

ABSTRACT

The Mason Jar

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My idea of original research for this thesis project was to search inside of myself to create a work of art that is my very own: a culmination of some of the most important lessons I have learned in my life up until now, especially during my time as an undergraduate at Baylor University. The connecting strand between all of the short stories in my collection is the very idea of human connectedness itself—something that I have come to understand as both difficult to achieve, but absolutely necessary in order to live a fulfilling life. These stories explore the different ways in which people obtain or struggle to obtain this by concentrating on simple, realistic situations and the emotions that constantly turn and shift underneath the surface. *The Mason Jar* works to authentically portray suffering and the difficulties people face in attempting to connect with one another, as well as uphold the hope of reconciliation—which often appears in ways that one does not expect.

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THE MASON JAR

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Honors Program

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INTRODUCTION

I would like to welcome you to one of the biggest moments of my life so far, during what has been the strangest, most uncertain time period of my life. This spring of 2013 has been a time of intense questioning—about myself, my capabilities, my desires, and my future. I have suffered heartbreak, rejections from too many graduate programs to mention, and am currently waiting with great anticipation and uncertainty from a teaching program that is my final and most wanted option. I have never been as uncertain as I am now about what the future will look like. Yet in the midst of this, I am more certain than ever about a few things: That my real friends are a community to lean on and grow with that loves me more than I can remember sometimes. That deep down, people just want and desperately need to be loved and encouraged. And that I am a writer. I am a writer simply in the fact that I have ideas and thoughts that I want to share, and I share them by telling stories. On the first day of my Beginning Creative Writing class, Dr. Greg Garrett said simply, “Writers write,” and finally I have written, and will continue to write. This thesis project marks a now very certain thing in my life.

This is not my first attempt though. When I was in the second grade I started to write a story about a bush baby and a mongoose that lived in Africa and were best friends. I remember sitting at my little desk next to Mrs. Day’s big desk, hoping and believing that it would be amazing. Then, we had to move on to learning about measurement systems and reading *The Boxcar Children*, and I never finished it. Even back then, I had no follow through with writing, but at least I thought the little bit that I had written was gold. Now it’s harder. Now I am worried about what other people think

and if the fact that I am even writing at all makes me pretentious. What happened? I think sometimes I start to really get a hold of the whole entering the kingdom of God like a child thing. Not caring what anyone thinks, bold and gentle and curious, believing in hope and magic, running in wearing rainbow leopard print shorts with a mismatched shirt and light-up sneakers. Sure, there may be dirt on your face and popsicle stains on your shirt, but you believe so much in what's going on that you have to be a part of it, and you are willing to bring your messy little self along inside just in hopes of being closer to goodness and light. I think that's how it is with writing, and maybe love, and probably the rest of life. Now I'm no longer writing about talking animals, but I am hoping to connect back with that initial desire to tell stories and willingness to act on that desire.

People are helping me along the way.

I have a friend who writes poetry and constantly tells me, "YOUR FEELINGS ARE SACRED."

I have a friend who I have seen writing and playing her own songs for years, and another one who decided to go to college and study Design even though she had never taken an art class in her life. Art and creativity come so naturally to them it seems. I am in awe and wish I could do what they do sometimes.

My best friend from the age of three goes to the Met and sketches the Greek statues in her spare time, and recently started writing stories and a screenplay just because she felt like it. She asked my opinion on them. Who am I to even say?

One of the biggest motivators for me this year has been an actual child. I tutor this 12-year-old girl here in Waco through my work-study job. The program I work for

reaches out to students who have been labeled “at-risk” of dropping out of high school because of various circumstances, and she is one of those students. I learned quickly that she loves to read and wants to be a writer. “Well, what kind of things do you want to write?” I had asked her, expecting her to have ideas of things for future projects. “Well, I am working on a mystery novel right now.” *Oh*. Then she asked me if I wanted to help her—but not so much with the ideas and story, just the spelling and grammar. “I like to just write and not worry about anything, and then come back later and deal with that stuff,” she told me.

As far as being worried about what anyone would think about the story itself, she told me she didn’t care. She knew what she wanted to write, had some ideas, and just wanted to go for it. I read what she had written and it was good. But even if it had not have been, the fact that she was so adamant about her goal would have been enough. While I was reading and listening to her talk about her ideas, I felt overwhelmed. Here was this girl, ten years younger, who was braver and wiser than I was. We talked about some grammar rules, and I told her that I was really proud of her and that she inspired me. She looked down with a shy smile and mumbled, “Thanks, Miss Teal,” probably a little uncomfortable because at that point I pretty much had tears in my eyes.

But I had to say it. As much help and guidance as I was supposed to be giving to these students, she was the one teaching me to be fearless and believe in the importance and beauty of my own ideas and art. Honestly it was the last push I needed to complete this thesis. Thank God for inspiring 7th graders.

Still there has always been the issue of what to write, and how to write it. People say things like “Write what you know,” and when I first heard of this approach I thought I was at a loss. I don’t know what it’s like to be anyone except me, and I am only a 22-year-old girl with a pretty normal life, and I am afraid that is not what people want to read about. I have a couple of good stories that have happened to me personally, but that’s about it. So when I was in my first writing class I was a little stumped. Like with cooking, I was taking the directions too literally. I realized that writing what I know doesn’t have to mean situations and actions that have happened to me or even someone I know. But I do know emotions, and those are what motivate characters and carry a story. I know how it feels to be sad, discouraged, afraid, lonely, confused, ashamed, angry. Though I haven’t really experienced any of the situations the characters in these stories face, I have to an extent experienced the emotions they undergo. In feeling it, seeing someone else feel it, or imagining what it would be like to feel it, I have taken part. All my life I have been doing this, taking little bits and pieces, storing all of these things up. Most of them I had no idea I was keeping, waiting to use them for something.

Recently I have had a fascination with Mason jars. Not so much an obsession as a realization that they have constantly filled my life, or rather they have been in my life, and I have been filling them. Growing up, my mother used them to hold cotton balls and Q-tips on the bathroom counter—the basics, the necessities. These days she also uses them to hold the vintage buttons and baubles she uses for the jewelry pieces she makes. It’s no longer just about what she needs, but what she wants to do. Making artful pieces for the sake of making them because they are beautiful and she loves it. She will be 54 this year and has only just started this hobby, and I could not be any more proud. On my

trips between her house in my hometown of Silsbee and Waco, I buy jars of Mayhaw jelly at my favorite little gas station, Woody's. This summer I sipped lemonade out of Mason jars at a couple of country weddings. Last week, I stayed the night at a friend's house staying up late working on this very thesis, and we ran to class with Mason jars filled with coffee because she didn't have any clean tumblers. These jars have been holding bits and pieces of my life since before I even realized it. I think this is the way memories and feelings work in my writing. All my experiences have been saved in my own jar, and this project is the culmination of it all—the finished product. Sometimes it's like the Mayhaw jelly, things put in and stored up, working themselves into something that takes time to ferment, and set, and become something truly good. Other times, my feelings and experiences are like the lemonade, poured out in a rush and immediately passed around to be shared.

I think about the image of my self-proclaimed Mason jar in comparison to one of my favorite books I read in college, Sylvia Plath's *The Bell Jar*. When I first read this novel, I was mesmerized by Plath's writing ability, infuriated by the issues she raised, but also astonished to find that I shared so many similarities with the main character. Like Esther, I was a junior English major in the Honors program, and at that point I was contemplating finding an internship in New York City that upcoming summer. I shared a similar sense of urgency and pressure, the feeling of being tugged in a hundred different ways, questions about my upbringing and my identity as a person. But unlike Esther, the jar I associate with my life is not one of confinement. It is something that allows for reflection, promotes growth, and promises a product that is even better than the

ingredients that were put inside. It is not a place where things go to die, but rather gain new life. It is not stifling like the bell jar. It is meant to be opened back up and shared.

This is not to say that all things that make up this jar of mine are pleasant and without pain. In fact, much of it is rooted in strife. Anne Lamott says, “Writing is about learning to pay attention and to communicate what is going on. Now, if you ask me, what’s going on is that we’re all up to *here* in it, and probably the most important thing is that we not yell at one another” (*Bird by Bird* 97). She continues, “Writing involves seeing people suffer and, as Robert Stone once put it, finding some meaning therein” (*Bird by Bird* 97). My stories here try to convey different forms of suffering and how people make sense of it. In most of them, no big event occurs by the standards of plot. They are subtle sufferings. The action that takes place may not seem like much to an outsider, but the beautiful thing about stories is that they do away with the outsider. A good story invites you in, sits you down on the living room couch, and let’s you make yourself at home—whether that home is a picture of happiness and unwrapping gifts, or features a shouting match followed by a tense family dinner with clinking utensils. We step into the characters’ world and are able to understand the details and delicacy of the situations. One person’s struggles are not insignificant compared to those of another. Everyone’s problems matter. The confusion and sadness of growing up can be just as painful to that individual as the death a loved one in another’s life—it all depends on perspective.

My goal for the stories in this collection is to explore this idea of suffering on multiple levels. The first story featured is “Lovebug Season.” I chose to start with this piece because I wanted to begin this collection that focuses on human connection by

paying attention to the importance and difficulty of trying to understand oneself. It's a coming of age story in which I tried to flesh out the confused and contradictory feelings of the changing views of yourself and the people around you, and how to make sense of it all. Until you understand, connect with, and accept yourself, you will not be able to do the same with others. "Lovebug Season" explores this idea behind the eyes of a girl who had a very different experience than me growing up—surrounded by brothers, resistant to the changes that happen to the body as it grows. She suffers embarrassment, confusion, even anger.

I included this story at the beginning of the collection as well because I wanted to establish that no matter what age, the emotions and thoughts of an individual are valid. Though the main character is involved in arguably the least intense situation of all the characters in this collection, she still suffers, and it is not to a lesser degree. I think about this idea often, especially when remembering certain instances in my childhood where I thought the world had ended because of something or another. It is easy to write it off now, patronizingly remembering the little version of myself, but the fact is, those problems and feelings were authentic. Though my problems back then were smaller than what I deal with now, they were the biggest I had dealt with at that point. I think it is important to remember this if you are truly seeking to connect with yourself and with others. We cannot disregard any of the experiences we have had or anyone else's.

We see the main characters suffer in one way or another in my stories, but in some such as "Marginalia" and "Candy Girl," we get a sense of the ways in which those characters make others suffer as well. Both of the premises of these stories are loosely based on real situations I had heard about from people I know. The first, "Marginalia,"

began forming in my head when one of my American Literature professors did a presentation on his trip to visit Mark Twain's home. He showed us pictures on the overhead projector, while he straightened his Mark Twain tie and chattered away about the history of the writer's life. He included pictures of his family that he had brought on the trip. Just as giddy and excited as he was about Mr. Twain, my professor carried on about his wife and children even though we were already running over past the scheduled set-aside time he had allotted for the presentation. I thought how wonderful it was that he was so passionate about both his family and his work, and wanted to include the people he loved in what he loved to do. The inspiration for "Candy Girl" came from a story about my friend's grandparents who I knew growing up. The wife had worked for the husband and they fell in love, and she was the light of his life. Both are beautiful pictures of love and a life well lived. But I wondered what it would have been like if both of these men were not as loyal to their wives and families? The husbands in my two stories cause their wives and families to feel lonely and unsupported. "Marginalia" allows the reader to imagine what the family feels, while "Candy Girl" specifically shows. Both men realize the error of their ways, but while the husband in "Marginalia" is able to reconcile with his wife, the husband in "Candy Girl" is not. Hope is not lost though for this man, and the final scene ends with a hope for future generations of females in his family. My aim is to show that life may not always work out in the way that seems best logically, but reconciliation is never too far away.

I wanted to explore this idea of reconciliation even further with my last two stories, "Felix and Leo" and "Strange Fruit." Having shifted focus from the self to loved ones, these are stories about human connectedness with strangers, and even worse,

enemies. “Felix and Leo” centers around the truth that each and every person has a back-story: things that they are afraid of, ashamed of, reasons to be broken, and no one’s is greater than another’s. “Felix and Leo” fleshes out what it looks like to love someone behind a hard exterior, even when that person fights tooth and nail against it. “Strange Fruit” is the final and in my opinion the most potent story in the collection. Drawing upon background of the Billie Holiday song by the same title, the situation and the enemy in need of love in this story is most definitely the easiest to hate. This one appears last in the collection because it is the ultimate depiction of human connectedness—forgiving someone who has blatantly harmed not just you, but your family, and scorns everything about your existence. Forgiveness like this can seem almost unimaginable. But still, reconciliation and the hope of connectedness are never too far away. Though it shows up in the smallest way, it is still there, shining brightly like a star—a pinprick of white light in a dark, vast night.

Anne Lamott says, “good writing is about telling the truth... We have so much we want to say and figure out” (*Bird by Bird* 3). Well, here is my first shot at trying to figure it out. The first popping of the top, the unscrewing of the lid. And I still most certainly have not got everything figured out. People tell you that college is the place where you find out who you really are, but I feel that this last semester I have only just begun, at least artistically. This collection will stand as a memorial to this time in my life when I first began to actually do something with the creative desires that I have been harbored all of these years. This is my Mason jar, full of me, what I have seen, heard of, and thought about. I hope that each of my stories will be like the fireflies I caught in a jar one summer

evening as a child—tiny orbs giving off light, ready for someone to open the lid so that they may float out into the dark and up towards the sky.

If you are reading this right now, know that you are sharing in a moment of my personal history. This is the moment where I finally complete something. Something that is not solely for the intention of receiving a grade—something for myself. Sure, technically it's for a grade—if I do not pass my defense then I won't graduate with honors—but honestly that is not the point of this project for me. Of all the lessons I have learned in my undergraduate studies, one of the most important is that the good work—the work that lasts—is not the stuff that gets done only for a grade. It's the work that I start to care about and put a little of myself into every time: the papers and projects that teach me a lesson worth retaining in the midst of completing them. For me, this has mainly looked like a lot of essays written about feminism and misogyny and racism. But this thesis project is in many ways the most important thing I have written in my whole life so far. It may not even be as good as other things that I have written, but it is the most significant because it is something that I have put all of myself in for the sake of its creation and nothing else.

I chose to write a creative thesis because I realized writing on my own was the bravest thing I could possibly do and would be the best way to truly express the most important things I have learned during my education. More than receiving almost all A's every year, learning how to write and how to *allow* myself to write has been my biggest accomplishment in college. To borrow Anne Lamott's words, writing these stories is important "Because of the spirit...Because of the heart. Writing and reading decrease our sense of isolation. They deepen and widen and expand our sense of life: they feed the

soul” (*Bird by Bird* 236). Good stories teach us about ourselves, and others, and life itself. I have always been moved by a good story, and now is the time when I move past just reading them. The stories that follow are the culmination of my Baylor experience and my life up until now. They bring together what I have learned in and outside the classroom, and I hope that you enjoy them. May they do for you what so many stories have done for me.

LOVEBUG SEASON

When I try to think of my earliest memory, the thing that comes to mind is crunchy grass poking my back and neck through a beach towel, and clear blue sky swirling with tiny black dots. Not long after, before I could even write my own name, I would learn what those dots were, and my childhood would forever be marked by the comings and goings of lovebugs in Southeast Texas.

The summer that things began to change started off like any normal one. Days of running wild with my brothers down to the creek, walking up to the Sno Biz snow cone shack along the hot pavement, heat playing tricks on us, making the view ahead shimmer like rippling water. And then it came: lovebug season. We called it a season even though it really only lasted a few days, maybe even a couple weeks or so, because it always felt like months. It was a disgusting time of the year, and I could never keep track of it as a child. It would happen once in the spring, sometime in late April or May, and then again in the late summer, August or September. I never really could quite tell the difference when I would try to recall exactly when they occurred because all my memories dripped with the same sweaty stickiness—spring and summer, even most of fall. Just plain hot.

Behind the pine curtain of Southeast Texas, there was no real grand changing of the leaves in the fall. On the calendar in elementary school, the fall months would be decorated with reds, and yellows, and oranges, pictures of falling leaves, swirling in a breeze that looked refreshing and cool even on paper, but that always seemed to be like something in a story. We never got what most people consider a real autumn. Usually the heat would even seep into those months that claim to be winter. The whole year would

melt and leak into itself, blending all the seasons together to become unrecognizable, except for the occasional arrival of the lovebugs. They swarmed and clouded the air, flying aimlessly, drunk off the heat. My second grade teacher, Mrs. Swanson always said that they floated around softly the way snowflakes fell. But she was from Virginia, and none of us had ever seen snow in our lives.

As pretty as our much-beloved teacher tried to paint it, the fact was lovebugs were one of the nastiest things you could think of, being second only to the stench of the Clarkton paper mill when mixed with the humidity of certain thick mornings. They weren't bad in the sense that they bit or brought any physical harm. But the assault on the nostrils was awful once they started to die. On the first whiff, it stuck with a sharp rancidness, but then turned into a heavy mustiness that lingered and just settled all over. Generally, our teacher told us once, lovebugs lived for about three to four days, but they often met an early death by colliding with oncoming vehicles. The acid in their decaying bodies made them incredibly difficult to get off, and on top of that, it would begin to eat away at the paint and chrome in no time at all. In their drifting flight, they would bump right into cars, coating vehicles with a layer of filth. And then they would stink. My God, would they stink. To high heaven, as Mama would say. The goop of their tiny little bodies would smear, and sit, and stink on cars all over town. Sometimes Daddy's truck windshield would get so clouded with bug guts that you could hardly see. He would hit the sprayer, and I would watch the stream of water go up and the wipers work hard to push the grime away, leaving the arched blocks of clear glass still surrounded by the murkiness the wipers couldn't reach.

Sometimes Daddy would break down and take his pickup to the carwash. Most times it would be the do-it-yourself kind, and we would all pile out of the truck to help. I liked the soft billows of pink foam that had a smell that still to this day I have smelled nowhere else. Highly artificial, of course—like flowers, but very clean flowers, with a hint of what I imagined strawberry chiffon would taste like, some French-y dessert I had read about in a book. The piles of foam looked like the big puffs of cotton candy we would get at the Southeast Texas State Fair every year—when Mama would let us each get one treat that we got to eat only after we finished riding the rides. My posted position at these trips to the carwash was the back end of the truck’s tail gate, but instead of cleaning, I always ended up just staring at it, dipping my fingers in the rosy clouds to make small swirls, until one of my brothers eventually came up and flung a bit of the foam in my face or sprayed water on me.

That summer, the first day of school got pushed back to the last week of August, and the lovebugs showed up the week before to ring in the new school year and ruin our last week of freedom. Daddy’s truck was filthy, and he took Regis, Buddy, and I to the carwash one morning. We went through our usual routine, piling out like riders in a clown car. Buddy and I, being younger, emerging from the cramped back seat to which we were always subjected. Buddy was 18 months younger than me, and at this point he was still smaller than me too, with arms that were white and long and skinny and swung funny when he walked. He reached one across the back seat as I was climbing out and pulled my ponytail extra hard, and I reached my own arm back and swatted at him as I jumped from the runner. I landed with a thud and pushed the elastic band holding my hair in place further up on the ponytail to tighten it back. An Alan Jackson song was playing

over the fuzzy radio intercom, and Buddy sang along to it with a goofy grin on his face as he emerged from the back seat, while I stood trying to give him a cold look, pulling at the hem of my shorts that had ridden up too high.

All of that summer my clothes that used to hang pretty loosely on my body were starting to get a little bit tighter. I guess Mama had noticed this at one point or another because she took me shopping the week before and got me new clothes for school, for my first year of middle school that I would be starting in a week. I sat on the bench in one of the little dingy, gray dressing room stalls of Beall's and waited for her to come back, staring at the pair of pants that we decided on—four more pairs hanging up on the other hook that didn't fit me right. Peeking out from the chosen pair of pants was a horrible bright flowery dress Mama insisted we get, and I glared at it, promising myself I would fight tooth and nail to never wear it in my life, and certainly not on picture day, like I knew she was planning to get me to do.

She came back with a hanger under her arm and a sort of sneaky smile that I had only seen my big brother Regis give when he knew something I didn't know. She hung up another blouse on the hook for me to try on, and then ever so casually pulled out from under her arm the two molded satiny triangles strung together with what looked to me like a mess of straps and weird hooks. I saw my own frown in the dressing room mirror, and Mama did too. She asked—fully knowing what the answer would be—“What's wrong?”

What's wrong, Mama? Everything is wrong. I don't want to wear that. Ever.

“I don't want that.”

“Just try it, baby.”

“But I don’t need it.”

There. There was that smirk. But more like a half-pitying smile. Yes. Yes you do, her eyes were saying.

So I didn’t argue about it with her, at least not in the store. I was taught not to do that at a young age. But when I got home I immediately stuffed the thing in my drawer and kept wearing my regular old sheer cottony sports bra. But I hadn’t cut the price tags off of the new underwired mess, and I should have known better. Not but one day later Mama called me out for not wearing it and made me put it on. Every morning since then I noticed her looking closely at me, eyes narrowed a little, which made me feel weak and exposed and rigid with a sort of slowly simmering anger I did not know what was for.

I had hidden the bra in the back of my sock drawer again and had on my regular comfortable one that morning at the carwash. As Buddy continued to sing and dance around Regis, his head barely coming up to Regis’s collarbone, I tugged and twisted at the thing. Admittedly, the elastic band was getting a little tight, but there was no way I could ask Mama for a new one without giving myself away. As I began to wonder if Mama would go through my drawers at home, Daddy ordered us to our usual positions, and I took up my post at the back of the truck. We sprayed the truck down with the pre-wash water to get the initial gunk off, and while the boys started with the foam I stood at the back looking at my reflection in the filmy mirror that had been created there. Even though it was hazy and discolored, I could make out the long ponytail and bangs and white t-shirt. Over and over I wiped it again so I could gain a clearer view of myself, but it was no use. The water shifted and spread on the metal of the truck, so only the blurry image remained.

I stared hard at the girl in the reflection. My focus was suddenly disrupted by a stream of cold water to the face. Sputtering and shouting, I put my hands out in front to block it and tried to come after Buddy who was standing a few steps away, holding one of the hoses, laughing crazily. As I blindly stumbled towards him, his laughter got even louder, and he dropped the hose, and doubled over holding his sides. I stood there, wiping the water from my eyes, and wringing out my ponytail, while he continued to laugh.

“What?” I finally demanded.

Cackling still, Buddy lifted up, unwrapped one of his arms from around his waist and flung it out, pointing at my t-shirt. It was wet and the thin white cotton had turned almost transparent. I looked down and saw the two tiny bumps that had appeared there, not stopped by the cotton sports bra, which could be clearly seen as well now. I glared back up at him, and he went into hysterics. Soon, Regis walked over and asked what and Buddy pointed at me again. I stood there dripping wet and wondering what Regis would do, hoping his response would be better than Buddy’s because I knew I could beat up on Buddy later, but Regis was much bigger than me—a sophomore in high school—and there wouldn’t be anything I could do about it.

Regis’s eyes met mine and for a moment he sort of tilted his head to one side and looked at me for what seemed like a long while. It was that look Mama gave me all over again. Only I wondered how Regis could know whatever Mama knew. It was like we were both in something secret, only I didn’t know what it was yet. But whatever it was, I knew that his eyes looked both sad and laughing at the same time, but not laughing in the mean way Buddy was. Finally the moment was broken by a loud used car advertisement

on the radio, and Regis blinked, breaking his gaze with me, and slapped Buddy on the back of the head.

“YOW! Whadya do that for?” Buddy said, rubbing the back of his white-blond head.

“Would you just pick up that hose and do your job?” Regis said.

“Oh, alright,” Buddy said, as he lazily picked it up and followed Regis towards the front of truck, dragging his feet.

As they walked over, there was a loud exclamation from the front of the truck. I followed Buddy and Regis to see what the commotion was. There was Daddy, bent over, picking at dried lovebug bodies stuck to the grill and the front of the truck. As he picked them off, the paint peeled off right along with them. He let out a loud and long growl of disgust, and smacked the grill with his broad hand. The hand returned to him, covered in grime.

“These goddamn bugs!” he yelled again, and went to kick the truck, but decided against it, swinging his leg around to keep his balance, which made him look like he was doing some sort of funny little jig. All three of us kids stood there silently, eyes wandering from him to the ground, not really knowing what to do or say. Usually Daddy was very gentle and quiet, but when it came to things like his truck, he got heated pretty fast. He knelt down to look again at the damage, and picked off some more with his fingernail. He sat for a while and stared at it, then closed his eyes and kept them shut for what seemed like a lifetime, while a George Strait song started up in the background. Then finally, he breathed out sharply through his nose, and hoisted himself up.

“Come on,” he motioned to us, without really looking our way. “Get back in the truck.”

We hesitated only shortly, and then walked slowly and stiffly to the door.

“We’re going through the high power wash,” he said. “You don’t need your seatbelts.”

A small flutter went through my chest. We hadn’t been through the automatic carwash in so long. Not since we had Jax, the old Jack Russell terrier, who got so excited that he had peed on Buddy’s lap and Buddy cried the whole way through the wash.

I loved the automatic car wash. The first time I ever went through one, I was a tiny little girl. It had been just me and Mama, and she turned around to look at me in my car seat and took my hand and said, “Now don’t be scared, sweet pea.” As the little sedan pulled through the dark, looming entrance, it felt like something awful was coming, like death. Our car shook and shuddered as the tires got picked up on the mechanical track and started to inch forward. And then the sprayers started, and it was just like being outside in the yard, playing in the sprinklers. I looked from window to window in the car, expecting to feel the sensation of being drenched but never feeling it. I knew the water outside was cold, but I felt warm inside and snuggled into my car seat with the purple plush blankie I always carried around at the time. Streams of rainbow colored foam sprayed out from one of the tubes—pastel pink, blue, and yellow—and to me it looked like magic. The beautiful blanket of colors sat on our car, and I was smiling and happy. At the same time, a small bit of fear crept along my skin, realizing I could no longer see the big truck that went into the car wash ahead of us. I wondered if our car would smash into the back of it and the end. But at that moment, I didn’t care. I was cozy in the back

seat, content while all the other crazy things in life swirled around outside and couldn't get to us for a while.

That morning with my brothers though, the cool air conditioning made my wet shirt like ice on my body, and I slouched down in my seat, curled up, trying to keep myself warm, but couldn't. I looked at the back of Regis's head and glanced over to Buddy who was picking lint off the seat cushion. I felt shrunken in, isolated, as I normally did when we went through the power wash, but more so this time. I was closed off from the outside world, but now I was closed off from my own inside world. As I looked at my father and brothers, I felt distant and apart from them, in such a way I had never felt before. A sense of dread, that slow, steady, heavy tingle rose up in me, because I knew that Buddy would have something to hold over my head for the rest of my life, and Regis would treat me like a pathetic leper that you feel sad for in the stories we heard in Sunday school.

I didn't know it yet, but I'd be right. Buddy would always be a step behind me, scandalized at everything I did. And telling on me for it, too. I would remember him, wide-eyed as always, tattletale, running up the creek bank hollering to everyone that he'd seen me kiss a boy. Regis didn't ever say much, but all he had to do was give me that look. Like he knew all about it, and knew all about me. I would get it all the time. Like the first time Mama and Daddy refused to let me go to the movies because the boy Buddy saw me kiss was the one who asked me. Or a couple years later, when I came home from Prom. Regis was home visiting, back from his off-shore job on one of the rigs, and he looked at me with those same laughing, sad eyes, patted my shoulder, whispered "Sis," and walked off. I felt the print of his hand long after he walked away, like it had marked

me as something different and unclean, and I laid in my bed all the next day, hair still matted with hairspray, eyeliner and mascara all over my face.

But I didn't know all of this yet. I couldn't tell exactly what was going to happen, but I knew things were not going to be the same ever. And I hated Buddy and Regis for this, with the same slow simmering hate heat that I found myself harboring towards Mama when she made me change clothes. And the worst part was, they were only pointing out the obvious.

While Mama and I were in that dressing room, she had tried to give me some speech about how this was going to be a "growing time" in my life.

"This is just another season of change for you, baby," she said, as I slipped my t-shirt back on. "Maybe the biggest of all."

I hadn't really been listening then, but now I saw it was true. And it was awful. And there wasn't anything I could do about it, and it happened to everyone, and everybody would think what they wanted about it. I would just be along for the ride, caught up in the wind of it, with no control.

As we emerged from the power wash, the air was filled with lovebugs, flying around, fated to inevitably end up on ours or other's windshields. Destined to rot and stink and destroy. With my head leaned up against the window, I watched one land on the glass outside while we were at a stoplight. It crawled around in weird circular patterns, looking lonely, confused, and pathetic. I wondered if he knew he was going to die. I put my hand on the glass and followed it with my finger. Suddenly I felt very sad for this little bug, and my body grew hot under my still cold clothing. The trace of tears stung my eyes, and I hoped to God that Buddy wasn't looking at me. I wanted to tell this little bug,

“It’s okay. It’s just a season of change,” but I knew it wouldn’t mean anything, and I wasn’t even sure what it meant myself.

As we pulled away from the intersection, the wind started to push against the little lovebug as we picked up speed. I looked on helplessly as it tried to brace itself, its wings all askew. One by one its tiny legs lost grip on the glass, and was blown off completely. I turned my head and followed it with my eyes as it swirled around in big circles, got caught in the exhaust of Daddy’s truck, and disappeared. My face was pressed against the glass for a long while after that, watching the lingering smoke. Just before we drove too far off, I saw the tiny bug emerge from the cloud and float away like a lonely black snowflake.

MARGINALIA

The Professor sits by the window in an antique armchair in a house that does not belong to him. The sunlight streams in and a fine mist of dust particles float in the broad beams of light. It is quiet and no one is there. Even as the Professor breathes, the dust swirls and the particles shift and switch places in the light before his eyes, like an ever-changing dance. He holds his breath—one, two, three—and realizes the pattern of his breathing has nothing to do with the mysterious dance. It is as if he has been dropped into another world, void of any living thing, and everything has been this way for over a hundred years. At least, to an extent this is true, since the Poet was long gone. After he had died, no one lived in the house again, and many years later the people left in his extended family and a society devoted to him worked together to make it into a museum.

Six days ago, the caregiver of the house had handed the keys to the Professor and said, “It’s all yours.” So now the Professor, with the help of the University’s summer research-leave fund and this small-town museum’s summer vacation hours, is literally living his dream. He steps where the Poet stepped, feet moving carefully across the wooden floor. He reads the books that the Poet read, remnants of his personal collection. Sitting in the faded high-backed apricot-colored armchair, the Professor holds one of the Poet’s favorite books, with gloves on, so as not to soil the pages. This particular book, old and leather-bound with worn edges and a deteriorating spine, has been quite the find. Like buried treasure, it had been pushed behind other books on the bookshelf, untouched since the Poet’s passing. The Professor had retrieved this tarnished gem from behind the

others, and parted the dusty covers to find each and every page covered in the Poet's own handwriting, the margins filled with thoughts and commentary.

Every sentence, fragment, word was a revelation, a flash of light. The Professor had already taken numerous notes, reveling in the fact that this was brand new information that no one else, no other scholar, had ever laid eyes on before. It was going to be momentous in the academic world. From the marginalia alone, he already had the idea for at least one book he would start immediately when he returned to the University. So much to glean from these tiny words in the margins, seemingly small and insignificant.

And to do so in such peace!—without the constant ringing of the telephone, doorbell, or ears in general, without tripping over Thomas the Train Engine—or was it Timothy?—toys the boys left out or Caitlyn—or was it Christina?—coming over every other afternoon to pound up the stairs and giggle with the oldest girl. To get something done with no distractions, no frivolous little matters arising every moment to pull him away from his work.

And now this!—to get to read as never before what was never before read. It was like meeting the Poet himself. Sitting near the window, the Professor imagines the Poet seated across from him in the matching armchair, speaking candidly from the inked-out words in the book, the only thing between them being the lines of sunlight on the floor and a century or so. By simply reading these tiny phrases written in slanted script in the margins, the Professor is able to see what words conjured a certain idea within the Poet's expansive mind, what lines he had loved, what paragraphs had influenced him to write one of his greatest works. He is in conversation with him. The Poet sits across in the

chair, sharing gentle laughter with the Professor at connections he had failed to notice before. “So when you wrote the line, *All are moving in circles, ‘round a central point,* this is what you were thinking of?” The Poet gives a knowing wink of his eye and a nod. The Professor smiles to himself, basking in the brilliance of his privilege and good fortune. “This man is my dear friend, one of the best.”

The Professor’s eyebrows furrow and he lifts his head to look again at the empty arm chair, pushing his silver rimmed glasses up with one finger to sit securely on the bridge of his nose again. These words settle in his mind as he envisions the little glazed ceramic sign above the calendar in the kitchen at home that reads, “Happiness is marrying your best friend.” It was a first-year anniversary gift from his wife’s aunt who collects china dog figurines, works at Curves, and records Lifetime movies on TiVo. As kitschy as it was, his wife had hung it up, and the Professor hadn’t objected. It had been true anyway. Twenty years ago, they had decorated their home with all of the awfully tacky gifts their extended family had given them and stayed up late every night talking about anything and everything, lying on an air mattress, even on the night before he had to present his dissertation. He had driven to campus the next morning in the boxy, blue Honda Civic with the passenger window partially rolled down—it was stuck that way—and given his talk with windblown hair askew and faint circles under his eyes. On his way home he had stopped at the tiny grocery store across from campus and picked up his wife’s favorite flowers, a bouquet of lilies—or was it daisies?—and she had placed them in the outrageous orange vase her uncle with the glass eye and toupee had given them.

The Professor's eyes wander back down to the page. There, scrawled out, are the Poet's scattered notes:

"Time as the Tide. Pattern repetition but movement. Change."

The Professor leans back. An insightful statement. Things had seemed as if they were the same old routine every day, and then one day he woke up realizing the real bed, the decorations more suited to their personal tastes that had replaced most of the ridiculous gifts. Since then, three children had come into being. Also since then, he and his wife's evening conversations were usually shortened to a brief discussion about who would take the boys to soccer practice the next day, and sometimes not even that, if one of them fell asleep before the other climbed into bed. It would be clarified on a yellow Post-it note near the calendar the next day, and the information would get passed on just as well. But the cheesy ceramic sign with the heart and house painted on it remained, hanging right above it.

The Professor adjusts his glasses again and continues to peer over the book. A block of writing takes up one of the bottom corners and spills up onto the side of the page. It is a portion of one of the Poet's greatest poems—quite possibly the earliest record of it. The last lines, *"The solitary bird from craggy cliffs, glides above sunken valleys, under cerulean dome, wings content to hold his weight alone"* rise up on the side of the page as if taking off with wings themselves. The Professor has read countless articles on this poem, and even has written some himself. The great symbol of the Individual, the inner life, the yearnings and desires. A being completely in tune with itself, only burdened with its own necessities. Not tied to the duties of the nest.

Thank God for those Post-it notes, sometimes the only thing that kept the Professor's inner bird mindful of his own duties to the nest. Sometimes his wife also would scrawl little things on the calendar itself, cramming it all to fit in the tiny squares. And of course sometimes the Professor would forget to read them. His wife would call him with a strained tone in her voice, or come home, open the refrigerator door, then turn to face him, sitting with his papers spread out all over the tiny kitchen table, and say with narrowed eyes and the slightest disappointed turn to her mouth, "You didn't pick up those things from the store this afternoon, did you?"

"Soaring, circling, swooping, far from the stench of sea air, the shifting sands and crashing chaos..."

In fact, this had been happening quite frequently before he left this summer. His preparation and anticipation for the trip had been consuming his mind. And each day had so much in every little square and the words were simply there, not blazing at you on a fluorescent background. Oftentimes he had resented it, the brightness and clutter of it all. He wanted the simplicity of a time he had never experienced, like the Poet's life. To be free from the trivial matters of the day and age he and his family were living in. The Professor in no way ever considered himself a postmodern man. It all seemed so lowly and trite to him. He wanted to be a man of elevation, like the Poet, and live above the commonplace cares of the world.

Absentmindedly The Professor moves his gloved hand over the Poet's words in the margin. His fingers trace the tall thin letters—the loops in the l's, and the dots of the i's often so far away from their proper place, hanging in mid-air. The sign of a brilliant mind that has so much going on that the body can barely keep up to get it all out. The

Professor recognizes that his wife's handwriting is very similar to the Poet's. The Professor tries to imagine the Poet jotting notes like his wife in some sort of date book to remind himself of special engagements or requests from his spouse. But he knows this is a futile thought. The Poet never married.

The Professor's eyes wander to the green lawn outside of the house and he wonders what it would be like to have never been looked at with raised eyebrows when you forget how many lumps of sugar go in her coffee, a cocked head when you get the favorite colors of your sons mixed up, or pursed lips when you can't remember your daughter's favorite subject in school this year. Always the tiniest things.

Gently running his hand over the salt and pepper colored whiskers on his face, the crease in his forehead appears again. This precious marginalia in his lap, who was it for? Who did the Poet think was ever going to see it? He had no one to write it to. It was only by happenstance that even the Professor was reading it now. In a slow-moving wave, this washes over the Professor as very sad, indeed. Even he, on the rare occasion that he scratches out a note for his wife, has someone to read it—someone who takes it, keeps it, and pulls it out of her skirt pocket at the end of the day and looks at it once more before she tosses it into the wastebasket in their master bathroom that he can see from the bed through eyelids heavy with sleep.

The Poet's eyes lift from the page to rest on the chair in front of him. It is identical to the one he is sitting in, but without the dingy patches on the armrests and back of the chair where the apricot-colored velvet has been worn down. Besides the faded color, it looks as good as new. As if no one has ever sat in it. It had been sat in at some point no doubt, but never consistently. The Poet didn't have anyone to fill that seat. No

one to sit with him while he worked, to hold his hand with a soft, yet constant pressure until she dozed off, head nestled in the crook of her arm. No one to come behind him and rub the knots in his shoulders, breathe warmly, sweetly into his hair and say softly “Come to bed.” Not even a cold body, silk-clad, curled up, with her back turned towards him to at least lie beside hours later.

The Professor carefully closes the leather-bound book and returns it to the shelf along with the gloves, and goes to rummage in his duffel bag for his cell phone that has been turned off for most of the trip. He looks down at his watch. His wife would just be getting the boys ready for bed. The oldest is probably just about ready too—taking longer in the bathroom than necessary though, of course. The whole house smells of peppermint in the evenings. The boys with their toothpaste gurgling competitions, the girl with the gooey concoction that she maintains is an invigorating mud mask with all natural ingredients that is the secret to perfect skin. As seen on TV. The Professor imagines the bustle of the evening antics and the sounds fill his ears, easily covering the silence of the house he sits in. His wife would be sitting on the edge of the bathtub, watching the chaos with the corners of her lips tilted upward in a small smile—lips that have a subtle sheen, coated in the lip balm that has been a trademark of hers ever since college. Peppermint, of course. He thinks of her conducting the nighttime ritual like a sacred ceremony. His wife the priestess of Post-it notes, his family giving life and meaning to the mundane objects in a way that outsiders simply could not understand—in a way that even he is only beginning to understand. If he is lucky, he will catch them all just as they are curling up with her for the nightly bedtime story, a tradition he only takes part in these days by

listening from the kitchen. His hand wraps around the small black cell phone, and his heart beats in anticipation as it begins to ring.

That night he will have a dream he is in the House of God on an air mattress between two apricot-colored chairs, light streaming in through the window illuminating the golden heads of his wife and children. He will read aloud to them from the Book of Life—notes scrawled into the margins next to people’s names, lines that go on and on—with the dust dance of a hundred years and more floating in the air all around them.

CANDY GIRL

I am looking into a face that is as colorful as the flower arrangements that surround it. Pale blue eyelids, blue as the sky. On the sky it looks just fine—peaceful. But on a face it is loud and hollers at you. It ain't natural. Even more than that is the hair color. It's that kind of white that is violet-tinted that so many old ladies have. They try to pretend—and we all help them right along—that it's not purple. But it is. It's just plain purple. And then those lips. Those bright lips, like two cherries after all this time. That's my wife, for you. She left specific instructions for the undertaker about how she was to look the last time anybody saw her. I shouldn't have expected anything less.

There was a time when she wasn't like this. When she walked into my office at The Marigold, just turned sixteen, asking for a job, long blonde hair in a ponytail hanging down her back, hands fidgeting with the side seams of her camel-colored jumper. She was an interesting girl. When she talked she looked into my eyes, determined, almost demanding in her asking. It frightened me in some deep-down unexplainable way, and at the same time made me want to laugh at this skinny, goosey girl. In the moments when her lips weren't moving, her eyes would dart back down to her lap. I just sat and stared at that pale skin with faint freckles over the bridge of her nose and watched her long eyelashes flutter. I rubbed the smooth skin on my chin like I was contemplating something real hard and thinking over what she had said, but all I really could think of was this weird pressure in the pit of my stomach and trying to make heads or tails of it. What did I care? She was five years younger and a head and a half shorter than me. But as she continued to stare down into her lap, I suddenly had this intense desire to know

every single thought that lay hidden in her head. I wanted those feathery lashes to rise back up so I could look into her brown eyes and start trying to figure it out. And I had a feeling that once I started it would take a lifetime.

I waited a moment more, just to make her squirm, and finally said,

“Sure. You can be my candy girl.”

Her curtain of lashes flew up. The smooth skin on her forehead wrinkled up and her eyebrows came together.

“You can work the concession stand,” I explained. “Sell the candy, popcorn, Coca-Colas.”

“Oh,” she said, her eyebrows back at ease. “Thank you, sir.”

“You know, you don’t have to call me ‘sir,’” I told her.

“Thank you, Mr. Lewis,” she replied, “but I think I will.”

“Well, alright,” I said as I leaned back in my chair and folded my arms behind my head.

She didn’t look at my face. The clock ticked loudly on the wall.

“Well,” I leaned forward and took a peppermint out of the Mason jar on my desk, unwrapped it, and popped it in my mouth. “I guess I should let you go,” I said with the peppermint clenched between my front teeth.

She began to get up out of her seat, smoothing her dress against her legs.

“See you Monday?” I asked and held out the jar to her.

She reached her hand in and took one of the candies. Her eyes rose to meet mine.

“Yes, sir.”

She walked to the door to leave.

“Lou Ann,” I called after her.

She turned, her hand on the doorknob.

“Y’know, one day I’m gonna marry you.”

“Mr. Lewis,” she breathed. Her cheeks turned pink as a tea rose. She stood there a moment, pushed a stray hair behind her ear, turned the knob, and was gone.

Now, I know some folks get pretty uncomfortable thinking about this. Sometimes when Lou Ann would tell our grandkids how she couldn’t get over her habit of calling me ‘Mr. Lewis’ for the first year of our marriage, I could see it in their faces. But you gotta understand, I wasn’t that much older than her to begin with, and besides, I was a young-looking guy.

And when you know, you know. So we got married the day after she turned eighteen. She looked like an angel in her tea-length white dress. I didn’t smear cake onto her face, and she got all giggly from the champagne. Her face was bright and clean, with hardly any makeup on it at all.

That was almost sixty years ago. A picture of us from that day still stands on the mantle above the fireplace. But now I stand here today, alone, and people pass by me, patting me on the shoulder, murmuring things that my hearing aids can barely pick up. Things like she was a wonderful lady. What a beautiful woman. All of which are true. But she didn’t use to be like this, all this paint on her face.

And there was a time when I wasn’t like this. Old, decrepit, feeble, walking with a cane, my spine like the bumps on a dinosaur’s back, skin drooping, hanging off my ribs. No, like I said, I was a pretty good-looking fella. Maybe that’s why Lou Ann decided to give me the time of day. Bad thing was I looked younger than I really was, and I acted

younger than that. Other women wanted to give me the time of day too, and I let them. Nights of “working late” and coming home smelling like a sweet mix of liquor and perfume and peppermints to cover it up. Lou Ann must have had some idea about what was going on, even though she never said anything.

But one evening I know she knew for sure because things weren't the same after. That night I came home late with the edge of a bright red lip print on my white collar, the starch sweated out. Lou Ann's eyes rested on it for a long while. Her eyelashes fluttered. Maybe she was blinking back tears, I don't know. The next morning, her side of the bed was empty. My heart jumped a little bit, thinking she might be gone forever. I stayed in bed for a while lying in a mix of my own guilt and disappointment, then dragged myself to the kitchen, preparing to pour myself a bowl of cold cereal. There was Lou Ann, in an apron, cooking the usual bacon and eggs, and her lips looked like maraschino cherries.

I watched her for a while as she moved silently about the kitchen. She looked like all of the other wives from the small business owner's association and the leading ladies of the movies we played at The Marigold. Generally, the stuff women put on their faces didn't matter to me one way or the other. But to see it on my Lou Ann's face gave me this twisted-up, knotted feeling in my stomach, and made me feel sick and sad. I should have apologized right then and there and told her she could go into the bathroom and take it off, that she didn't need it, and that I'd been a fool. But I couldn't bring myself to say anything, and I sat and ate my bacon and eggs in silence.

Lou Ann's lips stayed that way from that day on. Over time, she introduced other changes to her look, and they too became permanent. The eye shadow, the hair dye. She would get her ideas from the magazines she kept in a knitting basket under her side of the

bed. While I would get ready for bed in the bathroom connected to the bedroom, I would watch her in the mirror, at just the right angle that I could see that half of the room from it. She would pore over the pages and sometimes mark things with a pen she kept in the basket too. Whenever I turned the water off after brushing my teeth, she would put the magazine back in the basket and push it back underneath the bed. I never asked about it; it was one of those things we both knew but never spoke of.

It didn't stop with just the makeup. Once I got a postcard from California from a buddy who had moved away in high school. On the front was a close-up of a very tan blonde girl in a swimsuit with sunglasses and bright lips. The last line of his message said, "P.S. The gals are gorgeous here." It sat on the kitchen counter with the rest of the mail for a few days, and the next week Lou Ann started laying out in the back yard in her spare time trying to get her skin the right shade of golden brown.

And now she was laying here in this casket because of it. The sickness had waited a long time, then sprung up one day and couldn't be stopped. The doctor told us it wasn't really her fault. That we didn't know as much about the danger back then as we do now. He assured her that she couldn't really be blamed. But I felt I knew exactly who could.

Eventually, my Lou Ann was taking twice as long to get ready in the morning. And it didn't change when we had kids. No, some wives let themselves go or what have you once they have a couple of babies, but Lou Ann didn't miss a beat. She gave birth three times with a full face of makeup on and her hair done up in pin curls the night before.

Our youngest and only girl, Jacqueline, loved Lou Ann for her looks as much as she did for being her mama. Since the day Jackie could walk, she always had her little

feet in Lou Ann's high heels. She loved to watch her get ready in the morning and would sit up on the counter while Lou Ann stared into the mirror, painting her face. Jackie would reach her little hands out and stroke the silk, satin, velvet, or what have you, of the dress Lou Ann was wearing that day. Lou Ann would kiss Jackie once on her forehead before she put on her lipstick—never after.

I know this because I would watch them quietly from the bedroom while Lou Ann got ready in the master bathroom. The angle of that mirror let me stand in a place where Lou Ann couldn't see me, but I could watch her and Jackie both. I spent most of our marriage doing this. Just watching and never saying much. Lou Ann never let me see her without her makeup on.

One time, when I actually needed to get something out of the bathroom while they were in there, Lou Ann yelled "George!" and turned her face away from me, while Jackie cried out, "Daddy! No, no! Mama and I are getting ready," and swatted me away with her little hands. The earnest angry look on her little face reminded me of the determination on Lou Ann's face the first time she came into my office. I laughed and reached a hand over to muss up Jackie's hair.

"Daddy!" Jackie cried, "Stop!"

"George, get out of here," Lou Ann said, her face still turned away from me.

"Oh come on, y'all," I said while opening up the medicine cabinet above the commode.

"Daddy, you just can't be in here! We're not ready yet," Jackie said, as she tried to put on her very serious face again.

I laughed again.

“George. Please,” Lou Ann said, with a voice that cracked and sounded like she was almost in tears. “Just go,” she whispered.

I had never heard her sound so vulnerable in all my life. I looked at her for a moment, trying to search her and understand it, but she wouldn’t look at me, and I left the room.

Now, a framed photo of Jackie when she was just a tiny thing and her mama and me sits on a table up at the front near Lou Ann’s casket. Jackie looked so much like her mama when she was younger. Her skin looked like a pure white blanket of snow the way Lou Ann’s had before she started tanning. She had the same long, fluffy eyelashes and the gangly body shape Lou Ann had at that age, too. But that changed when Jackie got to high school. She filled out in all the right places, and lots of people took notice, particularly the boys, but we never had any real trouble with that. I was one of those dads who bought a shotgun the day after his first baby girl was born. But Jackie was a good girl, anyways, same as her mama had been. She was happy going to the picture show with her friends—she got free tickets to The Marigold. And she would always save one night a week for a game night with the family, even in high school when the two older boys had moved out and it was just me and Lou Ann.

Those nights were good and simple. She and Lou Ann tried out a different dessert recipe every time, usually something from the Betty Crocker cookbook. Lou Ann always insisted they wear aprons, and we had two with bright, checkered patterns. Lou Ann would come out of it all looking spotless as usual, while Janie always had a bit of flour in her hair or chocolate smeared on her cheek. We played board games together while whatever dessert it was that week baked in the oven. Janie’s favorite game to play was

Sorry. She was never very competitive, but she did enjoy a good win now and then. She would slowly draw her card, pause, and then read the number she got with a bit of drama, whether it was a 1 or a 12. But the best was when she would draw a “Sorry” card. She would raise her eyebrows and cast the card to the side and then slyly turn to us and say “Sorry!” laughing while Lou Ann or I had to move one of our pieces all the way back to start. She laughed the same way when her pieces got sent back, too.

For a moment I hear the same laughter, though a lot quieter and muffled. I look up from Lou Ann’s body, and my eyes search among the groups of people scattered about the room and finally rest on Jackie. She stands with her husband, who has his arm around her waist, and they are talking to an older person I don’t recognize. Jackie nods and listens with a small smile on her face, but then after a while it fades and her eyes go misty. She wipes the corners of them with her fingers, and eventually the person turns away. Jackie’s husband squeezes her hand briefly when she lets it drop, and she gives him a feeble smile. He kisses the top of her head. Jackie is still short like her mama.

Jackie cries easily and has got a soft heart, and she did the whole time she was growing up. I guess that’s what made her still love me and her mama while we were going through our troubled times, but I’m still surprised we didn’t end up breaking that soft heart into bits. We sure did come close though, I think. I remember Jackie’s reproachful eyes at the breakfast table after I had not been home for dinner the night before. I don’t know how a six-year-old’s eyes can look reproachful, but they can. But worst I think was what Lou Ann did and said to that girl. It doesn’t feel right thinking these kinds of thoughts right in front of Lou Ann’s casket, but once I start, I can’t stop.

The memories have been on a back shelf in my mind all this time, and things got knocked around and the whole shelf is tipping over now.

That one day stands out now out of all the rest. The heavy feeling in the pit of my stomach gathers strength, coming back in full force because it has been neglected for so long. That day I was sick with that walking pneumonia stuff, and had finally taken off from work even though I had been “walking around” with it for a week and a half. I had been laid up in bed all day, and still was when Jackie came home. By this time our two sons had moved out of the house. The screen door clattered as Jackie came in, and I could hear the school bus pull away from our driveway. She came into the kitchen, and started chattering about things that had happened at school to Lou Ann, when I heard Lou Ann cut in:

“What is on your face?”

“What? Where?” Jackie asked, rather absentmindedly since she was in the middle of a story about one of her girlfriends and a new dress the girl had gotten for her birthday.

“What *is* that on your face?”

The heels of Jackie’s pumps made a light clicking noise as she walked over, probably to the toaster, to try to get a look at her reflection in the shiny metal.

“Is it dirt or something, Mama?”

“Jackie. Your lips,” Lou Ann said flatly.

“Oh, that!” Jackie perked up. “That’s just a new lip color I thought I would try out. Rachel let me borrow it at school. I’ve never worn anything like it, but she said it would go really well with my complexion and—“

“You look like a whore.”

“Wha—Mama! I can’t believe you,” Jackie said. “You can’t possibly be—”

“You look like a goddamned whore,” Lou Ann repeated. “Take it off right now.”

“Mama! That’s not fair,” Jackie protested.

“Do what I say,” Lou Ann said.

“But you wear this color almost every single day!”

The hard pop of skin on skin. A moment of silence. Then a large sob and the clatter of heels fleeing from the kitchen and down the hallway towards Jackie’s room. The noise of pots and pans signified that Lou Ann was going right along with making dinner. My heart was beating rapidly from where I was stretched out on the bed, too tired to get up and go to either one of them, too confused to know what to say anyways. Dinner was the same as always, but Jackie ate with her eyes lowered, her lips rubbed raw and pink, and didn’t speak a single word except to ask to be excused early. That night Lou Ann spent the whole night sobbing in the master bathroom, and I fell asleep before she came to bed.

Now it is my turn. I am the last one at the front now, or at least I think so, but I can’t really see because my eyes are blinded with tears, and I don’t want to lift my head and look around. Not that anyone would think twice about me crying at my own wife’s funeral. But do they know what I’ve done? Do they know just how responsible I am? I can hear voices out in the reception area. They are probably all ready to go eat potato salad and green bean casserole, and all the other traditional foods these people bring to funerals. But I am not ready to go yet. How will I ever be able to leave with things being like this? No way to make it right.

I can feel the warmth of big tears rolling down my face, following the creases in my skin. “I’m sorry,” I whisper to Lou Ann.

Sorry for all the bad things I’ve done. Sorry for sleeping, drinking, yelling when I shouldn’t have, and staying quiet when I should have said something. Sorry for not telling her she could stop. That she could go right on back to being the simple girl I hired at the movie theater all those years ago who didn’t care about a thing and didn’t feel the need to try. Sorry for not telling my own freckle-faced teenager that her mama was the way she was because of me, and it had nothing to do with her.

I lean down and kiss Lou Ann’s red lips. They are cold and I can taste the salt of my own tears. I look down, waiting for her eyelashes to flutter open like they used to do on the rare mornings when I would wake up first and lay and wait and watch for her to join me. But they don’t, and they won’t. And this is the last time I will get to see them, even closed. I touch her face and stroke her lavender hair. From the closest arrangement I pull a flower—a white lily—place it on her chest, and stand for a while, taking in the picture in front of me.

A little tug on the hem of my suit jacket gets my attention, and I look down and there is Kate, Jackie’s daughter, smiling up at me.

“Mama is waiting for you,” Kate says, long eyelashes blinking, as she slips her tiny hand into my hand. She starts to chatter away about something, the same way Jackie used to do, but I am in such a fog and trying to dry up my tears without her noticing that I only catch a couple of words. But Kate is too caught up in her story to mind.

“...and Mama says it’s just too big right now so I can’t wear it, but it’s so pretty, and this one is so old and ugly, and I just don’t feel good. And this collar on it is so silly and the bow is all messed up—”

“Kate!” a voice says from the doorway.

I glance up and Jackie pokes her head inside. Kate flees from my side, and sprints over to her mama in her white patent leather shoes with frilly white socks. Jackie kneels down, eyes all aglow, smiling at Kate. Kate whispers something in Jackie’s ear and takes a step back, tugging at the sides of her flowery patterned dress, with the stern little frown on her face that the women in my family wear so well. Jackie shakes her head with a sad, sweet smile on her face, and pulls Kate towards her into an embrace, patting her on the back.

“You look beautiful, baby.”

She releases her and looks straight into her daughter’s eyes.

“Just the way you are,” she says.

Janie turns Kate around to re-tie the bow at the back of her dress, and spins her back around again, planting a big kiss on the top of her head. She rises, and both girls turn to me, smiling. Kate runs back over to me, and Jackie is not far behind.

Kate slips her hand into mine again and whispers gently, “Come on, Grampa.”

“Okay, pretty lady,” I say to her.

Jackie comes up along my other side and wraps her arm around my shoulders, giving me a little squeeze.

“Your mama’s right, you know?” I whisper to Kate.

She looks up at me with big brown eyes.

“You’re pretty just the way you are. You believe that?”

Kate hesitates.

“Yes. Yes sir, I do.”

FELIX AND LEO

A man in cargo shorts and flip-flops stands on a platform under a highway bridge, preaching about the glories of heaven on a morning that is hotter than hell.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven!”

Felix slowly rolls his shopping cart up towards the gathering, pausing to remove the faded red Chicago Bulls cap from his head and wipe the sweat from his dark forehead. Pumpkin, the orange tabby cat, turns to face him on her perch atop the items in his cart, letting out a questioning mew. The wrinkles next to his eyes deepen as he smiles at her, leaning over the handlebar to rub behind her ears.

“Hush now, pretty kitty.”

He straightens up—as much as his worn, weary back can straighten. There is a familiar cracking sensation along his spine, and he twists his torso left, then right, trying to work it out.

“Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted!”

He rubs his lower back with his hand as he surveys the crowd. It’s a sea of caramel-colored foldout metal chairs, most with bodies in them except for the ones in the very front. He hesitates for a bit, not wanting to create a racket by pushing his cart all the way to the front, knowing the off-kilter wheels would rattle loudly along the gravel. And he doesn’t want to leave his cart at the back. Even though this is a church service, he won’t allow himself to be too trusting. He’s made that mistake before.

“Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth!”

Felix looks a while longer, and spots an empty spot on the back row. The row is full all the way up until the second to last seat, and then a lone man, sitting apart next to the make-shift aisle. It's Leo. Leo is white, but you wouldn't know it by how burnt his skin is. He is almost rusty, skin burnt so brown, but always with a sort of reddish tint overall from the fresh burns. He is leaned back in his seat, left arm draped over the back of the chair next to him, right hand up at his chin, scratching the scruff that looks like a thick sprinkling of pepper. The streaks of gold in his light brown hair catch the sun's rays and play them back. Normally though, he wears a backwards camouflage baseball cap, with ARMY printed in bold black letters above the bill. He was never in the Army. The hat is resting on Leo's knee, on the leg that is extended, jutting out into the aisle. Felix's eyes rest on the fraying edges of the hat, remembering the one time so far that he has seen Leo wear his hat frontwards. Two weeks ago, at the intersection with the stoplight most notorious for staying red the longest. He was standing on the corner holding a sign that said, "Veteran. Hungry. God bless." Again, he was never in the Army.

Felix maneuvers his cart as close to the row of chairs as possible, keeping it in arm's reach, and steps forward to scoot past Leo into the empty seat. Leo looks up, the shiny blue of his polarized sunglasses that wrap around his head, showing Felix his own reflection. For a moment he doesn't move, then gives a big sniff and lazily moves his arm off the back of the chair. His leg is still out in the aisle. Felix grabs the back of the chair in front of him and awkwardly climbs over Leo, trying to be careful not to so much as graze his knees, and lowers himself into the empty seat. Almost instantaneously, Pumpkin leaps from the cart, and onto Felix's shoulder, using her claws to help her climb

down to his lap and rub her head against his belly. Her long fluffy tail brushes against Leo.

“Get that damn cat off me.”

“Sorry,” Felix whispers as he shifts Pumpkin to his other leg, her claws sounding like Velcro as they are released from his pant leg.

Felix grips Pumpkin tightly with one hand, stroking her from the top of her head to the end of her silky tail to get her to settle down. Leo pulls out a pocketknife and leans over, scraping paint off the seat of his chair between his legs. Felix tries not to look at Leo for the entire service, which isn't difficult because he is on the side of Felix's bad eye, out of which he can't see at all. It is gray and clouded, though sometimes a pale blue in certain light, and it looks straight ahead, not like a wandering lazy eye. A good thing too, considering Leo typically has a problem with people looking at him for too long, or in the wrong way, or just in general. Several times Felix had been walking around town and heard angry shouting in the distance, only to recognize Leo's voice as he got closer—yelling at passersby in cars, other homeless people, or even his own shadow.

Felix keeps his eyes turned forward, focusing on the young preacher with the beard talk about trusting God and finding comfort in Him, with spastic arm movements to accompany the message.

“Blessed are those who hunger and thirst...”

A silent yearning goes up from the crowd. A communal desire to get to the part where they feast on sandwiches wrapped in saran wrap.

“...for righteousness for they will be filled.”

The sharp pain and rumbling in Felix's stomach is overwhelming, but the final song helps him ignore it. He closes his eyes and hums and pats his thigh.

"I am a friend of God. He calls me friend."

When he opens his eyes at the end of the song and blinks back into focus, he spots a man in a camouflage hat and sunglasses across the street, leaned up against the wall of the Chevron station, smoking a cigarette, watching the end of the service. Felix turns to the now empty seat beside him. Carved into the chipped paint with long scratches that let the rusty brown metal underneath show through are the words, "God is dead. Jesus can fuck off." Felix looks up again at Leo, standing across the street. He takes a long drag of his cigarette, leans his head back, and blows a cloud of smoke that expands and disappears in the wind.

After the preacher finishes the final prayer, the crowd mobs towards the back of the chairs to the long plastic tables filled with boxes of sandwiches and water bottles. Felix makes eye contact with a woman who is helping behind one of the tables. Her sandy blonde hair is pulled back into a ponytail with a magenta scrunchie that matches the large flowered print on her blouse. The sweat on her forehead and across the bridge of her nose glistens in the sunlight. She gives Felix a little wave.

"You look mighty fine this morning, Miss June," Felix says, as the line moves up. The constant flush in June's cheeks, ears, and chest from her rosacea deepens, as it does every week when Felix says this.

"Thank you, Felix. What'll you have today? I got PB&J, chicken salad, or pimento cheese."

“Aw Miss June, you sure out done yourself. I’ll just have plain ol’ PB&J, let them other folks try the fancy stuff.”

“Well, Felix, that’s real kind of you, but you don’t have to do that,” says June, pushing a stray wisp of hair out of her face.

“Nah nah, I know, but I—“

Felix trails off as Leo elbows his way in front of him, and grabs three sandwiches out of the box. Felix looks at him in silence, the lines in-between his graying eyebrows deepening as he watches Leo. Leo turns to face Felix, and his reddish blonde eyebrows lift above the sunglasses on his face, a small smirk in the corners of his chapped lips.

“Felix,” June cuts in, “you and your friend here should come on out to the library this week on—“

“Not his friend,” mumbles Leo.

“What’s that?” June asks.

“I said I’m not his friend,” Leo says through gritted teeth.

“Oh. Alright then,” June says, the color surging back up into her face again. “Well, you come on out anyways. We’re having a book giveaway day. It’s gonna be all day on Saturday. Just a buncha free books you can look through, and read, and take with you if you want to.”

“That sounds mighty fine, Miss June” Felix says, as he scoots closer to the table to allow people still moving through the line to pass by him.

“You like books?” June asks Leo.

Leo gives her a cold stare with an expressionless face half hidden by his sunglasses. He turns his back on them both, and saunters away, the three sandwiches still gripped firmly in one hand.

When the sunlight starts to fade, Felix begins to make his way to a smaller highway bridge that he usually sleeps under. The items in his cart jolt with every stray pebble he passes over. The green plastic water bottle that a college student gave him rocks back and forth, the picture of a bear with its paw raised waving at him from the bottom of the cart. A pile of old layers of worn clothing and a blanket are there, and Pumpkin claws her way to the top of it to take up her normal perch. These are the things he carries, what he has to his name besides the clothes on his back, and the tiny copy of the Bible he keeps in the back pocket of his sagging pants. June had given it to him earlier in the year as an Easter present. It is the one gift he has ever received in his life.

As he approaches the bridge, his hand feels for the outline of the little book in his pocket just to make sure it's there, and he hopes that Leo is not. He squints in the ever-growing darkness, trying to decide if the shadowy blob he sees ahead is the same figure that was there the first night he received the book. He remembers the sinking feeling in his stomach as he came nearer and nearer to the man, huddled up under the bridge. Felix had taken one hand off of the handlebar of the cart to wave hello, and one of the front wheels hit a dip in the concrete and jolted Pumpkin off of the cart, the shock of which caused her to leap even further, out into the street. Felix's heart, which had been in his stomach, leapt up into his throat and was pounding away. He stumbled around his cart and ran to the side of the street and called the cat to himself, tears blurring the vision of his one good eye. It didn't take long for Pumpkin to realize the danger she was in, and

she quickly ran back over to Felix, who scooped her up into his arms and buried his face into her fur, making little wet patches with his tears.

Leo sat there and watched the whole thing and at the end of it just let out the loudest and most raucous cackle Felix had ever heard. And it didn't stop. All through the night, Felix heard Leo whooping and hollering to himself, about nothing it seemed, like a madman. Felix tried to read from his new gift from June, but he could feel Leo watching him and yelling, and he feared that he might try to come over and take it, so he slipped it into his back pocket and laid down and tried to go to sleep. All night he laid there, listening to Leo, who never did go to sleep that night.

As Felix gets closer he realizes the shadows have been playing a trick on him, and the bridge is completely empty. But tonight even without Leo there, Felix won't get much sleep, and he knows it. At night the trains go by. Loud and whistling. Roaring, screaming. He closes his eyes and tries to think of nothing, but each time all that comes is an uncontrollable rush of senses. He smells the sweet, sharp stench of alcohol on his father's breath, the constant perfume of his childhood. He hears his older brother's shrill screams upstairs and mother's desperate but not desperate enough pleadings. His fists clench up like they did that night, but he is paralyzed and helpless in his waking dream. "Where you goin with that bat, boy? What you think you can do?" The answer was nothing, and it will always be nothing. But it should have been something. By God, it should have been something. The white t-shirt leaving the house that night, soaked red lines like banners waving behind. Two days later, the same shirt and boy by the train tracks, dead. Joseph. Joseph. Jo. Jo. "Where you goin with that bat, boy?" and the trains won't stop. They just keep going.

Felix is glad in the mornings with the first sign of the awakening world. Even if trains go by in the daytime, there are other noises of life going on that help drown it out, all the other living, breathing, crying things in this world.

Felix walks by the gas station before the pale hazy blue of early morning has cleared from the sky. He sees June at a gas pump, hair pulled back, but in a messier than usual ponytail. He calls her name, and when she turns to him, he sees her eyes are red and puffy.

“Miss June, you don’t look so cheerful today,” Felix says.

“Oh, hi Felix,” she answers, looking a little distant and confused. “Well yeah, I’m sorry to say that is true. I just got some real bad news this mornin,” she replies, as she crosses her arms in front of her chest, and pulls at her elbows, as if she is cold and has got the shivers, but it’s the middle of the summer.

“What about, if you don’t mind me askin?” Felix says, as he watches the man two pumps over eye him up and down suspiciously.

“Well, my dad is in a home in Temple, and one of the nurses called me this mornin, said I need to get over there real quick. He’s not doing so good.” She looks at the ground, blinking rapidly.

“I’m real sorry to hear that. You let me know if there’s anythin I can do. Man like me can’t do much, but what I can, I’m willing,” Felix says, taking off his cap and holding it to his chest, the gray frizzy streaks in his black curly ponytail exposed now.

“Thanks, Felix. I appreciate that. You just keep prayin for me and my daddy with them words you read outta that good book I gave you. That’s what you can do,” June says.

“Alright, Miss June. I can do that,” says Felix.

Felix watches June get into her old station wagon, blot the corner of her eyes with a napkin from the glove compartment, and give a half-hearted smile before pulling onto the feeder road to get on the highway. He waves to her car until it is out of sight. The fumes of gasoline burn his nostrils and eyes, and he wheels his cart further on down the sidewalk.

The next time Felix sees June, it is at the library on Saturday. Felix arrives in the afternoon. She is arranging books on a table outside near the entrance. She doesn't have to say a word; he already knows something bad has happened. Her eyes are even redder than the last time he saw her, as if she has been crying for days. And now she is crying again, silent sobs, her shoulders shaking. Felix stands there, unsure of what to do.

“He's gone. His body's been goin out on him for years. It's his own damn fault, but he's gone.”

June's buries her face in her hands. Felix places a weather-beaten hand on her shoulder. She tenses up, but then relaxes. In a moment, Felix embraces her, his large arms and slightly damp shirt enveloping her. He smells, but June lets him hug her anyways. They stand like this for a while, thoroughly awkward but thoroughly comforting, until June stops shaking. She looks up at him through eyes that are now like slits, and says “Thank you, Felix,” and he gives the white, fleshy part of her arm that hangs above her elbow a squeeze in response.

After a moment, June says, “Your friend's been here since early this morning, just a readin away.”

Felix wonders whom she could possibly be talking about.

“He’s inside, just around the corner in the children’s book section. You should go join him. Your cart will be fine out here.”

Felix goes inside, and the coolness of the air conditioning washes over his body. He wanders over to the children’s section, and there is Leo sitting on a beanbag chair on the ground, with his head down, looking at a book. Felix doesn’t really want to sit with him, but these are the books Felix prefers, so he does anyway.

“Mind if I sit here?” Felix asks, standing above Leo and an empty beanbag.

Leo looks up. His sunglasses are pushed up on top of his head, and Felix sees the skin around his eyes that they usually cover up for the first time. It looks like the mask of a raccoon.

“Well I sure as hell can’t stop you,” Leo says.

Felix pulls a large collection of children’s stories and fables off of the shelf and cracks it open. He reads a couple of stories to himself, looking up occasionally. Leo noisily flips through thin books picture books, the edge of the pages scraping against the windbreaker he is wearing. In the time it takes Felix to finish just one story, Leo has gone through five books.

Finally Felix says, “All them books you reading only got pictures in em?”

“Yeah, what’s it to you?” Leo answers, without looking up.

“Nothing.”

“You got something to say?,” the edge in his voice getting sharper.

“No, Leo,” Felix says. He hesitates and then says, “Thought you just might want to hear a story read out loud or something, that’s all.”

Leo looks at him with his bandit face. His eyes are blue and pale and cold.

“Alright, shoot.”

Felix begins reading in his low, shaky voice very slowly, the story of the lion with the thorn in his paw and the little mouse that helped him. Leo sits looking down at his own hands, picking at his nails and biting them, and readjusting the Velcro fastenings on his fingerless motorcycle gloves. Felix reads for many pages, and Leo sits silently. Then, as Felix reaches the part where the lion is about to return the good deed to the mouse for all of his help, Leo reaches over and rips the page right out of the book. He crumbles it up in one hand, looking straight at Felix, stands up and throws it into his lap, spits on the carpet, and walks towards the exit.

Felix is still, blinks a few times, then takes the crumbled page and smooths it back out, and places it in its spot among the pages and sets the book back on the shelf. He braces himself by grabbing onto the shelves and hoists himself out of the beanbag, a series of cracks and pops escaping from his back like machine gun fire. Slowly he walks towards the door.

On the way out he waves goodbye to June and grabs his shopping cart. Turning the corner, there is Leo leaned up against the backside of the building, smoking.

“Go away,” he says.

“Hey man, what the hell is your problem?” Felix says.

“I said, get.”

“Y’know, it’s one thing to act the way you do all the time, but it’s sure nother thing to treat things like you treated them, especially when nice people like June are trying to do stuff outta the goodness of they heart.”

“That bitch don’t know jack shit.”

“You take that back,” Felix says slowly.

“Nah. I mean it,” says Leo. “All these people got it easy. They got houses, most of em got cars. They ain’t seen what I’ve seen. Easy lives.”

“That ain’t all the way true.”

“Oh yeah? Any of them got parents who were half-zombies because of the shit they put into their bodies? Any one of them got kicked out when they was barely fifteen years old? Any one of them been shit on by God?”

Felix stands silent. Pumpkin repositions herself in the cart.

“You don’t know anything about anyone. Cause you don’t care to know.”

Leo snorts.

“You think you the only one who got problems? We all got thorns in our paws, Leo. Ain’t nobody’s bigger than anybody else’s. Just different. Or maybe even the same. But you would have to get close enough before you could know that.”

The cars zoom past steadily on the road. A light breeze blows and both men’s shirts flutter a little in the wind as they stand motionless. Leo’s eyebrows come down and the muscles on the top of his cheeks go up, like he’s squinting from the sun, but the sun is getting low in the sky at this point. It’s a different kind of grimace that Felix has never seen on that face before. Leo pulls his sunglasses back down on his face and walks away.

The next Sunday at the church under the bridge, Felix is in the back row again. He has a seat next to a little old black lady in a dingy lavender floral-patterned dress with a big white collar. She pats Felix on the knee and holds Pumpkin in her lap for a while. During the first song, Leo walks up and takes a seat one down from Felix. Felix glances at him out of the corner of his good eye. Leo sits, stony-faced, eyes hidden behind his

sunglasses. After a while, he rummages in his pocket and pulls out a squashed packet of crackers, crackling the wrapper as he opens it. Before Felix can grab her, Pumpkin crosses over the woman and his own lap and goes over to Leo, her haunches moving rhythmically, on the prowl for food. Felix's muscles go tense. For what seems like a moment frozen in time he watches them. Pumpkin lowers herself into a posture of patience, eyeing Leo's crackers, keeping her head perfectly still, while her tail flicks wildly back and forth. Leo turns his face to look at her full on, her cat face reflected in the blue of his sunglasses. Pumpkin rises up and takes a few steps closer, and places her paws on Leo's thigh. Felix sees the fingers of Leo's empty hand stretch outward suddenly, and then slowly contract inward, balling into a fist. Felix parts his lips to say something, just as Leo swings the empty hand around. In it he shakes out some of the broken cracker pieces from the packet and extends it towards Pumpkin. The cat leans forward, head bowed, and begins to eat out of Leo's hand. Her tongue is rough and makes a light scratching sound against Leo's gloves. When she is done, it is Leo's turn to stare solemnly at Pumpkin. Finally, he reaches out and begins to scratch her behind the ears, his head bowed, watching her back arch and tail go straight up. A familiar smirk appears on Leo's face as he looks up again. Felix can't tell if Leo is looking at him or not because of the sunglasses, but it does not matter.

Suddenly the old lady next to Felix lifts her hands above her head, flabby skin shaking, lips spread in a toothless grin. She sings along loudly with the song, "can change the leper's spots, and melt the heart of stone!" and starts clapping wildly, patting Felix on the knee several times rather hard. Felix winces but gives a small smile and a slight nod of his head. He looks down the row past the woman. Next to her is a younger, college-

aged girl with a woven headband in her hair, eyes closed, sitting serenely. Next to her is a couple in tank tops, the young woman leaning her head on the man's shoulder, his hand resting on her large, pregnant belly, rocking her a little. Felix turns back to look at Leo. He is facing the stage now, patting Pumpkin in time with the song.

STRANGE FRUIT

Lisa had never heard of a parent conference being held with a substitute teacher before, but she had no other choice but to attend. The morning of, Marvin took their daughter Kimmy to school, and Lisa got to sleep in an extra hour, something that rarely occurred. Both Marvin and Lisa worked all day, every day of the week—Marvin at the chemical plant, 45 minutes out of town, Lisa as a dental hygienist. She had taken the morning off for the meeting—the first time she had taken off in a long time—with the hopes of getting to sleep for a little bit longer uninterrupted. Still, she woke up a few minutes before the alarm clock went off. Beams of sunlight streamed through the window blinds, making a slanted pattern on the beige comforter, but it wasn't the light that woke her up. Lisa was anxious about the meeting she was soon to attend. She still didn't understand it. Kimmy had never really had problems in school. She was nine years old, bright, and loved to learn. The only thing she had ever even gotten her color changed for on the behavior board was talking in class. That afternoon she had come home crying, insisting that she was only trying to tell the girl who sat next to her that she could borrow her purple crayon if she wanted to. All of Kimmy's teachers so far had loved her. The same was true for Mrs. Richardson this year, but she had gone on maternity leave right before Christmas break and wouldn't be returning for another month or so. When the new semester started, Kimmy's third grade class had a semi-permanent substitute teacher, Mrs. Smith. It was this Mrs. Smith that she would be meeting with later that morning.

Lisa pulled the covers back, the lines of sunlight unmoved, making the same pattern on her brown legs. She put on a blouse and dress pants and looked into the mirror

on top of the dresser. She smoothed her black hair into a low ponytail and secured it with a clip. Her reflection mirrored her soft smile as she imagined Marvin attempting to fix Kimmy's hair that morning. Kimmy had been blessed with Marvin's wild, tight spirally hair that was almost completely unmanageable. For Marvin, it was easy. He was a guy and had always kept it trimmed fairly close to his head. Well, except when Lisa first met him at an African-American Student Association meeting in technical school and he had it in an afro. Lisa always teased that it had been her favorite look of his, and it was partially true. She laughed to herself as she tried to envision what Kimmy's hair would look like when she saw it later in the day. Probably a fro, just like Marvin's younger days. She hoped that Kimmy would have an okay day at school though, in spite of it, and that none of the other kids would make fun of her for Marvin's fatherly ways.

Kimmy was a fairly sensitive child, and Lisa worried for her. She got along really well with other students and had several friends, but anytime any of the other kids teased her about anything at all, she really took it to heart. It was usually about silly kid stuff, like the color of her dress or her bumblebee decorated lunch kit. But once it had been race-related. Last year, a boy in Kimmy's class, Dylan, said she looked like the chocolate pudding in his lunch. He had laughed and wiped a bit on her arm. And it blended in.

“See?!” he cried to the other kids.

Kimmy wept hysterically on the couch that evening before dinner. Lisa held Kimmy in her lap and patted her on the back, trying to comfort her. Kimmy's little body shuddered with sobs and short, sharp gasps for air. Lisa firmly told her to take it easy and breathe. After a while, Kimmy's breathing slowed, and she stopped sobbing. She looked

up at Lisa with big, sad eyes, her long dark eyelashes clumped together from the wetness of her tears.

“Why am I different?” she asked.

Lisa struggled to find words.

She told her if she was chocolate pudding, then Dylan was vanilla. They both were very good flavors of the same thing.

But inwardly Lisa had wanted to go up to the school and rip the little jerk limb from limb. Or better yet, go to his parents’ house and do the same thing, since she knew it was ultimately where he got it.

But Lisa also knew she had to be careful about the way she thought of people. Larkin, Texas was not the same town as it had been while she was growing up. Kimmy, though still the only African-American in her classroom, at least got to go to the same school as white kids her age, and no one stood outside protesting it either. That was more than many in Lisa and Marvin’s generation could say.

Lisa was happy for Kimmy in that respect. She knew that Kimmy’s poor sensitive self wouldn’t have been able to handle that. Lisa had undergone much more than Kimmy would ever have to experience—she hoped.

Lisa walked into the kitchen and made a bowl of cereal for herself, and turned on the coffee pot to reheat the leftover bit Marvin saved for her. While she waited, she sat at the kitchen bar on a stool, staring at the side of the refrigerator. It was covered in Kimmy’s creations: perfect spelling tests, math worksheets, brightly colored crayon portraits of herself, Lisa and Marvin, cats, unicorns. Kimmy’s most recent picture was a neon-colored depiction of two little girls holding hands on a long piece of cream-colored

construction paper. Even though the girls in the drawing were purple and pink, Lisa knew that it was Kimmy and her best friend, Barbara. She could tell by the hair. Kimmy's had a scribbly mess of black on the top of her head, and Barbara had a more even pile of yellow curly-cues flowing from the top of her head down to her stick-figure elbows. Barbara, or Barb, as Kimmy called her, had beautiful hair, and Kimmy loved her even more for it. Lisa thought Barb was a sweet child, but she tried to curb Kimmy's enthusiasm about the hair. She worried it could be unhealthy, and that Kimmy would start to think poorly of her own appearance.

At one point, Kimmy had declared that she was going to start calling Barbara "Barbie," instead of Barb.

"Why's that? Barb told you she wanted a new nickname?"

"No," Kimmy said, not looking up, playing with her toys on the living room floor. "It's cause she looks like Barbie."

Lisa vetoed this immediately.

But she understood it.

The bold scent of the Texas pecan blend of the now reheated coffee drifted over to Lisa and she got up to pour herself some into her favorite mug. She thought about her own best friend she had had growing up. As she sipped the coffee out of the cup covered in sunflowers that wound their way up the handle, a million memories from her childhood sprung up, blossomed and twisted their way around in her own mind.

Lisa's friend, Janey, had truly looked like Barbie, and Lisa had thought it on more than one occasion growing up. Her hair was golden like Barbara's, but straight and smooth, and flowed down in a rippling waterfall that Lisa had often wanted to reach out

and stroke. Janey's mother always put a different colored ribbon in it, another thing that Lisa both admired and envied slightly. But Janey hated it. She ran around and played so hard at school during recess that it would loosen itself and fall to the ground to get stomped into the dirt by other children playing tag. Sometimes she noticed before it was too late and shoved it into the pocket of her jumper, attempting to retie it back in her hair before she went home, but never exactly getting it right. Once it had fallen out, and she let Lisa wear it for the rest of the day. It was a beautiful soft lavender, and Lisa felt like she had never been able to hold her head higher than when Janey tied it through her thick, dark hair.

On the way home, Janey's mother was in the front yard when the two girls came to her house. Lisa, still having several blocks to go until her own home, said goodbye to Janey and waved to Mrs. Carson. Mrs. Carson lifted her hand with narrowed eyes, then turned towards Janey, muttering a few words and placing her hand on her shoulder, guiding her into the house. Lisa stood there watching. As Mrs. Carson got to the front door, she turned around to look at Lisa once more, and her thin fingers tightened up around Janey's shoulder as she pushed her in and shut the front door behind them.

Lisa stood on the sidewalk in front of the house with the white picket fence, feeling small and confused. When she got home, her own mother looked at her with the same suspicion and cold eyes. Lisa's mother did not trust that ribbon. She told Lisa to take it back to school with her tomorrow and give it back to whomever it belonged to. She said Lisa had no need for all that nonsense.

The next day at school Janey informed Lisa that she was no longer allowed to let anyone else wear her ribbons. Lisa knew exactly what that meant and whom it was directed towards, but Janey seemed as if she didn't, or if she did, she chose to ignore it.

Janey was good like that.

She disregarded comments adults made about Lisa, but was ready to fight any kid who might have something mean to say at school. On the playground she confronted them, her bangs pushed up and wild and on her sweaty forehead, eyes fierce, stomping towards the culprit like Samson in saddle shoes and frilly socks. Janey could be both ferocious and gentle, a lion and a lamb all in one.

Lisa felt a little grumble in her stomach, even after her cereal and cup and a half of coffee. She walked over to the counter and peered into the large yellow ceramic bowl that they kept fruit in. On the top were three kiwis. She picked one up and rolled it in-between her hands. Holding it up to her face, she rubbed the brown, fuzzy skin against her cheek. The soft tickle reminded her of that random hot summer day she had spent with Janey just walking around the neighborhood together. Janey brought a sack full of things: sloppily made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches, with more jelly than peanut butter, all gem-like and oozing from the sides, saltines, carrot sticks she didn't plan on eating, and two little brown fuzzy spheres. She pulled them out last.

"What's are those?" Lisa had asked, eyeing the strange fruit.

"Oh just kiwis," Janey said. She reached out her skinny pale arm to hand one to Lisa.

"Um, I don't think we should eat those, Janey. They look like they...went bad or something," Lisa said. She sat and looked at Janey and did not reach out to take the fruit.

“What?” Janey said. “That’s how they’re supposed to look. Haven’t you ever eaten a kiwi before?”

“Yes,” Lisa lied.

Janey pulled out the plastic knife in her sack and split one open. She handed one half to Lisa.

“Here, eat it.”

“Okay,” Lisa said. But she started when she saw the inside—the bright green flesh and tiny black dots.

“Oh no, mine has little bugs in it!”

She knew she had made a mistake immediately after the words came out of her mouth.

“Lisa...”

She looked up. Janey was looking at her deeply, peering into her eyes. Lisa could feel the heat in her own cheeks and the embarrassed tears forming in her eyes.

The truth was Lisa had never even heard of a kiwi. Lisa’s house was only a couple streets over from Janey’s, a three-bedroom house like hers, except instead of an extra empty guest room, each of theirs was filled with people—Mama and Daddy, three kids in one room, and an uncle and grandfather in the last one. They lived from paycheck to paycheck. Lisa’s mother barely had enough to buy food that would last the whole family through the month, and there was no room in the budget to spend an extra couple of dollars on exotic fruit like that.

Janey kept her eyes on Lisa, but Lisa couldn't meet her gaze for more than a moment. She looked down, and a big tear escaped from the corner of her eye and rolled down alongside her nose. They sat in silence a moment.

Janey cleared her throat and said, "I think you should try it."

So she did.

And it was strange and wonderful. Janey helped her peel the skin off, and they rubbed it against their cheeks and giggled to each other. She sank her teeth into the soft flesh and the juices dripped down her chin. Janey sat across focusing on slurping the juice that had dripped down her wrist and arm. The seeds felt odd in Lisa's mouth, like tiny beads, slippery and strange. She took time to pinch them between her front teeth and crush them. The taste of the kiwi itself was sweet, but unlike anything she had ever tasted. She looked across at Janey, who gave her a big smile as she used her forearm to wipe her mouth. Lisa smiled back, but her eyes began to water again. She looked down before Janey could catch her eye. The fuzzy peels lay on the sidewalk between them, and Lisa traced her finger over them again and again. Lisa knew she wouldn't be able to describe the taste of the kiwifruit to her siblings any better than she would have been able to describe an apple or banana to someone who had never eaten one before. It was so distinct that it was in a category of its own. And Lisa wondered if they would ever get to taste one for themselves.

Lisa stood at the kitchen counter and ate the kiwi, remembering all of this. She had been sad that day for her big brother and sister, as she would be many times later in life. Letting the last of the seeds roll around in her mouth, she walked over and dropped the fruit skins in the trashcan. The neon green numbers on the microwave clock at the end

of the counter told Lisa to get moving. In a flurry, she brushed her teeth, put on her shoes, and went out the door.

The engine made a low grumble when Lisa cranked the ignition of her car, then evened itself out to a steady buzzing purr. When she was a kid, she didn't know cars could be this quiet. She only knew the sharp revving of her daddy's pick-up truck that she was sure must have woken the entire neighborhood some days. The old truck that shook the lot of them like a carnival ride, all piled into the back seat if her mama rode too. Her daddy always saved a secret glance for Lisa in the rearview mirror—a little smile and a wink—and she cherished those moments because they were some of the only things that were shared between just the two of them. Even in the rattling chaos of the drive, pushed up against her brother and sister, tiny compared to them, there was no threat of her being lost to her daddy's loving look.

Lisa drove her car through the same streets the rickety pick-up had driven. Some things looked exactly the same, some things changed wholly. The Batson Brothers grocery store stood where the old high school used to be—the all-black one. Half the town had gathered to watch it get knocked down. The young black kids had cheered—excited about the possibility of new books and enough desks. Their parents stood in silence, weariness and wariness pulling heavy on their hearts.

But even the things that looked the same only had the appearance of it. On the right was Larkin's only movie theater, The Marigold. The same neon sign jutted out from the building with the golden cursive neon lettering that lit up every night at six-o'clock. The inside was the same too: cushiony seats, one big movie screen bordered by maroon

curtains and a balcony with more seats. The thing that had changed though, was that these seats were no longer the only ones in which colored folks could sit.

A couple streets later, Lisa had to detour to the right for some construction on the main road. The detour took her past the old dirt road that led to what was once the public pool. She tried to look down the road, but it was even more shaded with trees than it had been all those years ago, making it impossible to see far. The leaves made shadowy patterns on the ground that moved and changed with the wind, and she remembered the coolness that had flooded upon her each time she walked in that shade. The memories of that road were just from one summer in particular, but even so, they were some of the strongest ones she had. Yet, they were also the ones that she most tried to forget. Lisa let the memories of that summer get crowded over, shaded by other things in her mind, just like the dirt road itself.

The detour ended and brought Lisa back out to the main road, just in time for her to get held up at the train crossing. The train tracks cut right through the middle of town, and there was no going around them. So when you were stuck, you were stuck. Lisa tapped her fingers on the steering wheel and flipped through radio stations. Five in a row were morning talk shows—one of her pet peeves—and she quickly gave up and turned the radio off again. As she looked at the time on the dashboard, an exasperated sigh escaped from her lips. Tied for first with her talk show pet peeve was that of being late. She was always on time, and if not on time, she was early. But the train was inevitable.

The cars rolled by, boxes covered in indecipherable graffiti. As Lisa waited, watching them roll into the distance, she remembered how she used to count as many as she could, much to her siblings' annoyance. They had always passed the tracks on their

way to the pool that summer. Her throat and nose remembered the gritty thickness of dust clouds that had risen up from her and the other children's feet on the dirt path. Hot summer days where the short walk seemed a million miles long, and the pool rose up like an oasis mirage at the end of the way. David and Patricia, her older brother and sister always came, and they walked along together side by side. But most times Janey joined them too, running up the path to catch up with Lisa, and the two girls dropped back behind the older ones to whisper and giggle together.

That awful day started just like that. Janey galloped towards Lisa on the road, hollering something that Lisa couldn't make out. When Janey reached her, Lisa put her hand on Janey's shoulder, steadying her, and asked with questioning eyes. Janey said nothing, but held up two shiny quarters and grinned. Lisa knew. The lady who ran the pool had bought a snow cone machine at the beginning of the summer, and the frozen treats were a quarter each. Lisa couldn't stifle her grin. She didn't try to deny Janey's generosity. She couldn't. They had gone through that before, and Janey wouldn't hear it. The girls spent the rest of the walk deciding what flavor they wanted to get. Lisa wanted cherry, and Janey's favorite was blue raspberry. The one other time they had gotten snow cones together, the syrup had stained Janey's mouth blue, but she didn't care at all.

Lisa was almost as excited about watching how the treat was made than she was about eating it. Miz. Sharon, the woman who was in charge would shove a large block of ice into one end of the metal contraption and push it through while she pulled a big lever with her other hand. Lisa had watched in amazement as the shaved ice shot out of the other end like a flurry of pure snow. She wondered what it would be like to own a machine like this and try a new flavor snow cone every day.

Still sitting in the car, Lisa did not want to think back on what happened the rest of that summer day. She had spent so much energy on reviewing those events in her head while growing up that when she became an adult, she buried it in the recesses of her mind. Now, she still did not want to think about the snow cone she never got that day and the reason the thought of them made her slightly sick to her stomach ever after. But sitting at the tracks, still waiting on the train, she was trapped and at the mercy of her memories. The only thing there was to focus on was the steady rhythm of the boxcars going past that matched the thumping of her heart, which was speeding up the more she got caught up in her thoughts.

What had happened that day was simple. Lisa, her siblings, and Janey all arrived at the pool and walked in the gate towards the little stand where Miz Sharon made the snow cones and gave out paper cups filled with water for thirsty patrons. Lisa didn't remember until later that they walked right past a group of angry looking kids, sulking outside of the gate. She was too bent on getting that cherry-flavored ice onto her dry tongue. Miz Sharon was leaning forward on the counter, head resting in one hand, a cigarette in the other. Running her tongue over her lightly stained teeth, she looked the kids up and down, while the breeze lightly lifted her blonde hair. She took a long drag of her cigarette and blew it in their direction.

“Okay that's gonna be 75 cents.”

The kids hesitated. The girls looked towards David, the oldest and the boy, to say something, but he looked just as confused.

“Uh. We didn't order anything...Ma'am.”

She took another puff of her cigarette and flicked the ashes off to the side with a disinterested look.

“Membership fee,” she said.

“What? Since when?”

Miz Sharon turned her head to look him in the face, eyes narrowed.

“It’s 25 cents a person. Now, come on.”

The children stood doing the math in their head. Then David spoke.

“You mean, a dollar for all four of us, then.”

“No,” she said with obvious irritation in her voice. “I mean, 75 cents for *y’all*,” and she gestured with her free hand at Lisa and her siblings.

Slowly it dawned on the children what was happening.

David was wide-eyed and could say nothing.

Patricia blurted out, “But we don’t have any money with us.”

Miz Sharon let out a gruff chuckle. “Mm-hmm. Okay, then,” she said, and waved for them to go back the way they came.

They had no other choice. Slowly, David turned towards the gate.

“Wait!” Janey piped up. “Take my quarters!”

She stood up on her toes and slid the coins across the counter.

“I know it’s not really enough, but maybe we could get the other quarter next time. I promise we would, really,” Janey said, words spilling out all at once.

“No.” Miz Sharon pushed Janey’s hand away.

“Come on, please!”

“No.”

“You can’t just do that!” Janey said, in a voice that sounded like she very well meant to stop her. Her hand was steadfast, still on the counter with the coins.

Miz Sharon and Janey locked eyes, and Lisa was scared for her friend. She had seen that same look in Janey’s eyes on the playground with bullies. Except those bullies were kids and couldn’t do much to her. But Janey didn’t care now either.

Miz Sharon reached across and grabbed Janey’s wrist.

“Child, I can do anything I want.”

“But’s it’s not fair!” she shouted and stomped.

Miz Sharon still had Janey’s wrist and tightened her grip and pulled it towards her, almost lifting Janey off the ground.

“Hush up.”

She flung Janey’s hand back down to her, and Janey snatched it to her chest and rubbed the red mark already forming.

Miz Sharon came around from the counter and got down on Janey’s level, surveying her.

“You’re the Garrison’s kid, huh?”

Janey had her jaw set firmly, scowling. She nodded.

“Well missy, you can just stay put until I call your parents. Sure you mama and daddy won’t be too pleased to hear about this.”

She began to walk away, and when her back was turned, Janey let out a bark of fury and kicked the back of her leg.

Lisa’s mouth dropped. She looked around only to find that David and Patricia were already outside of the gate walking back up the road. She backed up slowly,

keeping an eye on Janey, whose chest was heaving beneath her yellow swimsuit cover-up dress. Then, she turned and ran.

Lisa felt hot tears roll down her cheeks that were instantly cooled by the car's air conditioning. The same kind of tears that had fallen from her face that day as she trudged back down the road behind her siblings, making water marks in the hot dirt that quickly evaporated. There they had caught up with the group of angry kids they hadn't noticed before. An older boy asked David what had happened, and they traded similar stories.

"Man, I hate white people," the boy had finished off with. "Right?" he asked, when David made no audible response.

"Yeah," David murmured, and the other boy picked up a long whip-like branch and struck a tree trunk with it. The cracking noise hung heavy in the air as the group trudged back down the road in a cloud of thick dust.

But Lisa did not hate white people. She couldn't because she did not hate Janey. Part of her knew that she should tell the boy and the others what had passed between Janey and Miz Sharon, but she was afraid to speak. She knew she couldn't hate all white people. But she sure as hell hated Miz Sharon.

The next time Lisa saw Janey, she showed her the bruises from the whooping she got for talking back to Miz Sharon. Lisa gasped at the purple and yellowish marks, but Janey had a faint smirk and still a twinkle of defiance in her eyes. A month later, Janey's family picked up and moved her to a town that was "more homogeneous" in hopes that there would be no more problems with Janey "acting out." But they couldn't have been more wrong. By the end of high school, Janey was participating in sit-ins and protests all over the state.

As for Miz Sharon and the pool, the city eventually asked her to shut it down. The Civil Rights Act of 1964 had been passed several years before, and the city management didn't want the feds coming in and getting too involved with anything. So the pool was filled with concrete, and no one really talked about it after that.

So much had taken place in just the course of a summer, but Janey made sure to keep in touch after she moved. Sometimes Janey asked Lisa why her family didn't move, too. Certainly they would have, except everywhere else was like this too but worse. A town 30 miles over had chained a black man to the bumper of a car and dragged him through the streets just for looking at a white lady the wrong way.

Sometimes Lisa and Marvin talked about why they didn't move even now. Finally they were in a situation where they were financially stable enough to leave. But they didn't. As the train finally passed and the line of vehicles began to move forward, she searched herself once again for the answer. Honestly when it came down to it, as bad as some of the memories from Larkin were, it was their home. Family was here. And so were friends. This house and home. Even the train tracks the car bumped over.

And besides it isn't like that anymore, Lisa thought. *It isn't like that.*

At the elementary school, Lisa signed in at the front desk and wound her way up and down the hallways to get to Kimmy's classroom. Stopping in front of Room 316, she looked at the cut-out hot air balloon shapes circling the die-cut letters that spelled out "Mrs. Richardson's class is soaring to new heights!" She found the one with Kimmy's name written on it. It was right next to Barbara's. Turning the doorknob, she smiled as

she noticed the two tiny stick figure girls holding hands in both of the girls' hot air balloon baskets.

As Lisa stuck her head in the door, she saw a woman at the desk with bright yellow, box-dyed hair with her head bent over some papers. She didn't look up. Lisa lightly knocked on the door and opened it wider.

"Hi, I'm so sorry I'm late..." Lisa said.

"Mm-hmm," the woman said, still not looking up.

"There was a train."

"Oh, sure sure," she said in a tone that sounded rather flippant to Lisa. "Typical."

Lisa started at this last word, muttered under the woman's breath. Her eyes grew wide as the woman looked up to face her. She recognized those teeth, and those eyes. Though filled with exponentially more wrinkles, this was the face of Miz Sharon.

Of course. Sharon Smith. Why didn't I realize that?

She had never really known Miz Sharon's full name until the tiny article that appeared on the back page of one issue of the *Larkin Lariat* that summer long ago. Plus, Smith was a common name anyways, and up until today, Lisa had done a decent job of leaving those memories under those shady trees.

Lisa stood there with her mouth parted slightly unable to process what was happening.

Miss Smith paid no attention.

"Well, take a seat," she said, and waved her hand at the empty tables.

"You don't have any other big chairs?" Lisa asked, after eyeing the child-sized blue plastic chair next to her leg.

“Does it look like it?”

Lisa made no response and attempted to lower herself into one. When she finally was seated she realized her thighs had not just been shaking because of the muscle force it took to bend that low to the ground, but out of anger and anticipation. Suddenly Lisa felt like a young Janey, ready to fight and scream and claw and box. She wanted to carry out what Janey had started that day at the pool in some feat of poetic justice. The poison words she so wanted to spit like darts formed and festered in her mouth.

Mrs. Smith began to talk, still looking down at the papers on her desk rather than at Lisa.

“Basically I called you in here because Kimmy is one of the worst students in this class.”

“Excuse me?”

Mrs. Smith looked up at Lisa and put her pen down. Lisa began again.

“How do you mean?”

“I mean she talks all the time. She disrupts the progress of the class.”

“But she has made nothing below an A all year,” Lisa said.

“That may be true, but she’s a real distraction to everyone. I’m just tired of her bringing the other kids down. Especially the brighter ones.”

Kimmy is a brighter one, Lisa thought.

“I already had to move her seat away from my granddaughter, Barbara.”

Lisa was silent. So Barbara was Miz Sharon’s granddaughter. How did that happen? Barbara, who was so sweet and loving to Kimmy. In a way Barbara was

Kimmy's Janey, except not as overtly fiery. But only probably because she didn't have to be.

The heat of indignation that had kindled into a flame once Lisa had seen Mrs. Smith was somehow being lessened by something else. Sadness slowly lapped over her anger like a wave. Very much against her will, too. Part of her struggled and urged against it in the name of justice and vengeance. The blood pulsing through her body did not want to give up and give in. But another even more uncontrollable part of her could be nothing but soft, as much as she tried to steel herself. Lisa looked at Mrs. Smith's face and followed the contours of her sagging skin and deep circles under her eyes. She saw more than the weathering of time there. In Mrs. Smith's face she saw the effects of more than half a century of hatred. There was the awful toll hanging on to a grudge can have on a person.

Like the universal look of pain that passes before all of her patients' eyes when getting a tooth pulled or a root canal no matter who they are, Mrs. Smith's deterioration was not something she alone revealed. Lisa recognized the same kind of hardness and weariness on this face that she had seen in others too, even in her grandfather and Uncle Curtis, and for a time, her brother David. It was the crippling hatred of people who never forgave or forgot enough to so much as trust or speak anyone who even resembled the people who had wronged them. The familiar look of someone who is caught up in the forceful undertow of bitterness that they are too blind to even see that they are drowning.

With David it had grown at an exponential rate ever since that day at the pool. He had responded in the only way he could make sense of—what seemed justified to him. And that was hatred and sneaking out late at night to join other young guys damaging

property and anything else they could get away with. But when Lisa received the news Janey had been killed the year after she graduated high school in what had started as a peaceful protest, the entire family was rocked, including David. That Janey would give her life for something that didn't even outright concern her, that she would take up the fight, David said, was proof enough that there was some good. But Lisa had seen Janey doing this her whole life.

Janey. It was all Lisa could think as Mrs. Smith continued to talk about Kimmy's behavior in class. Janey, who had tried so hard to share the things in her life to which Lisa didn't have access. But what she had given most was better than any ribbon or treat.

Out of seeds planted in the same Southern soil, the fruit that had sprung up was something strange and wonderful. An unlikely friendship that was only unlikely because society tried to make it so. She watched the wrinkled folds of skin near Ms. Smith's mouth where words dripping with underlying hatred spewed out, and her heart broke for her. Ms. Smith was blind, and Lisa wondered if she would ever have her eyes opened. She had thought that she would be the one to do it in this classroom, by finding the right words that would stab the woman like a dagger and leave her bleeding for dead, but the more Ms. Smith spoke, the less Lisa had to say. This was not what Janey had died for, what Dr. King had died for, what anyone in the history of bringing peace to humanity had died for. The pain inside of Lisa's own body was immense. She felt the burden of trying to forgive this woman who would most likely never apologize, and it weighed her down. Her face fell and shoulders slumped. So this was the whole idea of that strength to love she had heard about. She had not known it would hurt this bad.

Lisa took notice of the satisfied smirk on Mrs. Smith's face when she surveyed the wetness in Lisa's eyes as she got up to leave, but this only brought more pity from Lisa. Passing by the hot air balloon pictures again on the way out, she placed her hand on them and prayed for more Janeys and Barbaras and Kimmys.

Later on that day when Lisa came back to pick Kimmy up from school, Kimmy was very talkative, but did not mention Mrs. Smith. Instead she told Lisa about how Dylan had gotten made fun of because of his glasses and how another little boy had taken his snack cake at lunch and squished it. Kimmy had given him the lemon bar Lisa had put in her lunchbox. Lisa looked up in the rearview mirror, listening to Kimmy talking from the backseat, with the same look of love that her father had shown her. She smiled at her daughter.

“Kimmy, that was very kind. I'm really proud of you, baby.”

“Thanks, Mama.”

Lisa thought a moment.

“Hey, you know what? Since that was so sweet of you, I think you deserve something sweet to make up for that treat you gave away. What do you think?”

A squeal of delight.

“Alright, well whatchya want?”

“A snow cone.”

Lisa paused.

“You sure?”

“Yup.”

“Okay.”

Once it got warm, which in Larkin, Texas was around about March, snow cone stands all over started opening back up. Lisa drove a couple of streets over to the one she knew was near by, but never went to. When they got up to the window of the little red shack, the lady opened the sliding glass door with a smile and asked Kimmy what she wanted.

“Rainbow,” she said.

The lady left the window momentarily and came back, handing Kimmy her snow cone, glistening in the light.

“And you, ma’am?”

Lisa looked up from grabbing some napkins.

“Oh...um, I’m okay.”

“Are you sure?”

“Come on, Mama, get one, too!” Kimmy said. She looked up at her with a big smile, lips already a little blue from the snow cone.

“Oh, alright.”

“Okay, what flavor?” the woman said.

Lisa thought for a moment.

“Kiwi, please” she said finally.

Later, sitting at a picnic table outside the shack, Lisa shared a bite of hers with Kimmy.

“Oh that is good, Mama. That is very good.”