. That was a lie—had to be—and that's why he still had the portrait. He could've left once the blaze began, but he'd stayed. He remembered watching the fire for so long as the house writhed like a dying thing. He'd felt relief; he'd felt contentment. Had he smiled? He couldn't recall, but he could have smiled. His father could have smiled too, after he'd shot everyone, after he'd gotten the gun pressed to his stomach just right. He could have felt contentment and had an honest-to-god smile, not like those smirks he always wore.

Quince pulled away the dishtowel, and the blood had stopped. The apple on the counter had already gone brown. He would have to go up to Lela and tell her that something was wrong with him. That he'd been stupid—so stupid—to think that he could ever have a life. He was as uncaring, selfish, and twisted and lost as his father. He would tell her that it was a mistake and that baby in her had made him realize that he wasn't anything worth having. He could destroy her life. He could end up the same and drag them down with him. He couldn't risk that. Lela deserved a life, a good and full one. Whatever was in her stomach deserved that too.

Lela would tell him no. She would tell him he was wrong. She'd get out of bed all wobbly on her weak legs and swollen feet and tell him that everything would be all right. He would want to believe her like he always had, back when he thought that things could work out; he would almost believe her. In her weakened state, she would swoon, and he would reach out and catch her and hold her close. He wouldn't be able to tell her how sorry he was; he didn't have the words.

Quince stopped rehearsing the scene and stood up, using the counter because he felt a little light-headed. He saw at once the stark lines between him and Reggie. Reggie did not feel. It was simple; Reggie did not feel. Like when he took them all to get that portrait made. He rushed them, boxed the ears of the littlest ones when they were slow and tired. After the photographer had gotten them in their places, Reggie had scolded his mother about her hair. "Pull it back, now." And his mother had obeyed as quickly as she could, handing the infant sister to Louise. The baby cooed and Reggie shushed her, harshly.

When they were all ready, Reggie directed them: "Look at the camera and look nice. This is my family." It was the ownership in his voice. He considered them all his and he could do whatever he wanted with them. How could Quince have forgotten that? He must not have realized it at the time: Reggie's cruelty, his selfishness. That's why Quince was looking off to the side in the image. They had only that one shot—that one moment—to look like the perfect family that Reggie tried to force them to be but they were not because of him. Quince had looked out the back window at a husband and wife walking down the road with a small child between them. There was nothing sensational

about them—no wonder he'd forgotten them—except that the father was holding one of the child's hands and the mother was holding the other.

The bulb had flashed and Quince blinked. Reggie was ushering them out. His little sister Zora asked if he could carry her back to the car. He'd been tired and he told her she had legs and could walk. She'd looked up at him and said his name, softly. He'd sighed and gathered her up, and she'd clung to his back. On the way home, the four little ones had rested on him in a pile. They'd never done that for their father. Quince remembered Reggie looking back at him in the mirror with narrowed eyes.

He was not his father. He had his blood, but he'd missed whatever else ran in it.

First, to the spare room, and Quince took the picture from the closet. He studied it for the longest time. He carefully propped it up against the wall, right across from the door, so he could see it whenever he passed. There was guilt there. He'd left them for years alone, like his father had. They couldn't be tucked in a closet anymore, nor in the back of his mind only arising in glimpses. When he walked out of the room, he kept the door open. He would not leave them again, tucked away in shadows. That was right. He was right.

On his way to the bedroom, to Lela, there was a crash, and Quince lurched to the door and half-stumbled into the room, full of a new pressure—a miserable worry. Maybe that feeling had always been there, and he was just mistaking it for something like whatever had pounded in his father. He found Lela on the floor, on her hands and knees, retching. He knelt by her and held her hair from her face. "You're all right," he whispered. "I'm here."

When she was finished, Quince sat back against the bed and leaned Lela against him, wrapping his arms around her. She was heavy against him. She smelled like sweat and flowers, like summer, and Quince rested her head against his chest. He just held her. They both held her stomach. The tiny thing in there kicked.

It would be a lie to say that Reggie was not in his thoughts, not in his blood, but it would also be false to say that he was Reggie. Despite everything, Quince was not, he told himself, and he sounded convinced, like it was true.

When they'd gotten back from Reynolds with the portrait, Reggie had hung it over the mantle. He'd studied it for a good long while and everyone else held back, waiting for him to pass judgement. He didn't say a word about it the whole time and then went out to the fields. Quince approached the portrait and looked at it. They all looked tired and serious, and he was looking out the window. He'd never noticed how pretty his sisters were; they all had the same rounded nose, not unlike his nose. His brothers looked very grown up. Though the frame fit them tight, he didn't think he'd seen them all together like that before. His mother, too, was really beautiful with her hair pulled from her face and in a dress that wasn't patched or wrinkled by apron strings. There was a beauty there: in that instant they were all together with nothing between them. His whole family was there before his eyes, looking back at him.

They were always there, locked in that one moment before, all looking in the same direction, thinking only of the present. It was so much more meaningful now that Quince was looking into the distance.

A CONSOLATION

Germantown was all but dead. They were killing it; they being the North Carolina zoning board. As New Deal policies took hold, the country was becoming less country, even the homes way off the main drag boasted porchlights that attracted powder-winged moths well into the evenings. Neighboring Bramble Cove had a cigarette factory that sent funnels of black smoke into the sky, proclaiming industry, and, more importantly nowadays, money. The nearby city of Reynolds had expanded as well, having a skyline of three tall buildings, and paved roads, sidewalks, and streetlamps.

Then, there was Germantown, rooted between them. First sign of the end times was a zoning order posted at the town line. When the zoning man came by a few days after the posting—he was a rotund man who wore a laughably tiny tribly—he stopped at the general store and said, most like to Mr. Jefferson but within earshot of everyone else in the store, about fifteen people, “This little spit isn’t even a town. Barely any land here at all.” He took a sip of the Coke-cola that Jefferson had given him on the house. “You heard that Benfor County is looking to expand, right?”

Benfor County rested right against Tulip County. Germantown had been the seat of Tulip until Dan sprang up around the river farther north. Benfor was named for some War of 1812 hero, which ought not to have meant too much in 1939, but national pride had been surging under FDR and mumblings of another war. But still, all that was far away from Tulip county and Germantown.

The zoning man said the plan was to split Germantown clear down the middle and keep half in Tulip and give half to Benfor. It was like that Bible story about the baby split in half; no one wanted it to come to that. But Germantown was no stranger to passerby so there was only kindness paid to the zoning man. Lots of good afternoon, how're you doing? and a free pack of crackers to go down with that cola. The zoning man said the board would send a crew out in the early morning and decide the lines. It needed to be done before the start of the new year, which, nonsensical, the government office placed in late June.

Once out of the store and on his way from town, like a held breath finally expelled, the general store was all racket. Benfor County charged more taxes. Could everyone still do so much together if they lived in different counties? Would they keep the name or, once the land was chopped in half, rename the chunks so that all of Germantown would be lost? Sarah Tesh, Jefferson's niece, said softly to her uncle, "We can't let it happen. There ought to be a way to keep Germantown together and still in Tulip." Sarah had a powerful interest. She was one of the schoolteachers down at the school. She wondered what the split would mean for her students. Some of them might have to walk down to a Benfor school, and that could be a long and tiring trek. It was hard to think that some might graduate from the school without their friends. Even harder that she might not see some of them in classes ever again. Those little things were the future and knew all the stories of their parents and their traditions.

Jefferson wasn't as upset as the others (he'd gained a touch of indifference in his old age), including his niece who had a pleading note in her voice, but him and his store

were closer to the Benfor side already, and he feared the spike in the taxes which would force a price increase which would mean fewer customers, especially neighbors who were used to low prices and understanding.

“That man,” said Mrs. Nancy Parish, a fancy young woman who used to be a Brow, daughter of the wealthy undertaker. If Germantown had an aristocracy, Nancy would have crowned herself queen long before. “Had the stupidest face.”

There was a murmur of agreement, though, really, the man’s face had nothing to do with anything. Sarah rolled her eyes. She was a few years older than Nancy—twenty-eight compared to twenty-six—but such a small differences in ages shouldn’t account too much. Sarah had never liked Nancy Brow Parish, though the Browns had lived beside her Uncle Tom for as long as she could remember; they’d earned their money through undertaking, and it was hard to look at their big house and not think of all the bodies they’d had their hands in, all the families and their griefs that paid for Nancy’s heavy curls and pretty dresses. “More pressing, I can’t believe he said we weren’t a town. Course we are.”

Her cousin, who was up for a visit from Raleigh, Julian Hall said, “Well, I think it is the truth.” Being from a big city meant he couldn’t care too much about the death of a small town. He’d visited his Uncle Tom a few summers, only to grow weary of gossip and the ladies with their fans out on their porches. He couldn’t see the good alongside the bad, not like those who’d lived there for most their years.

“There’s got to be something to convince them to keep us together,” said Nancy, handing a candy stick (unpaid for) to her daughter, Harriet. The child sucked apathetically, similar to a cow at their cud, with her wide but dull eyes on her mother.

Each town had a story; something that could bind all the folks together. There wasn’t much in common all Germantown could all claim. Originally, all of it was German, but that blood had been distilled through marriages and generations, and no one wanted to claim such a heritage when a man like Hitler occupied the newspapers. The only real thing that they had were the Pickett murders. Which was also something that no one really should’ve wanted to claim.

Those murders should’ve been old news. A decade had passed since that Christmas morning when Reggie Pickett took a shotgun and ended his large family, leaving his wife and children bleeding out on the floor, and then killed himself. He left behind his oldest son. A sad story, but the real news was that Reggie’s brother, Marlowe, opened the house up as an attraction. Most everybody remembered and that was what had put Germantown on the map for several years. People came from all around to see the house, to be close, for a space of a half hour, to something so gruesome. Most of the Germantown folks had gone once or twice. Mostly because they wanted to see what exactly had happened and try to figure out crazy old Reggie, though some were morbidly intrigued by the whole thing and enjoyed the showiness of it all. The house had burned down little over four years ago; most said it had been God laying a judgment on that place and hurling lightning its way. Others said it was Quince Pickett who did it.

Quince Pickett could be the key for keeping up Germantown. If the gunshots and his daddy had brought everyone together in the national (or at least the state's) eye, the story would have to do it again, and no one knew it better than Quince Pickett. No one had known what to do with him after the murders. There were no words to say to someone who had gone through something like that. Some folks felt genuinely sorry for him, and others thought that he was going to turn out like his father; everybody really figured that the poor thing would kill himself and bring a conclusion to the whole thing. He hadn't though. He'd gone college. He'd become a teacher, first in Germantown school and then at a college teaching arithmetic. He'd gotten married and bought a house. He seemed just like any ordinary folk. Most were pleased that he had turned out so well; if not also a touch surprised. A few did express something like disappointment, feeding off bitter jealousy.

Still, while it was a story they all knew, it was not something that could stop the zoning. County lines and offices had little to do with something as wrought as old murders.

The general store had fallen silent. Nancy sighed, deeply. "It's been ten years, we all know that."

Even unspoken, everyone knew what she was talking about, except Julian who asked, "Since what?"

No one answered. Jefferson decided he would tell him later. Jefferson moved to put a few more bottles in the ice chest. "How do you expect to use that?"

Nancy went for another candy stick, and Jefferson shot her a look, so she ran her fingers through her long hair instead. Nancy said, “We’ll get Lela to write an article for the *Reynolds Reader*.”

Sarah shook her head. She’d taught with Quince for several years when he was at the Germantown school, and she knew his wife, Lela, fairly. She couldn’t imagine Quince would want anything to do with another article, and she was sure that Lela would not write such a thing. It was also too cruel to make them recall the anniversary of something that both of them would have wanted to forever forget. Nancy, and whoever agreed with her, were fools and a shame to the town. Sarah was trying to find some gentler words to say—after all, there were over a dozen people in the store to overhear—to Nancy, but her uncle saved her by opening his mouth first.

“She’s already written bout that.” Jefferson took some candy, unwrapped it, and handed it to Harriet; he couldn’t stand her pleading eyes.

There was quiet again. A few people left the store. Lela had started her career at the *Reader* with gossip columns, and then ended up with an interest one. Then she wrote an article about the Picketts. It’d been a good one—a testament to all their memories of it—that many folks had cut it out and added it to the other murder articles they’d clipped and kept in the bottom of their drawers. That article has been beautiful: about deep sorrow (something they had all surely felt, and suddenly became real in print) but also she found some good there. She made the murders as living a thing as the town, as complex as it was. Since then, Lela had picked up two more columns for the paper and was even out in the field—odd for a woman, odder for a mother. Sarah still couldn’t

figure how such an article could keep Germantown whole. Her uncle and cousin were both quiet, though she caught Julian rolling his eyes. A few people—Mrs. Wearn, Mr. Kiger, a handful—were nodding with thoughtful looks. So much worse, Sarah knew that several others in the store probably also agreed with Nancy because they didn't understand how progress worked. She tried to think of something else to say.

“I'll go out and ask her,” Nancy said, taking her daughter's hand. With Harriet there, how could Lela say no?

Sarah held out her arm. “Nancy, you can't do that.”

“Why?”

There wasn't a good answer. Sarah just shook her head. “It's rude. And not neighborly, if that's suddenly all you care about.”

“Sarah, I know what I'm doing. I'll keep Germantown together. Just you watch.” Nancy flipped her curls from her shoulder and took her daughter's hand, fiercely. Her heels clacked against the wood of the floor as she marched away. She thought her hips looked lovely, and Sarah thought that Nancy was only making herself look more ridiculous. Odd that someone like her could be so influential.

Once she was out the door, Jefferson went back to checking folks out. Old Mr. Vernon, who'd bought a big bottle of ginger ale asked, “What does that girl really expect she'll get from the Picketts?”

Sarah didn't bother to respond. She brought a pack of cigarettes to her uncle at the counter. She'd been trying to quit smoking, but somehow she didn't think she'd ever be able to. Not with how things were going.

The next day, Nancy Parish made her way to the Pickett house with her daughter in tow, though the girl complained about the walk and the heat and how her shoes rubbed the sides of her feet.

Quince and Lela lived a ways out of town in a small house on a hill that had once belonged to old widow Lakely. The widow's son had been a builder, so the house had all sorts of windows and odd shaped doors. They were settled in that house and were blessed with twins. It was an intimidating walk uphill and watched by pines. Nancy was almost out of breath when she came in sight of the house. It was a light grey with shutters a shade darker, and the paint was fresh. There was a wrap-around porch adorned with whicker rockers and a large, scruffy-looking dog. The front of the house bore two bay windows which no doubt gave superior views of the sunrise. At approach, Nancy could see that Lela sat at a desk in one of those windows, with her hands poised over a typewriter. She wasn't typing; she was watching the front yard,

Nancy heard the children—the twins—before she saw them. Harriet tugged against her hand to go join. The twins were small—they only counted three years—and were as blond as corn silks. They were tackling their father, who was on his back, and trying to tickle his neck, arms, and stomach. He pinned them to him, and they squealed. Nancy searched but could not remember their names. The boy seemed to notice her, and he tapped his father's chest twice with urgency. Quince sat up and straightened his glasses. He was red faced. He took a spell to recognize her and said, "Afternoon, Mrs. Parish."

He'd known her when she was just Nancy or Nancy Brow. She hadn't noticed him much back then. She'd been rich and him poor, so, despite the lack of young men in Germantown in those days, she hadn't even looked that way at him. When his pa did all the others in, she was pleased with her choice, even though the haughty Lela Jones (who came from Virginia of all places) laid claim to him. Nancy was less pleased now that Quince fit well in his clothes and had two lovely children, while her husband had grown fat, careless, and Harriet—bless her—seemed only alive when she had a sweet clenched in her tomato red fist. Nancy bowed her head a little as Quince rose, pulled his suspender straps back on his shoulders, and picked up the girl child. Nancy increased her grip on Harriet. "Please, just Nancy'll do." She gave her daughter a squeeze. "Say hey, Harriet." Nancy threw out her most neighborly smile.

Harriet displaced a grass tuft with a gentle kick. "Hey." She looked at the children. "Can we go play?"

The girl squirmed from her father, took her brother's hand, and both bounded up on the porch to clasp their mother's legs. Quince followed close behind, kissed the side of his wife's face, and then whispered something in her ear. Lela nodded, then said, "Good afternoon, Nancy. Rosalyn, Hart, you may play with Nancy's girl. Stay in the yard."

Nancy smiled and lowered her face to hide it. Lela didn't know Harriet's name as Nancy hadn't recalled Rosalyn or Hart's. The children scampered off and picked flowers. Quince invited Nancy on the porch. Lela went in the house and returned with coffee and a plate of cake squares. It was well-known in Germantown that Quince and

Lela had hired a housekeeper—a middle-aged woman from Bramble Cove—who cooked and cleaned. Most folks in Germantown had laughed about it; how two people so alack in homemaking had a home, but Nancy thought better. Even if Nancy’s husband and daughter left some to be desired, at least she could prepare their meals and keep her house picked up. On the other hand, the murder really had seemed to do a wonder for these two: a house, hired help, and healthy children; why couldn’t it be of help to Germantown as well?

Lela and Quince sat beside each other on the porch swing. Nancy sat near them in a rocker. “What can we do for you, Nancy?” Quince asked as he draped his arm around his wife.

Hart, the boy, was pulling petals from flowers and throwing them at his sister and Harriet. They were laughing.

Nancy had to pour her own coffee—Lela did not move to serve her. That woman had no hospitality. Nancy took a sip, found it too bitter, and added in some sugar. The spoon chinked on the china saucer. The Picketts seemed too polite to press her to offer a response. Nancy took another sip. It was just perfect. She licked her lips. “I suppose ya’ll have heard bout the counties.”

The couple nodded perfectly together. Neither responded. They frequented the general store as much as anyone else. They counted the Jeffersons as close friends. They even attended a few county events. They were as deep into this zoning conflict as anyone. Despite all said and done in the past, they were now awfully normal Germantown folks.

They didn't see how dire it was. "Germantown may be cut in half. Split between Tulip and Benfor. We can't sit idle as our town is killed."

Rosalyn cried in laughter. She and her brother were running circles around Harriet, dousing her in waxy, white daisies. Harriet was looking up, watching the petals in the air fall as lightly as feathers.

"In half doesn't mean killed," Quince said, brow furrowed in thought.

"Well, the name could be lost. Our feelings as neighbors will end. Surely, you've both lived here long enough to care."

Their faces were all indifference. They thought Nancy stupid and wondered if anyone else in town shared her feelings. Certainly, some had, but many did not.

"Kind of you to ask, Lela. I wondered if you would write an article for the *Reader* to increase interest in our little town."

Lela picked up a piece of cake and took a bite. She handed the rest to Quince and then rubbed her hands on her skirt. "I doubt many of my readers would care about this place."

"Well, not the place. Maybe a more fascinating story—"

"She's already written about the murders," Quince said. "Once is enough."

"It's coming up on a decade. I'm sure folks would love the piece, and it will make Germantown known again. It'll do good by your neighbors." Nancy could tell she was losing them. Quince had begun to tap his fingers on the arm of the swing. "None of us want to lose Germantown, and that story really brought us together."

Quince stood up. Nancy thought he was going to yell at her, but instead he left the porch and went to stand by the children who were busy rolling through the grass. Harriet's dress would be streaked with grass stains.

Lela crossed her legs. "I won't write that. Let it go. I doubt it would help anyway. What could an article really do?"

"We have to try everything for the town—"

"That's not what makes a town a town, and if that is what truly binds Germantown together now, perhaps it's better off being broken." Lela stood. "Look, I won't tell you what I want to because there are children nearby, but I'm not writing another article about that. We've moved on and we aren't going back." She looked out towards the yard and the children and licked her lips. "I think most everyone's all moved on by now. Let's say goodbye like we have an ounce of class, and you get on."

Nancy stood stiffly and nodded. She banged her leg against the serving tray, spilling the coffee pot. Lela did not move to clean it. It was disgusting how Lela and Quince could help but chose to do nothing. Nancy didn't say goodbye—an ounce of class, her foot; Lela Pickett, her husband, and her children were classless. Nancy gathered up Harriet wordlessly and made her way back down the hill, relishing that the Picketts would be in the Benfor part of the split and would have more taxes on that home of theirs.

Nancy bought a bottle of malt beer at the store, and Jefferson took that as an admission of defeat. After paying, Nancy unscrewed the top and took a long, long drink.

Jefferson wasn't sure what Nancy had expected anyway. Those murders had been hard on everyone, and just because the town's coping had been a touch morbid didn't mean that it was something that should be flaunted around. Maybe Nancy didn't realize this because she had been a teenager at the time and really only the older folks remembered the harsh details of late 1929, early 1930. Back in those days, neighbors had been slow to talk of themselves or to meet in their houses, only seeing each other in public: at church, at the store, at *that* house, as if the insides—of their homes, of themselves—were tainted somehow. So, sure, they all talked about it and all agreed that Reggie had been as crazy as a rabid dog on a summer afternoon, and it was God-awful what happened, even if it had fascinated them all. But it had happened and now it was over, and there was little point in dragging it back from the grave.

If Germantown remained on the map, unified, it should be because of the strength of its backbone and the richness of the folks in its life-blood, not because of a murder on a snowy morning. The town had never been lines and figures before. While there had certainly been talk of taxes before that was not what defined neighbors. It was this newer generation that spoke of other things, who cared about imagined lines drawn by a man in a ridiculously small hat; those invisible lines that could somehow mean so much.

Germantown had always been the people. The people made the town, and if the younger folks couldn't see that, then mayhaps it was for the best that Germantown would be split and lost.

Sarah looked disgusted as Nancy left without a word, still gulping down the beer, all unladylike. Sarah wasn't so sure there was anything that could save the town from the

zoning crew overnight. The town would be eaten up by progress. She didn't want to think of her students or the store or what all would be lost. Sarah picked out a bottle of cheap gin and put it on the counter. She lit one of the cigarettes she'd bought the other day and was pleased with herself when she realized that the pack was almost full. Perhaps things were looking up, and everything would work out in the end.

Jefferson eyed the alcohol. "You don't usually buy alcohol, Sarah." He rubbed his forehead. Aside from a few bad habits, his niece was a very kind young woman. Teaching fit her. He expected that one day, she would be the one that all Germantown folks would go to for help, with their stories to tell, and with their desire for stories to hear. Stories—good stories—could keep a town together after all; the people at least.

"I just really feel like drinking," Sarah said.

"That's not good for you," Cousin Julian said.

Sarah shrugged. "Better than anything else, I reckon." And she left the store, walking down the drag a piece to her house, a small bungalow.

As night fell, the store emptied of people wondering what the next day would bring—when the zoning man would return with a posse from the board to redraw lines, and, by daybreak, post the new split on the front wall of the store so everyone could see. While they slept, their fates would be decided. Their hearts ached, as did their wallets.

It was hard to see them that way, and Jefferson offered them the best: words of encouragement, discounts, and candy for free. They'd all still be neighbors, he assured them, names and county lines always change, but not the people. Most seemed satisfied at that as they ambled home. Jefferson tried not to think that—if he really did have to

increase prices—he might never see some of them again, save for sideways glances at church on Sundays.

“So, Uncle,” Julian began. “What is this murder story?”

Jefferson took a breath to steel himself for the telling. He’d told the story too much. He wondered if he would ever be able to stop telling it.

That night, on down the road from the store, Sarah Tesh’s little bungalow caught fire and burned. It began around two in the morning, and the blaze didn’t settle till firetrucks from both Bramble Cove and Reynolds arrived, having to bring buckets with them and fill more from the creek, around half past four. It burned till nothing was left but the beams, blackened and pointed as ribs. Everyone came out to watch, clutching nightgowns close and tying robe belts. There was no talking; the main drag was choked with people. No one said the obvious: Sarah Tesh never left the house. They never saw her, not until the fire was all gone, and by then she was only a thing covered by an old quilt Mrs. Jefferson brought from their house.

Standing there, supporting his aunt who was heavy with sobs, Julian Hall saw an official looking truck pass on by, heading towards the northern reaches of the town, towards sparsely populated farmland. He didn’t say a word.

It was three days later that a zoning notice appeared on the general store’s wall, placed a respectable distance from the flowers there to mark Sarah’s passing. Though the store was closed, folks milled about, talking to Jefferson in his black suit, giving him

food and good will. Nancy was very quiet and even Harriet seemed to realize the seriousness of the situation. What had happened to Sarah was: she passed out drunk from the gin with a lit cigarette. It fell from her mouth and started the fire. How could she, so clever, a favorite of all the children, been so stupid? She was so burned up that the body was buried quickly with nothing more than a few words said over the grave. It was like all Germantown had learned from the first Picketts: such things could not be understood and to linger was too painful. They tried not to talk of it.

Now, there was the zoning ordinance to take their minds from Sarah, charred beneath the quilt. The map of Germantown was untouched; they'd only given half of one road to Benfor, and that was a road of two or three families who never came around much anyways because their distance was a mite too long for a walk, and they were too poor for a car. At the bottom of the map in chicken-scratch, was written: Zoners couldn't fully access because of fire. Due to other obligations, the board determined these lines. Contact with questions. Then there was a phone number.

There was little celebration because of Jefferson, though he kept a brave face. But the relief could almost be felt in the air. Germantown had survived. The cost had only been one woman's life. It was a hard thought. Too hard.

What a thing, Jefferson thought. What a thing to keep them all together. Though, maybe, Sarah would have wanted it that way.

Lela and Quince visited Jefferson with their children. The old man bounced both twins on his knees and cradled them to his chest, where they squirmed and giggled like warm living things. Those children would still grow up in Germantown, they would be

the future, and one day they would tell the story of Germantown and the zoning board and the fire that night, perhaps as a coincidence, maybe as fate.

“I’m so sorry, Tom.” Quince said. He put his hand on Jefferson’s shoulder.

Jefferson smiled up at him, but couldn’t find words to say. He focused again on the children. The way they looked back at him so innocent for now. He thought about the stories they would hear. All the stories they would tell.