

## ABSTRACT

Tastefully Written: Reflections on Fiction and the Feast

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From Homer to Shakespeare to Dostoyevsky, authors of fiction have found meal scenes prove to be rich repositories of symbolism. In the introductory chapter of this thesis, I attempt to answer the question of why authors include scenes of feasting in their stories, tracing both the symbolic implications inherent in the act of eating and the significance of the feast to ancient Jewish and Greek culture. To this introduction, I append two creative works—a short story and a short film screenplay—that make use of the symbolism of feasting to tell a story about the humbling of pride and the extension of forgiveness.

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TASTEFULLY WRITTEN: REFLECTIONS ON FICTION AND THE FEAST

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## CHAPTER ONE

### The Feast as a Symbol

Food and words have a long history together. From the symposia of ancient Greece to modern-day political fundraisers, banquets keep the mouth busy in more ways than one. As D. P. Cassidy points out, the tongue is an organ of discrimination: our taste-buds are the tribunal that judges what food we will allow to pass into our stomachs and (eventually) become part of us.<sup>1</sup> In a way, the reverse of the process happens in speech: the tongue forms the words we send out into the space between ourselves and others, words that we may share as spiritual and intellectual nourishment (or poison). Such feasts, both mental and physical, require the presence of others: one cannot feast alone. In the same way that human beings need food to survive physically, they also need communion with other people to survive spiritually, emotionally, and psychologically. After all, our *companions* (from the Latin words for “with” and “bread”) are those with whom we eat bread.<sup>2</sup>

As anyone who has read a really “meaty” story knows, books may be feasts; but so may, in a sense, feasts be books. Meals are moments pregnant with possibilities, moments where much may be revealed about who we are and what matters to us. Combine this fertile ground for imagination with the long-standing social traditions of communal meals—especially celebratory meals, such as those at weddings or funerals—

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<sup>1</sup>D. P. Cassidy, “Food for Thought,” CDA, 1:01:00, from collection, *Feasting with the King: Food for the Journey from the Gospel of Luke* (Austin, TX: Re2010).

<sup>2</sup>Norman Wirzba, *Food & Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 12.

and the equally long-standing symbolism and significance that accompanies such meetings, and it is little wonder that authors from Homer to Shakespeare have written feasts into their stories, using them to reveal character or indicate theme. In the second and third chapters of this thesis, I have attempted to follow in this tradition, constructing an original short story and short film screenplay thematically arranged around a single feast. In this introductory chapter, by considering the symbolism inherent in the act of eating as well as the role of feasting in the Ancient Greek and Judeo-Christian traditions, we will explore the ways in which feasting has become such a rich symbol for authors across the centuries.

Eating (and, thus, feasting) is a highly symbolic act in itself. Creatures eat to sustain life. The food we eat provides the energy that fuels our bodily systems and, what is more, becomes the raw material used to rebuild our organs. In one sense, then, it is true that “You are what you eat.” But this reality says something about the nature of the human beings: we are needy, and cannot single-handedly supply our need. As Norman Wirzba puts it, “Whenever people come to the table, they demonstrate with the unmistakable evidence of their stomachs that they are not self-subsisting gods.”<sup>3</sup> To eat is to acknowledge that you are in need of something else, something outside of yourself. That something else can only be obtained by the death of another, whether animal or vegetable.<sup>4</sup> Providing food to another person is, then, an implicit signal that the provider wishes that person’s life to continue; it is an acknowledgement of responsibility toward

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<sup>3</sup>Wirzba, *Food & Faith*, 2.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid., 1.

them. The symbolism of identity, sacrifice, covenant, and communion are thus not arbitrarily tacked onto the act of eating, but rather are integral to it.

The feast is a meal expanded to epic proportions, a meal consciously imbued with significance. The ritual of feasting has permeated culture from time immemorial: from weddings to funerals, from births to harvests to treaties, “We mark the significant moments of our lives,” as Sara Covin Juengst says, “with knife and fork.”<sup>5</sup> For many, some of the most significant of life’s moments are religious occasions, holidays (“holy days”) or rituals. These high days and rituals, too, were often celebrated with a feast.

In ancient Greece, religious feasts doubled as opportunities for cultural bonding. Sacrifices were “at the same time a religious observance, an occasion for enjoyment and an opportunity for meat-eating.”<sup>6</sup> Barbara Norman likewise observes that public religious feasts were “an instrument for satisfying the public and keeping the poor under control.”<sup>7</sup> Triumphal festivities in Rome later performed a similar function, influencing popular opinion in favor of the conquerors in whose honor these festivities were held.<sup>8</sup> Nearly all the Romans’ feast days—and there were a great many, 160 per year by the time of the emperor Claudius—were dedicated to one or another of the Roman gods.<sup>9</sup> Moderation was not a concern to the Romans, but there were religious considerations to

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<sup>5</sup>Sara Covin Juengst, *Breaking Bread: The Spiritual Significance of Food* (Louisville, KY: Westminster/John Knox Press, 1992), 76.

<sup>6</sup>Andrew Dalby, *Siren Feasts: A History of Food and Gastronomy in Greece* (London: Routledge, 1996), 3.

<sup>7</sup>Barbara Norman, *Tales of the Table: A History of Western Cuisine* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1972), 5.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Patrick Faas, *Around the Roman Table: Food and Feasting in Ancient Rome* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 23.

be attended to before eating: these were the libations and offerings of food to the gods, gestures that were significant because, as Faas puts it, “sharing food was, and is, a fundamental way to acknowledge someone’s presence.”<sup>10</sup>

The accounts of lavish Greek and Roman feasts are many: from the Homeric heroes’ superabundance of roasted meat to the luxurious dinner feasts of Greece’s golden age to the drinking parties recounted in works such as Plato’s *Symposium*.<sup>11</sup> George Paul also notes the accounts of banquets-gone-awry recorded in Greek and Roman historiography, banquets at which betrayals and even murders occurred. Paul postulates that Greco-Roman dinners and drinking parties may have been considered “microcosm[s] of society,” and “bastions of civilization in a war against barbarism”; consequently, the manner in which they were conducted had much, symbolically at least, to say about their native cultures.<sup>12</sup>

In Homer’s *Iliad*, we get an example of the feast as a symbol on a more personal level, the feast as an indicator of relationship. After the Greek hero Achilles kills Hector, the Trojan who slew Achilles’ friend Patroclus, Achilles continues his vengeance on Hector by daily dragging his corpse around Patroclus’s tomb. In the twenty-fourth (and last) book of the *Iliad*, Hector’s father, Priam, comes to Achilles to beg for the body of his son. Priam wants to give his son a decent burial, and Achilles reluctantly consents,

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<sup>10</sup> Faas, *Around the Roman Table*, 22-23.

<sup>11</sup> Eugenia Salza Prina Ricotti, *Meals and Recipes from Ancient Greece*, trans. Ruth Anne Lotero (Los Angeles: J. Paul Getty Museum, 2007), 2-8, 28-33.

<sup>12</sup> George Paul, “Symposia and Deipna in Plutarch’s Lives and in Other Historical Writings,” in *Dining in a Classical Context*, ed. William J. Slater (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1991), 166.



conscious that Priam comes with the blessing of the gods. After he does so, the two men share a remarkable moment. Achilles adjures Priam,

“Now, at last, let us turn our thoughts to supper.  
Even Niobe with her lustrous hair remembered food,  
though she saw a dozen children killed in her own halls”

.....  
Never pausing, the swift runner sprang to his feet  
and slaughtered a white sheep as comrades moved in  
to skin the carcass quickly, dress the quarters well.  
Expertly they cut the meat in pieces, pierced them with spits,  
roasted them to a turn and pulled them off the fire.  
Automedon brought the bread, set it out on the board  
in ample wicker baskets. Achilles served the meat.  
They reached out for the good things that lay at hand  
and when they had put aside desire for food and drink,  
Priam the son of Dardanus gazed at Achilles, marveling  
now at the man’s beauty, his magnificent build—  
face-to-face he seemed a deathless god ...  
and Achilles gazed and marveled at Dardan Priam,  
beholding his noble looks, listening to his words.<sup>13</sup>

The meal that these two share together is a symbol for their deep connection, a sign rendered even more poignant by Priam’s admission that this is the first food he has eaten since his son’s death.<sup>14</sup> Though the two men, leaders of opposing forces, are deeply divided, they are also both men who have lost a loved one in this war. In eating together, they affirm their common humanity and share, at least for a short while, admiration and understanding. In this way, a meal becomes a moment of community.

In the Jewish Bible, feasting is an opportunity not merely for communion other individuals but also for communion with God. In the books of the Pentateuch, Yahweh commands the nation of Israel to celebrate certain religious feasts, feasts that serve to remind His people of who they are in relation to Him. These Jewish religious festivals

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<sup>13</sup>Homer, *Iliad*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), XXIV.707-709, 731-44.

<sup>14</sup>Ibid., XXIV.753-755.

were connected not only with specific seasons of the year, but also with specific stories to be told, as J. Van Goudoever notes in the preface to his work on the Biblical calendar.<sup>15</sup> The three main feasts of the Jewish year—the Feast of Unleavened Bread, the Feast of Harvest/Weeks, and the Feast of Ingathering/Booths—were all tied to harvests, whether in preparation, enjoyment, or thanksgiving.<sup>16</sup> These three feasts were opportunities to hand down memories of the past, as well: the story of God’s delivering Israel from Egypt, making a covenant with them, and providing shelter for them in the wilderness.<sup>17</sup> At these feasts, parents passed down to their children the collective memories of their people, the story of their identity as God’s chosen people.

Among the practices that set the Jewish religious feast day apart from normal life was the sacrifice of special offerings appropriate to that day. Norman Wirzba, in his work on *Food & Faith*, quotes Matthew Levering’s powerful statement that “the feast is the realization or crowning of the sacrificial movement.”<sup>18</sup> Sara Covin Juengst notes that, in ancient Israel, meat was usually eaten only at special meals such as religious feasts and meals cooked for guests.<sup>19</sup> The juxtaposition of sacrifice and feast (also present, as we have seen, in Greek culture) may seem strange to modern revelers accustomed to pre-packaged grocery store meats; but Cassidy affirms this juxtaposition with his description of cooking. “Through a process of washing and cutting and firing,” he says, “we take something that’s dead and we prepare it to be consumed so that it makes us live”—a

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<sup>15</sup>J. Van Goudoever, *Biblical Calendars* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1959), 3; vii.

<sup>16</sup>*Ibid.*, 11; 15; 30.

<sup>17</sup>*Ibid.*, 13; Juengst, *Breaking Bread*, 79; 80.

<sup>18</sup>Matthew Levering, *Sacrifice and Community*, quoted in Wirzba, 137.

<sup>19</sup>Juengst, *Breaking Bread*, 41; 18.

process remarkably akin to the Biblical ritual of offering a sacrifice.<sup>20</sup> Cassidy notes that, in the Bible, God is said to “consume” the sacrifice—and yet, His consumption by fire enables the priest and the worshipper to consume the meat as well. Thus, “The offering you give becomes the feast you receive.”<sup>21</sup>

In addition to these divinely prescribed religious feasts, the Old Testament Scriptures recount Jewish celebratory feasts (e.g., feasts given at the weaning of a child, or the celebration of a marriage). Significantly, feasts also served in ancient Israel as signs and seals of covenants (that is, oaths). The patriarch Isaac, for example, prepares a feast for the Philistine king Abimelech and his men before exchanging peace oaths with them.<sup>22</sup> In the Bible, God also seals His covenant with His people by sacrifice, as when God promises Abraham that his descendants will inherit the land of Israel.<sup>23</sup> The sacrifices at subsequent religious feasts thus act as reminders of God’s promises to the Israelites to be their God. Juengst puts it this way: “In sacrificial meals, the people and their God came together at the same table to partake of the same holy food. Eating together resulted in being drawn together, in a renewal of the covenant bond.”<sup>24</sup> The human feast, at which host and guest eat together, mimics this picture of the fellowship that takes place between God and His people in sacrificial feasts.<sup>25</sup> As evidenced by the Psalmist in Psalm 41:9, it is a deep and terrible betrayal when one who has broken bread

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<sup>20</sup>Cassidy, “Food for Thought.”

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Gen. 26:26-31.

<sup>23</sup>Gen. 15.

<sup>24</sup>Juengst, *Breaking Bread*, 41.

<sup>25</sup>Ibid., 42.

with another turns and breaks that bond of fellowship: “Even my close friend in whom I trusted, who ate my bread, has lifted his heel against me.”<sup>26</sup>

In the New Testament, Jesus Christ makes a shocking declaration as He and His disciples celebrate the Passover: Jesus claims that He is Himself the feast that they all must eat. Christ claims to be the sacrificial offering for the sin of His people and the seal of the new covenant between God and them: “Now as they were eating, Jesus took bread, and after blessing it broke it and gave it to the disciples, and said, ‘Take, eat; this is my body.’ And he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he gave it to them, saying, ‘Drink of it, all of you, for this is my blood of the covenant, which is poured out for many for the forgiveness of sins.’”<sup>27</sup> Christ thus fulfills both sacrificial and covenantal aspects of the Jewish feast.

According to Christian theology, the feast of the Lord’s Supper, repeated for centuries at Christians’ weekly gatherings, is a preview for a final feast, one foretold in Revelation 19:6-9:

Then I heard what seemed to be the voice of a great multitude, like the roar of many waters and like the sound of mighty peals of thunder, crying out, “Hallelujah! For the Lord our God the Almighty reigns. Let us rejoice and exult and give him the glory, for the marriage of the Lamb has come, and his Bride has made herself ready; it was granted her to clothe herself with fine linen, bright and pure” – for the fine linen is the righteous deeds of the saints. And the angel said to me, “Write this: Blessed are those who are invited to the marriage supper of the Lamb.” And he said to me, “These are the true words of God.”

This heavenly meal celebrates the final consummation of the union of Christ with His Church, a perfect and eternal union for which the human soul was created and without

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<sup>26</sup>This passage is commonly regarded as prophetic of Judas Iscariot’s betrayal of Jesus. This treachery, too, comes at the hand of one who ate with his victim: “And as they were eating, he said, ‘Truly, I say to you, one of you will betray me.... He who has dipped his hand in the dish with me will betray me’” (Matt. 26: 26:21, 23, English Standard Version).

<sup>27</sup>Matt. 26:26-28.

which it cannot be fulfilled. All earthly feasts are either foreshadowing or distorting the image of this final feast. The Church looks forward to the day when it will be united with Christ in a bond stronger than earthly marriage; in the meantime, humankind continues to mark the rhythms of life—birth, marriage, harvest, death—with feasts.

With this cursory understanding of the role that feasting plays in the Bible, let us consider a specific instance of feasting recounted in Luke 15, an archetypal picture of the joyful feast: Jesus’s parable of the Prodigal Son.

And [Jesus] said, “There was a man who had two sons. And the younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of property that is coming to me.’ And he divided his property between them. Not many days later, the younger son gathered all he had and took a journey into a far country, and there he squandered his property in reckless living. And when he had spent everything, a severe famine arose in that country, and he began to be in need. So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him into his fields to feed pigs. And he was longing to be fed with the pods that the pigs ate, and no one gave him anything.

“But when he came to himself, he said, ‘How many of my father’s hired servants have more than enough bread, but I perish here with hunger! I will arise and go to my father and I will say to him, “Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son. Treat me as one of your hired servants.”’ And he arose and came to his father. But while he was still a long way off, his father saw him and felt compassion, and ran and embraced him and kissed him. And the son said to him, ‘Father, I have sinned against heaven and before you. I am no longer worthy to be called your son.’ But the father said to his servants, ‘Bring quickly the best robe, and put it on him, and put a ring on his hand, and shoes on his feet. And bring the fattened calf and kill it, and let us eat and celebrate. For this my son was dead, and is alive again; he was lost, and is found.’ And they began to celebrate.

“Now his older son was in the field, and as he came and drew near to the house, he heard music and dancing. And he called one of the servants and asked what these things meant. And he said to him, ‘Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he has received him back safe and sound.’ But he was angry and refused to go in. His father came out and entreated him, but he answered his father, ‘Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your

property with prostitutes, you killed the fattened calf for him!’ And he said to him, ‘Son, you are always with me, and all that is mine is yours. It was fitting to celebrate and be glad, for this your brother was dead, and is alive; he was lost, and is found.’”<sup>28</sup>

The feast the father offers for his son is both a celebration and a renewal of covenant, a welcoming back into the family. As we have seen, “meat was reserved primarily for ritual or highly celebrative occasions”; the killing of the fattened calf is entirely in keeping with this pattern.<sup>29</sup> And since “Consuming food together made the participants symbolically members of the same family or clan,” it is also fitting that this celebratory meal should re-establish familial bonds that previously existed.<sup>30</sup>

So, the father of the prodigal celebrates his son’s return with a sacrifice, renewing the covenant oath between him and his son, affirming their familial relationship. The prodigal’s elder brother, however, refuses to put his approval on that act. The elder brother signals his rejection of his brother by refusing to come in to the feast. He will not eat, for to do so would be to enter into communion with his brother and father.<sup>31</sup> Instead, the elder brother complains that his father has never slain an animal for him and his friends to feast on. The outward sign of the brother’s behavior—a refusal to eat food with his family—signaled a spiritual problem: his self-righteous attitude and lack of love for and compassion toward his younger brother.

The symbol of the feast helps to express some of the parable’s major themes: e.g., the father’s gracious acceptance of his son and the judgmental selfishness of the elder

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<sup>28</sup>Luke 15:11-32.

<sup>29</sup>Juengst, *Breaking Bread*, 18.

<sup>30</sup>*Ibid.*, 51.

<sup>31</sup>Cassidy, in “Food for Thought,” points out that a refusal to eat with someone is a rejection of identification or relationship with them.

brother. The feast thus helps to illustrate the theological points the parable makes: a critique of the Pharisees' lack of grace and an affirmation of God's fantastically abundant forgiveness toward repentant sinners, a picture of "the gospel in miniature."<sup>32</sup>

Western literature has inherited the Greco-Roman and Judeo-Christian symbolic languages, and as a result, the symbolic power of the feast is alive and well in literature today. Though not all of Western literature by any means willingly accepts or endorses Christian symbolism, this symbolic backdrop (like the symbolic language of Greek and Roman myth) has been around long enough and proved pervasive enough in culture to require works of literature to respond to it in some form or fashion, whether consciously or unconsciously, affirmatively or negatively.

In his somewhat tongue-in-cheek guide to *How to Read Literature Like a Professor*, Thomas C. Foster provides a layman's interpretation of some of the most common symbols in western literature. Foster claims that when people eat together in plays or novels or short stories, this eating is almost always a symbol of communion (either religious or non-religious).<sup>33</sup> Foster says, "writing a meal scene is so difficult, and so inherently uninteresting, that there really needs to be some compelling reason to include one in the story. And that reason has to do with how characters are getting along. Or not getting along."<sup>34</sup> Foster gives the example of Raymond Carver's story, "Cathedral," in which a man gains sympathy for his wife's blind friend. From drinks to drugs to a sumptuous home-cooked meal, the pair's shared consumption plays an

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<sup>32</sup>David L. Jeffrey, ed., *A Dictionary of Biblical Tradition in English Literature* (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1992), 640.

<sup>33</sup>Thomas C. Foster, *How to Read Literature Like a Professor: A Lively and Entertaining Guide to Reading Between the Lines* (New York: HarperCollins, 2003), 8.

<sup>34</sup>Ibid.

important role in the story, finally enabling the main character to enter into an empathetic relationship with the blind man.<sup>35</sup>

Many scholars concur with Foster on the importance of food in literature, while at the same time expanding his picture to recognize the fact that fictional feasts can provide clues to more than individual characters' relationships with one another. In the introduction to their collection of scholarly essays on the use of food in children's literature, Kara K. Keeling and Scott T. Pollard claim that "Food makes things happen. It is acted upon (cooked, elaborated), but as a cultural force it also acts."<sup>36</sup> Rachel Towns claims that meal scenes in *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* provide keys to C.S. Lewis's views on nationalism and gender roles, while Mervyn Nicholson identifies eating as a symbol of power (being the means of self-reproduction and self-transformation) in works ranging from Genesis to *Alice in Wonderland*.<sup>37</sup>

This symbolism of eating is not always positive: if a feast can be symbolic of covenant, sacrifice, and communion, feasting gone awry indicates a distortion of those things. And feasting, both in fiction and real life, often does go awry. In his *Confessions*, St. Augustine discusses his struggle with one disordered form of eating:

We repair the daily deteriorations of the body by eating and drinking, until the day when You will *destroy both the belly and the meats*, for You will

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<sup>35</sup>Foster, *How to Read Literature*, 10; Raymond Carver, "Cathedral," in *Cathedral: Stories* (New York: Vintage Contemporaries, 1989), 209-228.

<sup>36</sup>Kara K. Keeling and Scott T. Pollard, eds., *Critical Approaches to Food in Children's Literature* (New York: Routledge, 2009).

<sup>37</sup>Rachel Towns, "'Turkish Delights and Sardines with Tea': Food as a Framework for Exploring Nationalism, Gender, and Religion in *The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe*," in *C. S. Lewis: The Chronicles of Narnia*, ed. Michelle Ann Abate and Lance Weldy (Basingstoke, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), 15-37; Mervyn Nicholson, "Food and Power: Homer, Carroll, Atwood and Others," *Mosaic* (Winnipeg) 20, no. 3 (1987): 38-39, accessed April 02, 2014. <http://ezproxy.baylor.edu/login?url=http://search.proquest.com/docview/1300057502?accountid=7014>.



kill our emptiness with a marvelous fullness, and You will clothe this corruptible with eternal incorruption. But for the present time the necessity is sweet to me, and I fight against that sweetness lest I be taken captive by it.<sup>38</sup>

Augustine does not fault food, but rather his inordinate desire for it. The pleasure of eating is dangerous because it tempts the eater to locate his source of happiness in the sensual pleasure communicated by the taste of the food, rather than in that “marvelous fullness” promised by God, communion with Whom is the final beatitude of the soul. Augustine, taking a Biblical view, believes that in order to respond rightly to God and to creation, the soul must love God first and far more than it loves His good gifts. Augustine says that when we disturb this order of loves (when, for example, we love riches more than people, or ourselves more than God) we are sinning, and terrible consequences occur.

Eating, like any earthly activity, can thus become disordered. In the Augustinian view, disordered eating is any kind of eating that moves food out of its proper place, loving it more or less than it ought to be loved. This may include everything from substance abuse and addiction to body-punishing eating disorders and overeating. The sin may be subtler still: as Francine Prose summarizes Gregory the Great’s five-fold distinction of gluttony, we may be tempted to eat “*Too soon, too delicately* [i.e., caring too much about fine cooking], *too expensively, too greedily, too much*.”<sup>39</sup>

Disordered forms of eating may be even more widely used in literature than are their innocent counterparts, and their symbolic implications are just as important.

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<sup>38</sup>Augustine, *Confessions*, trans. F. J. Sheed, 2nd ed., ed. Michael P. Foley (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 2006).

<sup>39</sup>Prose, *Gluttony*, 7.

Consider, for example, the painful dinner party scene in Fyodor Dostoevsky's *Notes from Underground*: instead of witnessing a happy reunion of school friends, the reader watches as the Underground Man drinks himself into total isolation, cutting himself off from the warmth of the circle of conversation carried on by his "friends." (Significantly, no food is described in the scene: though the consumption of a meal is implied, the dinner is an exercise in starvation.) There are, of course, even more unsettling examples: the myth of Thyestes, for one, in which the Mycenaean ruler Atreus murders his nephews before cooking and feeding them to their unsuspecting father as an act of vengeance. Few more devastating visions of family breakdown have been imagined.

Tracy Letts's play, *August: Osage County*, attempts a similar vision, employing disordered eating to reinforce a tale of familial dysfunction. In the play, various members of the Weston family descend on the family home after Beverly Weston, the patriarch of the clan, disappears. The gathering is highly combustible: Violet, Beverly's wife, is intensely acerbic, and clashes with her strong-willed daughter, Barbara (as well as almost everyone else).

From the opening page, the play is rife with themes of feasting gone wrong. Some of the symbolism is readily apparent: addiction is rampant in the family, with Violet addicted to painkillers, Beverly to alcohol, and a number of characters to marijuana. Other indications of the feasting theme are more subtle: for example, there is the inscription at the beginning of the play (a quote from Robert Penn Warren's *All the King's Men*):

The child comes home and the parent puts the hooks in him.... When you get born your father and mother lost something out of themselves, and they are going to bust a hame trying to get it back, and you are it. They know they can't get it all back but they will get as big a chunk out of you

as they can. And the good old family reunion, with picnic dinner under the maples, is very much like diving into the octopus tank at the aquarium.<sup>40</sup>

The theme of emotional cannibalism resurfaces several times in the play. At one point, Violet threatens Barbara, “These [pills] are my best ... friends and they never let me down. Try to get ‘em away from me and I’ll eat you alive.”<sup>41</sup> At another, Violet’s daughter Ivy calls her mother and sister “monsters. ... Picking the bones of the rest of us.”<sup>42</sup>

While food appears in many scenes throughout the play, one meal scene is especially significant. After the funeral, the family gathers for a meal at the old house. Violet talks over everyone, forcing the conversation in whatever direction her drug-addled brain desires—and the direction she leads inevitably ends in alienating some member of the family or other. The meal ends with Violet screaming, “I’ll eat you alive, girl!” as Barbara tries to grab the pills Violet clutches. The funeral feast deteriorates into an around-the-house chase between the two, and the act ends with Barbara’s forceful declaration, “I’M RUNNING THINGS NOW!”<sup>43</sup> Instead of renewing family bonds and celebrating the life of their husband and father, the characters in the post-funeral “feast” scene of *August: Osage County* spiritually eat each other alive, struggling for domination rather than communion.

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<sup>40</sup>Robert Penn Warren, *All the King’s Men*, cited in Tracy Letts, *August: Osage County* (New York: Theatre Communications Group, 2008).

<sup>41</sup>Ibid., 96.

<sup>42</sup>Ibid., 134.

<sup>43</sup>Ibid., 96-97.

How does this breakdown occur? If we recall the ideal feast as presented in stories like the parable of the Prodigal Son, the answer becomes clear: in a world of broken, messed-up people, there is no true communion without sacrifice. There is little the characters of *August: Osage County* are willing to give up for each other. Faced with the ugliness of Violet's and other characters' actions, one by one they peel off in different directions, hell-bent on their own ways. There is no forgiveness, no redemption in this play: only isolation.

The Hebrew Bible says in the book of Proverbs, "Better is a dinner of herbs where love is than a fattened ox and hatred with it."<sup>44</sup> It is not the food that makes the feast, but the sacrificial love that goes into providing and enjoying it. When messy people gather anywhere there is the possibility—to be honest, the probability—that much harm will be done. What keeps this harm at bay is charity, the kind of love that is the highest of the Christian virtues, the love that "does not insist on its own way," that "bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things"; the love that offers itself for the beloved.<sup>45</sup> What made the prodigal son's return so splendid was not the feast but rather the love of the father who ran to welcome him home. Without love, the feast becomes merely a vehicle for gluttony or an opportunity to insist on one's power over others. The selfish feast finds its ultimate antithesis in the Lord's Supper, where the host of the banquet offers Himself as fare for His guests. This Supper is the fulfillment of God's promise to provide for the nations "a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wine;" it is

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<sup>44</sup>Prov. 15:17.

<sup>45</sup> I Cor. 13:4, 7.

the final flowering of His invitation and command, “Open your mouth wide, and I will fill it.”<sup>46</sup>

In the following short story and its film adaptation, I have tried to construct an imaginative response, of sorts, to *August: Osage County*, a response that uses the same images of feasting to present a more hopeful vision.

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<sup>46</sup>Is. 25:6; Ps. 81:10.

## CHAPTER TWO

### “Keeping the Feast”: An Original Short Story

*“Earth to earth, ashes to ashes, dust to dust...”*

It was redder than ashes, the Kentucky dirt crumbling into the hole and splattering over the casket. Ann dropped the last of it from her fingers and wiped her hands unthinkingly on her skirt. It left a faint smear on the black. She had never liked mess, not even when they were children. George had been the one always shaking dirt out of his jean cuffs and his pockets, as if he were made out of mud and crumbled as he dried. He had a kinship with the dust, that one.

*“In sure and certain hope of the Resurrection unto eternal life, through our Lord Jesus Christ ...”*

The red clods kept falling on the casket with a *thump, thump* like a heartbeat. Wasn't it odd, Ann thought, that a lump of muscle about the size of a beefsteak should be the engine of a human being, should squeeze itself (she had learned it in grade school) 100,000 times a day to move all that blood in and out. 100,000 times a day! And then, one minute, stop squeezing.

*“At whose coming in glorious majesty to judge the world, the earth and the sea shall give up their dead, and the corruptible bodies of those who sleep in him shall be changed...”*

Alcohol intoxication. “An accident involving alcohol intoxication.” It was reasonable, Ann thought, to assume, as she had done, that that meant a car accident. You

would never think of a drowning, of George—George!—getting stone drunk on the front porch and stumbling down to the old cow pond for a swim. And sinking.

*“And made like unto his own glorious body; according to the mighty working whereby he is able to subdue all things unto himself.”*

Mama’s face was wet, her makeup sliding on her cheeks, but she had her sunglasses on and Ann couldn’t tell if it was tears or sweat. It was hot in the graveyard, and here they all were, wearing black—all except the pastor, whose vestments swayed like white seaweed as he rocked on his heels and read from the prayer book. Behind him was the church, the one they had followed Grandma and Grandpa into on those stifling summer Sundays, into the cool, underwater-light of the sanctuary.

*“I heard a voice from heaven ...”*

There was a squeak and a rattle as Grandma unscrewed the lid of the tin she had brought with her from the farm. It was an old shoe-polish tin (she always saved them), packed full with dirt. She turned it over, and the round cake spilled out and shattered on the surface of the casket. Her voice unfurled like a vine of morning glory, repeating, repeating the words, unconscious of the pastor’s prayers.

“Bone of my bone. Flesh of my flesh,” she said. “Dust to dust. Bone of my bone ...”

Grandma’s wild hair rolled like a scroll away from her face, her eyes burning steady and unseeing, like some ancient blind oracle’s. Then she blinked, and a film of tears choked the flame. Rachel, a blond flicker like a heat mirage, took Grandma’s arm and wept.

Ann looked at Mama, but she couldn't tell if Mama was looking back behind those sunglasses. Probably not. The preacher's voice hesitated.

"Get on," said Mama.

The line of well-wishers afterward was short. Ann would have liked a larger attendance at his funeral. Then again, he'd never liked crowds.

A man with a buzz cut and crooked teeth was shaking Rachel's hand. He smelled sharply of sweat.

"Yes, ma'am," he was saying, "and I ain't just sayin' so. He was a good man, good with cars. Never had a better mechanic."

Ann glared at his nearly-bald head as he sauntered away. That was the highest praise he could bestow on her brother? Why did people feel it necessary to comment on the dead, anyway?

An older woman with blue-tinged white hair hugged her way down the line of mourners, cradling hands and offering soulful condolences—first to Grandma, then Rachel, then Mama.

To Mama she said, "Eva, sweetheart—if there's anything, you know, anything, just let us know," and Mama said, "Thank you, Mrs. Dooley."

When Mrs. Dooley finished frowning and patting Mama's arm and moved on to Ann, she pressed her hands to her chest.

"My!" she cooed. "My, my, my! Is that our little Annie, all grewed up? Why, if it isn't you to the life, Eva! Mercy, it's been so long."

"Only six years," said Ann. "Not *too* long." Not long enough to make such a fuss, she added to herself.



“You are just like your mama, just the spittin’ image, aren’t you?” said Mrs. Dooley. “People must just tell you that all the time! Do they?”

Ann glanced sideways. Mama’s dark bob was drooping a little under the afternoon heat, but she held her neck straight as ever, her chin tipped up. She looked like an aging version of Elizabeth Taylor’s Cleopatra, minus the startling eye makeup.

“No,” Ann said, “not usually.”

“Let’s go,” said Mama, when the last of the stragglers were slamming car doors and crunching gravel under tires as they pulled away. The pastor and his wife were the last to stick around. Ann had watched Mama walk over to them, lay a black-gloved hand on his shoulder. She hadn’t heard the question, but she watched the couple defer—“Oh, no, we couldn’t”—then seen their resistance crumble under that subterranean pressure, that riptide-like pull Mama exerted. “Well, if you’re sure ...”

When Mama came back, she was—not smiling, exactly, but her chin was tilted a little higher than before. “Pastor’s coming to lunch. Let’s go.”

“Why on earth did you invite them?” Ann asked.

But Mama was already walking to the car, Rachel following. “Get your Grandma,” said Mama.

Grandma was staring down into the grave, her fingers tracing the inside of the tin of dirt. Ann looked at the casket, already lowered into the grave. She felt a wing of panic flap in her stomach. It was too soon, there must be something to say, some last symbolic motion to make. Something, before the backhoe piled three feet of Kentucky dirt on top and tamped it down. What was there to say? “Goodbye”? But she’d said that a long time ago, six years, after that last Thanksgiving. He’d dropped her off at school in

Chicago for the last time. ‘Bye,” she’d said then, and pecked him on the cheek and hopped out of the truck. And never looked back.

“Grandma? Time to go.”

Grandma paid no attention. She wasn’t looking at the casket anymore: she held her fingers, powdered with the iron-rich dust, before her eyes. “In 1935,” she said, “your grandfather first drove onto that property, dirt poor and land-hungry. He saw those acres and that old house strung up on that hill and he slapped down his cash, all he had. Named it Mount Zion.”

“I know, Grandma.”

“That’s where he died. Where I’ll die. Where George died, and should have been buried.”

So that was it. Ann squeezed her hands together.

“I know, Grandma. But Mama wanted him buried here. She wanted him to be with Grandpa.”

“It’s family land. Red. Like blood.”

“I know, Grandma.”

Grandma’s eyebrows flicked upward and her eyes rested on Ann at last. “You know!” Ann suddenly felt the gulf between them, the six years and six states that divided the life she lived now from the one they’d had in the old farmhouse. The golden summers and weekends while Mama worked at her restaurant in town and the three of them—George and Rachel and Ann—lay on their stomachs spitting watermelon seeds into a jar while Grandma worked the garden.

“We’ve got to go,” said Ann. “Mama invited some people to lunch.”

Suddenly, Grandma swung around and planted her thumb on Ann's forehead, smearing the sign of a cross. "Dust thou art," she whispered, "to dust thou shalt return ..."

Ann grabbed at her hands and held them, palms together.

"Come on, Grandma. Let's get you home."

The fields surrounding the farmhouse were grassy and unkempt, each hill shaggy like a head gone too long without a haircut. Climbing out of her rental car—an Alaska license plate marooned long ago at the rural two-gate airport—Ann wondered briefly why people always wanted to bury other people on hills. It wasn't as if they would enjoy the view. But Rachel and Grandma had been insistent, before Mama put an end to the discussion. "It's what he wanted," Rachel had croaked through a veil of Kleenex. "He wouldn't want to be sent away."

And Ann suspected she was right, that he'd rather rest under the red maple a little ways from the house, opposite the propane tank. Those summers when Mama made the drive from Nashville to Mount Zion to drop them off, as soon as they had rolled, road-stiffened, out of the car and chattered hellos to Grandma, the three of them would race to that propane tank. They'd slide, belly first, up onto it, straddle it like it was a fat white hippo and slap it with their palms to hear the hollow, echoing clunk. They'd stay out there until Grandma came out on the back porch to call them in to dinner.

Looking over those fields now, though, she noticed something. Something new. Something not right.

"What's that huge hole down in the west field?" she asked Rachel as they made their way to the kitchen down the hallway—a narrow dog-run in pioneer days, now

cramped even narrower by the old piano set against one wall and the plywood sewing desk built into the other.

“You remember the sinkhole down by the old dugout,” said Rachel. She made it to the kitchen and wilted into a chair. “We’ve had three more open up since you left—one four years ago, one last winter. That one was June. Renter working the farm brought in some big equipment and it just dropped out underneath him. Busted his combine pretty bad.”

Ann had always found the old sinkhole terrifying. Once, George had determined to explore it. She remembered the surge of claustrophobia as he knotted the rope around his waist and then her own, the feeling of standing at the brink, looking down into that rocky funnel and the yawning black gullet at the bottom. She had screamed until he promised not to go, after all. And then there had been nightmares. It was horrible to know that holes were hidden under the fragile green veneer of the fields, caverns that funneled into a deeper network of caves honeycombing the state. You could walk along those fields for years, a life even, and never know they were there. Until you stood on the piece of ground you held to be really truly solidly your own, and it opened up underneath and ate you.

“So, no more renter, I guess.”

“Nope. Too unstable, he said.” Rachel sighed. “Mama got upset when I told her.” Rachel fidgeted with one of the kitchen towels, a dingy once-white thing with a red felt apple appliqué. “I think in case we wanted to sell later. But I told her, that won’t be for a long time.”

“Over Grandma’s dead body, you mean.”

The screen on the front door slammed, and Mama blew into the kitchen.

“Alright, then,” she said, as if concluding an argument. She swept up to the fridge and immersed herself, head and shoulders, in its shelves. “Rachel, where did I put the sorrel?”

Rachel jumped. “I don’t know. If you can’t find it, we could always heat up a—”

“Over my dead body will a guest at my table eat a warmed-over casserole,” Mama said. “Set that oven to 350.” She stacked covered dishes on the kitchen island.

Rachel stared at the oven. She fingered the buttons. Watching, Ann noticed how thin her fingers were, how the skin stretched over Rachel’s wrist-bones was near translucent.

“Ok—on,” Rachel said. “And—350.” Her eyes cut over her shoulder to Ann. “How do you make it—?”

“Press Start.”

Mama snorted, without turning around. “Good grief, you’ve never turned on an oven before? Hmm, now, this is interesting.” She held up a Tupperware container full of some kind of chopped salad. There was a kind of ravenous curiosity in the way she was gazing at it, holding it poised at eye level like Hamlet with the skull.

“That’s mine,” Ann said.

“Yours!” Mama raised her eyebrows. Those high-arched eyebrows—those were from Grandma, about all they had in common. “What, you thought we wouldn’t have enough food around here?”

“I always bring my own stuff, just in case,” said Ann, removing the plastic container from Mama’s fingers. “I’m vegan now, you know.”

“Vegan?” For a moment, Mama was too shocked to be angry. Then she tilted her chin a little higher and turned back to the fridge. “No wonder you’re skinnier than you used to be. Here: chop, chop, julienne those.” She shoved a knife and two fist-sized knobs the color of brains across the island to Ann.

“It’s not about weight, it’s about being kind to the earth. ... What *are* those? And do what?”

Mama pushed Ann aside. “Julienne. It’s celery root.” Under her knife, the thick skin peeled off and the flesh parted into delicate matchsticks. “‘Kind to the earth!’ You sound like one of those stupid health magazines.”

Ann took the knife and tried to imitate Mama’s deft strokes. “I work for one of those stupid health magazines, remember?”

Mama slid a yellow baking dish with a plastic lid across the island to Rachel. “Stick that in the oven. Where is that sorrel!”

Ann bore down on the knob of celery root. Her knife was stuck halfway into the vegetable, her muscles shaking. “Why sorrel?” she asked. “What are we even making?”

“Oh, sorrel and buttermilk beet salad, roasted potatoes, lamb with kalamata and halloumi ...”

Ann’s shoulders slumped and she let go of the knife. “For Pete’s sake, Mom.”

“... apple and celery root slaw and a rosemary-chocolate mousse.”

“Good grief, Mama, it’s a funeral lunch, not a five-course dinner at your fancy-pants New York restaurant. Heat up a stupid casserole.”

Whisking cider and mustard in a glass bowl, Mama began, “Calm down, most of it just needs to be reheated. And I object to your calling my ... What is that smell?”

An acrid smoke smell billowed from the oven. Rachel gave a little scream as Mama ran to the oven and yanked it open. A puddle of melted plastic smoldered on the oven floor underneath a yellow ceramic baking dish. Mama swooped on the dish with pot holders and pulled it, dripping white film, from the oven.

“What have you done?” She glared at Rachel. “Are you trying to asphyxiate us all? Those fumes are toxic! How am I supposed to make potato salad without any potatoes?”

Rachel was near tears. “I’m sorry! I forgot you have to take the top off. I never—”

“You couldn’t put a goddamned dish of potatoes in the oven? Was that just too difficult—?”

Ann butted in. “Stop it, Mom, it was an accident.”

“You couldn’t even take off a goddamned plastic lid? You’re that stupid?”

Ann slammed the knife onto the cutting board so hard it sliced right through the celery root and sent half the globe spinning off onto the floor. “That’s right,” she sneered, “it’s our fault we can’t cook ...”

Mama whirled on Ann.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“You know what they say about the shoemaker’s children ...”

“You do not talk to me this way, ma’am.” Mama was at her most regal. If a golden cobra crown had suddenly reared up on her forehead, Ann would hardly have been surprised.

“No, I don’t,” Ann said, “not nearly often enough.”

“Please,” Rachel jumped in, “not today. For George.”

Ann noticed her knuckles growing cold. She gripped the knife so tightly her fingers were almost numb, and her hand was shaking. She dropped it with a clatter onto the cutting board and turned to leave, but before she could, Mama grabbed her wrist. She hissed just quiet enough for Rachel not to hear.

“You think this will all last, huh? We’re sitting on top of one of the biggest cave systems in Kentucky, the ground literally falling out from under us, and you think without George this can all just go rolling merrily along till Judgment Day?”

“What are you saying?” Ann asked coldly.

Mama let go of her wrist, dropping it as if the touch was repulsive to her. “Keep quiet and stay out of my way.”

They were six at table—Mama at one end, Grandma at the other, Rachel, Ann, the pastor and his wife in-between. Once Mama had got through with it, the table looked set for a Martha Stewart photo shoot: the steaming platter of lamb, the individual salad plates with the celery root arranged on beds of arugula, the deep blue-and-white china bowl full of beet salad. Ann let her eyes wander over everything, over all the butter-drenched, cream-saturated, egg-contaminated food, and reconciled herself to an empty plate.

The preacher, a tall man with silver spectacles, held Grandma’s chair for her when she sat down. “My,” he said to Mama, “this looks just excellent.” His floral wife—*floral* was the adjective that came to Ann’s mind; maybe it was the dress, or the whiff of sweet pea wrapped around her like a nimbus, or the rosy softness of her face—agreed.



“Yes, goodness, Eva, it’s no wonder your place in New York does so well. This is beautiful.”

Mama gestured toward an empty chair, like an empress at an ancient banquet (“You may sit,” was implied). There was a potent silence. Then, “Pastor,” said Mama, and she nodded at him.

In the slow quiet of the prayer, Ann felt she could hear the farmhouse sag in the afternoon heat. Someone sniffed. She peeked one eye squinty-open. Mama’s eyes were snapped shut, her face angled up at the ceiling, as if smelling something superb.

When he had finished, Mama stood and started running the table like a drill sergeant, doling out lamb with a practiced hand. “Pastor, what can I get you?” “Rachel, pass those beets to your grandma.” “Are you finished with the bread?” “Pass the salt, Ann.” For once, Ann was glad of the micromanagement. It kept conversation to a minimum for a while.

Then Mama was reaching for her plate. Ann put a protective hand over it. “No, thank you.”

Mama’s eyes narrowed. “Oh, yes, I almost forgot,” she minced, “Ann’s our newly minted vegan.”

“Hardly new,” said Ann. “Six years.” She avoided looking at Mama’s eyes, which were narrowed.

“Yes, Ann works for one of those health magazines,” interposed Mama.

“I’m a sub-editor at *Healthy+Wealthy+Wise*,” Ann clarified, feeling how ridiculous the name sounded when spoken aloud in such a context.

“Very progressive views on diet,” said Mama. “What do you think, Pastor, is eating meat a sin?”

You couldn’t let it go, thought Ann.

The pastor chewed his lamb in a meditative fashion.

“No,” he said, “I don’t believe the Bible says it is. A sad necessity of our fallen world, perhaps, but not a sin.”

Mama smiled triumphantly at Ann.

“Well, I don’t think it’s a necessity at all, sad or otherwise,” said Ann. She was painfully conscious of the emptiness of her plate.

The pastor smiled, one of those rueful stretchings of the mouth that is really more of a sympathetic gesture than a smile. “In my experience, to live, sacrifice is always necessary,” he said, “in one form or another.”

Grandma’s voice rose from the end of the table. “Therefore let us keep the feast!” she sang out, and tucked back into her beet salad.

“Rachel, you want some lamb,” Mama said.

Rachel was poking and pushing her salad around her plate. “I’m not really very hungry, Mama.”

“All of a sudden everyone’s starving themselves to death. No one will eat anything!” mumbled Mama.

The pastor’s florid wife put in, “I’m so glad that we’ve finally gotten to see your little piece of heaven. It really is a treat, isn’t it?”

“A beautiful bit of country,” the pastor agreed. He addressed himself to Grandma. “Looks like someone used to have quite a garden down in the east field. My

wife likes a bit of gardening, herself; she'd be quite beyond herself for such a pretty piece of land, wouldn't you, love."

Grandma's back straightened, and she shook the floppy strands of her hair back from her face. "I canned twenty-five years' worth of crops from that plot," she said.

"Used to get everything from melons to tubers. Still could."

"Hush now, Grandma," said Mama, "eat your lamb before it gets cold. Nobody would have the time to get that garden back into useable shape."

Mama didn't look at Grandma when she said this. It didn't matter: Grandma was staring hard enough to bore holes in Mama's forehead.

"So, the farm isn't still in use at all?" the pastor asked.

"Oh, no," said Mama, "no, it's long past that, I think."

Rachel's voice seemed to come from far away. Ann noticed that she had barely touched any of the small, neat piles of food she had arranged on her plate.

"George wanted to get it up and working again," she said. "I think he would have loved growing things. He would have been good at that."

"Oh, yeah," Ann agreed, "we used to talk about that when we were little. We'd pretend that we were going to be the farmers when we grew up."

"The land's farming days are over," Mama insisted, her voice a touch loud for the dinner table. She ran a hand over her haircut. "The view is still lovely, though, isn't it?"

Suddenly, Ann knew. As sure as she was this woman's daughter, she knew why the pastor and his wife were there. She knew why the meal was so elaborate. She knew, and she despised Mama for it.

“So, Pastor,” said Ann, turning to the gentleman, “how is the church these days? How is it doing?”

The pastor blinked at the unexpected question. “Well, ah ... remarkably well, actually. The congregation has been growing.”

Ann resisted the urge to cut her eyes over to Mama’s chair. “Enough to merit a new building?”

“Actually, we have been thinking along those lines. Still a couple of years out, but yes.”

“Isn’t that nice,” said Mama, adjusting her chair.

Ann folded her arms on the table. “Then I suppose you wouldn’t be looking for land to build on yet—say, farmland.”

Rachel stopped kicking beets around her plate with her fork. “What?”

“Ask your mother.” Ann stood up to go.

“Where are you going?” demanded Mama, her voice trembling. “Sit down!”

“You’re unbelievable,” said Ann. “This is why you didn’t want him buried here, isn’t it? Because that devalues the land.”

“The farm isn’t for sale!” Rachel protested.

The wood floor creaked as Grandma shoved her chair back. She stood, clutching the table corners with her broad, manly hands, and raised one to point a thick finger at Mama.

“Eva Hermon,” she said. “Is this the truth?”

There was stillness for a moment. Then Mama said in a thin voice, “I only thought—there was no harm in them seeing it—just in case ...”

Grandma trembled. Her arms tightened, the smooth muscle working under the loose skin. Then in a swift move like the rebound of lightning, she snatched up her plate and hurled it at Mama. It hurtled by her left ear and smashed on the floor behind her.

“No harm?” Grandma thundered. With a sweep of her arm, she rocketed the blue-and-white bowl of beets from the table, right over Mama’s shoulder. “You ‘just thought’ you’d drag me off my land and lock me up in some godforsaken nursing home to rot. You ‘just thought’ you’d deprive the dead his proper resting place!” She sent another plate flying, nearly nicking Mama’s right ear this time. The preacher was on his feet, but Mama hadn’t moved.

“Do you see?” said Mama. “Do you see how unstable she is? How ill-suited she is to live alone?”

Grandma swept every dish within her reach off the table. Slaw flew, and plates rolled, and the pastor somehow caught the lamb before it hit the floor. Grandma’s fingers found the salt and pepper and threw them, too. The glass pepper shaker shattered, and Mama, seated closest to the explosion, got a nose-full.

“No, she’s alright!” said Rachel. She was standing by now, her thin arms grasping Grandma’s shoulder. “I can take care of her! This is our home.”

“You!” Mama sneezed violently, snorting and coughing in between convulsions. “You were—f-flat on your back in a—h-hospital last year because you—couldn’t even *f-feed yourself*. W-without George, neither of you has a-ah—chance.”

Ann whirled on Rachel. “A hospital! Why didn’t somebody—?”

Rachel's eyes were dull, and her voice, when it came, was dryer than Ann had ever heard it, dry like a rasp. "What, call you in California and tell you to just hop on over? Sure, especially after not hearing from you for six years."

Mama screamed as Grandma lunged out of Rachel's arms and spun the platter of lamb across the table. It slid off and crashed on the floor with a noise like a gong.

Ann stamped her foot. "Can you blame me?" she screamed. "I had to get out or I was going to go crazy, crazy like all the rest of you!" And she ran from the living room, down the hallway, and out the front door, slamming it behind her.

She didn't know where she was going, but everywhere she turned she saw him. Sprawled on his belly on a picnic blanket under the maple tree. Kicking the propane tank with his heels, yelling "Giiiiidy up!" Pulling up in the pickup after long hours at the garage, coming home to Grandma's oracles and Rachel's clinging desperation. Drinking alone on the sagging front porch. Ann hated him for being needy in the end, too. She hated him for leaving her behind.

Ann felt the swish of the sun-warmed grass around her ankles. The cicadas were chirring in the trees, and the land shimmered under the weight of the afternoon. If he had wanted to work these fields then why for goodness' sake hadn't he? But she knew what Rachel would answer to that.

She came suddenly upon the green lip of the cow pond, the ground falling away into dank water below. She saw him swimming there, floating, his white belly skimming the surface like a cresting whale's. Was he ten years old, or twenty-five? Or both?

Ann pointed one finger and yelled, "I do not need you! Any of you!"

The surface of the water moved, breaking the spell. A small eddy swirled at one end of the pond. Ann blinked. As she watched, another started at the other end, the beginnings of a tiny whirlpool. She wondered ...

And then she was pitching forward as the ground opened up to swallow her. Dashed against rock, dragged through dirt, she rode a mudslide downwards, bouncing and bruising, until she lost feeling at some point. The final crunch at the bottom should have hurt, but she hardly felt the jangling pain. She lay at the bottom and stared up at the patch of blue sky above her. This must be what the world looked like from the vantage point of a coffin ... until the backhoe came and filled in the sky with dirt.

When Ann regained consciousness, she lay in complete darkness, except for a small puddle of light, leaking under a bedroom door. Her head ached, and though she felt nothing but a dull throbbing in her upper body, she was conscious she could not move her arms if she wanted to. At the moment she didn't want to. She didn't want to move ever again.

The puddle of light stretched and shot up into her eyes as someone pulled the door open. Squinting, Ann could make out a trim figure with bent shoulders. It was Mama, carrying a tray. She hesitated in the doorway, and Ann thought she might go away.

"You're awake."

There didn't seem to be much to say to this.

Ann's tongue felt hot and swollen. "What happened?" she managed to croak.

"The pastor saw the hole on his way out. We had quite a time getting you out of that thing."

Mama set down the tray on the bedside table and, inexplicably, sat on the bed next to Ann.

“Your collarbone is dislocated, and your right arm is broken,” she said. “You have a minor concussion.”

Ann could have wept. All she wanted was to leave, to run back to L.A. and the world of nutritional seaweed supplements and yoga practice, and here she was, an invalid. Ann closed her eyes.

Mama seemed to be talking half to herself.

“Looking at you lying down there, I saw a scrappy little six-year-old again, head-to-toe in blood and Band-Aids because you couldn’t ever stop your bike without crashing into something.”

Ann felt a cool hand touch her forehead. Mama shrank back when she opened her eyes.

“I guess you’re tired. I’ll let you sleep.”

She turned away. Ann couldn’t move her arms, not even to reach for her mother. So she just said, “Mama.”

Mama stopped, waiting. There were years in that pause. “Yes.”

“I’m starving.”

Mama’s eyes shone strangely bright. Her eyes are blue, Ann thought, with crow’s feet wrinkles at the corners. Mama held the bowl underneath Ann’s chin and held the spoon to her lips. Vegetable soup. With beef. Ann inhaled the savory steam. Oh, well. Something in her chest gave a last ineffectual kick and flutter, and she gave up and ate.



## CHAPTER THREE

### *Keeping the Feast: An Original Short Film Screenplay*

FADE IN:

INT. HEALTH STORE, DAY.

An army of colorful plastic bottles fills a juice display case: bottles of superfood drinks, smoothies, kombucha. ANN, late 20s, stands in front of the counter surveying the lot. She already has six bottles in her cart. She picks another bottle from the display case and checks the ingredients list. She gasps.

CUT TO:

Ann stands at the check-out counter. She talks to a clerk and gesticulates at the bottle she found. A line of customers is forming behind her.

ANN

"Omega-3 enriched" means fish oil, and fish oil is definitely not vegan.

CLERK

Ma'am, there's a plant-based Omega-3.

ANN

"Contains fish product," right there.

CLERK

Ok--

ANN

If you don't mind, I'd like to speak to the manager.

A middle-aged WOMAN behind Ann meaningfully shoves her groceries farther along the conveyor belt.

ANN (CONT.)

It's a shocking oversight. You woo customers with claims of being a "Vegan Superstore," and expect them to just lie down and take fish oil in their fruit juice--

WOMAN

Please.

ANN

I must insist on seeing the manager.

CLERK

Ma'am, if you'll go online and fill out our customer service form, we can review your comments. Next customer, please!

INT. ANN'S APARTMENT, LIVING ROOM, DAY.

Ann enters her apartment, fuming. The apartment is small and minimalist: white walls, dark furniture, a bamboo plant in one corner of the living room.

ANN

Fish oil ... gonna write your head straight onto a platter, that's what I'm gonna do.

She slams her laptop onto a table and rips it open. Rifling through her handbag, she tosses a notebook and pencil onto the table, then a magazine flipped open to a page with the article title, "5 Up-and-Coming Health Magazines." Her computer, starting up, opens to the homepage of "Healthy+Wealthy+Wise," an online magazine with pictures of women in exercise clothing and articles like "Pilates or Yoga? An Expert's Opinion," and "5 Comfort Foods You'll Never Eat Again." Some of the articles are by Ann Hermon.

The kitchenette opens onto the living room, and Ann punches the playback button on the answering machine, which lies on the passthrough.

MAN (ON MACHINE)

Hi, Ann, this is Jason--Jay--  
from Jay's Supplements. We just  
got in a new shipment, and I was  
wondering if ... Anyway, I was  
wondering if you'd wanna check  
them out, maybe grab dinner  
after. I could help with the  
research you were--

Ann deletes the message.

ANN

No, thank you, I don't need your  
help.

TELEMARKETER (ON MACHINE)

Hello, there, this is Michelle  
Bjorgenberg, licensed  
psychiatrist here in Los  
Angeles. Have you got the big  
city blues? Do you have issues  
with relationships or--

Again, Ann deletes the message.

ANN

I don't need your help, either.

WOMAN (ON MACHINE)

Annie, this is your mother.

Ann freezes.

MAMA (ON MACHINE, CONT.)

I hope this is still your  
number. Something's happened  
with your brother. With  
George. My number--

Ann punches the delete button. She stares at the phone for another second, then walks into the bedroom.

INT. ANN'S APARTMENT, BEDROOM, DAY

Ann has changed into yoga clothes. She zips up an oversized faded blue hoodie with "Kentucky" and "UK" on the front.

She gathers up a yoga mat, but catches sight of herself in the mirror. She rubs the hoodie.

ANN  
Wonderful. Just what I wanted  
to do today.

Ann picks up the phone on the bedside table, flipping through caller ID. She dials and turns her back as the phone rings.

ANN (CONT.)  
Mama? What's this about George?

She sits on the bed. We watch her shoulders slowly slump.

EXT. AIRPORT, DAY

The airport is tiny: only two gates. Ann sits alone on the drop-off/pick-up platform on top of her suitcase; she is still wearing the blue UK hoodie. She checks her watch. In the distance, a lone pickup kicks up a cloud of dust. Ann stands up. The pickup pulls up in front of her and parks.

The front door slams as RACHEL, early twenties and thin almost to emaciation, gets out.

RACHEL  
Hey.

ANN  
Hi, Rachel.

They stare at each other for a moment. Then Rachel flings her arms around Ann. She SOBS.

ANN (CONT.)  
I know.

A rickety little airplane TAKES OFF AND FLIES overhead.  
Over Rachel's shoulder, Ann watches it go.

INT. PICKUP, DAY

The pickup turns onto a gravel drive marked "Mt.  
Zion." The unkempt green fields of the farm roll by the  
window. The pickup passes a sinkhole, twenty feet in  
diameter and ten feet deep.

ANN

Woah.

RACHEL

You remember that sinkhole down  
by the dugout.

ANN

Yeah.

RACHEL

We had three more open up since  
you left. That one was  
June. Renter working the farm  
brought in some big equipment  
and it just dropped out  
underneath him. Busted his  
combine.

ANN

no more renter, I guess.

RACHEL

Nope.

EXT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE, DAY

The girls climb out of the truck. A sleek black car is  
parked in front of the house.

ANN

Mama here?

RACHEL  
Got in last night.

Ann looks up at the old farmhouse with its cracked white paint. The house sits atop a hill. It's autumn: leaves blow on the porch. There's a pill-shaped propane tank by the side of the house. The porch door opens.

MAMA  
Annie.

ANN  
Mama.

Ann steps onto the porch. She and MAMA (50s, a stylish woman with a modern haircut) stare at each other through the screen door. Mama's chin trembles. She fights it. She opens the screen door.

MAMA  
Come in before the cold does.

INT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE, HALLWAY, DAY

Mama leads the way along the hallway. There's a rolltop desk to one side of the hall, and a stack of mail lies on it. Mama pauses to pull the top down as they pass.

MAMA  
You saw the sinkhole ...

ANN  
Yeah, I saw it.

MAMA  
The man said we must be sitting on top of one of the biggest cave systems in Kentucky. How's that for a selling point.

ANN  
Nobody's talking about selling.

They walk into the living room.

INT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE, THE LIVING ROOM, DAY

GRANDMA, late 70s but remarkably tall and strong-looking for her age, sits on the couch. The TV is playing an obnoxious children's show. Grandma stares at it.

MAMA

Mother, Annie's here.

(to Ann)

I have to call the church about the funeral flowers. Keep an eye on her.

Without waiting for an answer, Mama leaves. Ann sits down next to Grandma.

ANN

Hey, Grandma.

Grandma doesn't respond. Ann touches her hand. Grandma finally looks at her.

ANN (CONT.)

Hey. It's me, it's Ann ...  
Annie.

GRANDMA

Have you seen George?

ANN

No, Grandma.

GRANDMA

He works so hard. So late, sometimes. But he'll be home from the garage soon.

ANN

No, Grandma. No.

GRANDMA

No. I forgot.

She pulls her hand away and turns to continue staring at the TV.

INT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE, UPSTAIRS, EVENING

Ann lugs her suitcase upstairs. She starts to head down the hallway to one of the bedrooms, but pauses at the top of the stairs. The door to her left is ajar. She enters.

INT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE, GEORGE'S ROOM, EVENING

There is a blue UK pennant on the wall, an old TV set in one corner. The room is still in disarray. Ann opens the closet and runs her fingers over the clothes--canvas jacket, old plaid shirts. An oil-stained mechanic's coverall is wadded up on the closet floor.

Ann sits on the bed. There's a picture on the bedside table: GEORGE--20, tall and skinny, wearing glasses, a party hat, and a goofy grin--stands behind a birthday cake, his arms around Ann and Rachel.

Ann sits on George's bed and picks up a stack of books on the bedside table: *A Farmer's Almanac*, books on *Getting Your Small Farm Up and Running Again*, *Beginning Crop Rotation*.

Rachel knocks on the door.

ANN

Come in.

RACHEL

Mama was asking if you could come help make some stuff for lunch tomorrow.

ANN

Asking, huh.

RACHEL

Well ... you know.

She sits on the bed. She takes one of the books from Ann and holds it.



ANN

We used to joke about being farmers when we were little. He was still playing around with that idea?

RACHEL

He tried to grow some tomatoes in Grandma's old garden last year.

ANN

And...

RACHEL

And the garage manager got sick and he took the extra shifts. And Grandma got it into her head that she was a prophetess of ancient Greece and tried to hitchhike to Louisville, and I--

Ann watches her. Rachel puts the book down and stands up.

RACHEL (CONT.)

Well, the tomatoes died.

ANN

I know Mama wanted to sell, way back when Grandpa died. If George hadn't--well. You think it was worth it?

RACHEL

Grandma said she'd rather die than leave. George agreed. So did I.

Ann opens her mouth as if to speak, then closes it again.

RACHEL (CONT.)

We better go help Mama.

She exits.

INT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE, KITCHEN, NIGHT

Mama rummages through refrigerator, cupboards, pantry, tossing food items in a heap on the kitchen island. The sound of cicadas drifts through the window over the sink. Ann swings into the kitchen, followed by Rachel.

ANN

What is it, Mama.

MAMA

I invited the preacher and his wife to lunch after the service.

ANN

Why in the world--

MAMA

Where is that sorrel ... I can't find a thing underneath all these casseroles.

RACHEL

We could always heat one--

MAMA

Over my dead body will a guest at my table eat a warmed-over casserole. Set that to 350.

Rachel stares at the oven; she fingers the buttons.

RACHEL

Ok--on.

ANN

Press Start.

MAMA

Good grief, you've never turned on an oven before!

She unearths a Tupperware full of some kind of chopped salad.

ANN  
That's mine.

MAMA  
You thought we wouldn't have  
enough food around here--

ANN  
I always bring my own stuff.  
I'm vegan.

MAMA  
No wonder you're skinnier than  
you used to be. Chop, chop.  
Julienne those.

She shoves a knife and a pile of vegetables toward Ann.

ANN  
It's not about weight, it's  
about being kind to the earth  
... What's a Julienne?

Mama pushes Ann aside and demonstrates.

MAMA  
You sound like one of those  
stupid health magazines.

ANN  
I work for one of those stupid  
health magazines, remember.

Mama slides a baking dish with a plastic lid across the  
island to Rachel.

MAMA  
Stick that in the oven.

Rachel hesitates, then puts it in. No one notices that she  
leaves the lid on. Mama slams the fridge door and rips  
open a cabinet.

RACHEL  
Maybe you left it in the car...

MAMA  
Of course not.

ANN  
What are we even making?

MAMA  
Sorrel and buttermilk potato  
salad, lamb with kalamata and  
halloumi ...

ANN  
For Pete's sake, Mom.

MAMA  
... and a rosemary-chocolate  
mousse.

ANN  
Good grief, it's a funeral  
lunch, not a five-course dinner  
at your fancy-pants New York  
restaurant. Heat up a stupid  
casserole.

MAMA  
I object to your calling my--  
What is that smell?

Smoke billows out of the oven. Mama and Rachel SCREAM,  
Mama runs to the oven and yanks it open, pushing Rachel  
aside.

MAMA (CONT.)  
How am I supposed to make potato  
salad without any potatoes?

A puddle of melted plastic smolders on the oven  
floor. Mama grabs the dish from the oven. White film  
drips from it.

RACHEL  
I'm sorry!

MAMA

What, you couldn't put a  
goddamned dish of potatoes in  
the oven! Smell that, smell  
it! Was it just too difficult--

ANN

Stop it, it was an accident.

MAMA

You couldn't even take off a  
plastic lid--you're that stupid?

ANN

Oh, as if it's our fault we  
don't know how to cook--

Mama whirls on Ann.

MAMA

What do you mean by that.

ANN

Like you don't know!

MAMA

You DO NOT talk to me this way.

ANN

No, I don't, not nearly often  
enough--

The kitchen door SLAMS open. Grandma stands in the  
doorway. All stop to look at her.

GRANDMA

I want him here.

MAMA

We talked about this, remember.

GRANDMA

I want him buried here.

MAMA  
He'll be in the churchyard, with  
Grandpa.

GRANDMA  
I want him here. He'd want to  
be here.

ANN  
It makes sense.

MAMA  
I will not allow my son to be  
buried on this farm!

ANN  
Why not ...

MAMA  
Because--because it's--

ANN  
Because it's what.

Mama throws the casserole dish on the floor between her and  
Ann, where it cracks.

MAMA  
Because I don't want him to.

Rachel CRIES OUT and tries to gather the mess with a towel.  
Ann looks down and realizes she's gripping her knife so  
hard her knuckles are white and her hand is shaking. She  
drops the knife on the cutting board and storms out of the  
kitchen. Mama follows.

EXT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE, NIGHT

Mama storms out the front door. Ann is standing in the  
front yard, looking out over the moonlit fields.

MAMA  
What is the matter with you.

ANN

You're the one turning your  
son's funeral into a showcase,  
for some unfathomable reason.

MAMA

You think this will all last--

She gestures at the farm.

MAMA (CONT.)

You think without George this  
can all just go rolling merrily  
along till Judgment Day! Well,  
it can't, and it won't. The  
bottom is literally falling out  
of this place, and we've got to  
make the best of it.

ANN

What are you saying--

MAMA

If you want to keep your  
anorexic sister and your  
demented grandmother off the  
street, keep quiet and stay out  
of my way.

Mama stalks back inside.

EXT. GRAVEYARD, DAY

A small crowd of mourners stands around the open grave.  
Mama and Rachel are on one side of the grave, Grandma and  
Ann on the other.

Ann and Mama avoid eye contact with one another.

The PASTOR, mid-50s, tall and scholarly with a kind face,  
reads aloud from a prayer book.

PASTOR

Earth to earth, ashes to ashes,  
dust to dust, in sure and  
certain hope of the Resurrection  
unto eternal life, through our  
Lord Jesus Christ, at whose  
coming in glorious majesty to  
judge the world, the earth and  
the sea shall give up their dead

...

The members of George's family one by one toss handfuls of red Kentucky dirt onto the casket. Grandma opens a tin-full she's brought from the farm and, fighting tears, empties it into the grave. Ann looks at Mama, but Mama won't look back.

CUT TO:

Mama, Ann, Grandma, and Rachel stand side-by-side in front of the grave. A line of stragglers from the funeral shake their hands.

JIM, mid-40s, with a buzz cut and crooked teeth, shakes Rachel's hand.

JIM

... A good man, good with  
cars. Never had a better  
mechanic.

MRS. DOOLEY, a heavy-set woman in her 70s, clasps Mama's hand.

MRS. DOOLEY

Eva, sweetheart--if there's  
anything, you know, anything,  
just let us know.

MAMA

Thank you, Mrs. Dooley.

Mrs. Dooley turns as if to move on, then catches sight of Ann.



MRS. DOOLEY

My, my, my! If it isn't you to  
the life, Eva! Is that our  
little Annie--

ANN

Hi, Mrs. Dooley. It's been a  
while.

MRS. DOOLEY

You are just like your mama,  
just the spittin' image, aren't  
you. People must just tell you  
that all the time! Do they?

ANN

No. No, they don't.

As the last of the stragglers leave, the group of women  
heads for the car--all except Grandma, who lingers by the  
grave. Ann goes back for her.

ANN (CONT.)

Grandma.

Grandma is contemplating a handful of red dirt.

GRANDMA

In 1935, your grandfather first  
drove, land-hungry, onto this  
property. He saw that old hull  
of a house strung up on that  
hill and he slapped down his  
cash. Named it Mount Zion.

ANN

I know, Grandma.

GRANDMA

That's where he died. Where  
I'll die. Where George died and  
should have been buried. It's  
family land. Red. Like blood.

ANN

I know, Grandma.

GRANDMA  
(sadly ironic)  
I'm sure you do.

Suddenly, she swings around and plants a thumbful of red dirt on Ann's forehead, making the sign of a cross.

GRANDMA (CONT.)  
Dust thou art, to dust thou  
shalt return ...

Ann grabs at her hands.

ANN  
Let's get you home.

INT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE, DINING ROOM, DAY

The Pastor, PASTOR'S WIFE (early 50s, pleasantly plump), and the family sit around the dining table. The table looks like it's ready for a Martha Stewart photo shoot. The Pastor is finishing his prayer.

ALL  
Amen.

MAMA  
Pastor, what can I get for you?

She stands up and starts portioning out the meat as people pass their plates.

PASTOR'S WIFE  
This is just beautiful,  
Eva. It's no wonder your New  
York place has done so well.

MAMA  
It really is wonderful to have a  
job that doesn't feel like work  
at all ...

As Ann watches, the sound fades out. Mama continues to serve: confident, comfortable running things, pleased with how impressive she is.

INT. EVA'S APARTMENT, EVENING

Flashback: Young George and Young Anna stand in their mother's bedroom doorway, whispering to each other.

YOUNG ANN

You go.

YOUNG GEORGE

No, you go.

Young Rachel wanders up and tries to toddle into the bedroom.

YOUNG RACHEL

Mommy!

Young Anna holds her back, but it's too late. Mama stirs, grunts.

YOUNG ANN

We were wondering if we could have macaroni for dinner.

MAMA

I said you could have peanut butter.

YOUNG GEORGE

But we had peanut butter last--

MAMA

Mama's tired.

YOUNG ANN

We found a box in the pantry--

Mama hurls a pillow at the kids standing in the doorway. They jump.

MAMA

I worked twelve hours today to  
put food on your table--let me  
sleep! You want macaroni, you  
make your own.

END FLASHBACK

INT. GRANDMA'S HOUSE, DINING ROOM, DAY

MAMA

...and you know, we just have to  
do what our talents call for.

Mama reaches for Ann's plate.

ANN

No, thank you.

MAMA

Oh, yes, I almost forgot. Ann's  
a newly minted vegan.

ANN

Yep. Five years "new."

PASTOR

Really.

MAMA

She works for a magazine with  
progressive views on  
health. They think meat-eating  
is a sin.

She looks expectantly at the pastor.

PASTOR

A sad necessity, perhaps, but  
sacrifice is what makes life  
possible.

ANN

Sacrificing someone for your own  
ends is deplorable.

MAMA

Unless that someone happens to  
be a plant.

She LAUGHS alone; everyone else maintains an uncomfortable  
silence. Neither Ann nor Rachel eats anything, though  
Rachel pushes bits of food back and forth across her plate.

MAMA (CONT.)

You want some lamb.

RACHEL

I'm not that hungry.

MAMA

All of a sudden everyone's  
starving themselves to death.

PASTOR'S WIFE

I'm glad we've finally gotten  
out here to see your little  
piece of heaven.

PASTOR

A really fine bit of country.

PASTOR'S WIFE

It looks like someone used to  
have quite a garden.

GRANDMA

I canned twenty-five years'  
worth of crops from that  
plot. Used to get everything  
from melons to tubers. Still  
could.

MAMA

Nobody would have the time to  
get that garden back into usable  
shape.

PASTOR

The farm's not in use at all?

MAMA

No, it's long past that. Though  
the view is still lovely.

Ann looks sharply at her mother. She has an idea.

ANN

So, Pastor, how's the church  
doing?

PASTOR

Quite well. Wonderful,  
actually, the congregation has  
been growing.

ANN

Enough to merit a new building?

PASTOR

We have been thinking along  
those lines, yes. Still a  
couple of years out, but ...  
yes.

MAMA

Ann ...

ANN

Mhmm, you wouldn't be thinking  
about looking for some land to  
build on yet--some old farmland,  
say--would you.

PASTOR

Well, we--

RACHEL

Farmland ...

ANN

Ask your mother.

Ann pushes back her chair and gets up to leave the table.

MAMA  
Where are you going?

ANN  
You're unbelievable.

RACHEL  
Mom.

MAMA  
(to Ann)  
Sit down.

Rachel stands, too.

RACHEL  
The farm isn't for sale.

ANN  
This is why you didn't want him  
buried here, isn't it: because  
that decreases the value of the  
land.

Grandma heaves herself up from the table.

GRANDMA  
Eva.

Everyone stares at Mama.

GRANDMA (CONT.)  
Is this true.

Beat.

MAMA  
There was no harm in them seeing  
it, just in case ...

Grandma snatches up her plate and hurls it at Mama. Mama  
ducks and the plate smashes on the floor behind her.

GRANDMA

Thought you'd steal my home out  
from under me ... Turn out your  
own dead from his rightful  
resting place ...

MAMA

(to Preacher and his wife)  
You see, you see she can't live  
here on her own, she's obviously  
unstable ...

Grandma snatches salt and pepper shakers, sends them flying  
after the plate, one after another.

GRANDMA

Lock me away in a prison of a  
retirement home, just like you  
always wanted.

The pepper shaker explodes. Mama and the preacher's wife,  
nearest the explosion, begin sneezing violently.

Rachel tries to restrain Grandma. The preacher helps her.

RACHEL

No, I can take care of  
her! This is her home, our ...

MAMA

(between sneezes)  
You--you ended up flat on your  
back in a hospital last year  
because you couldn't even feed  
yourself. Without George,  
neither of you has a chance.

ANN

(to Rachel)  
A hospital ...

RACHEL

This is not about me.

ANN

Why didn't somebody--



RACHEL  
Call you in California and tell  
you to hop on over? Sure,  
especially after not hearing  
from you for six years.

Mama screams as Grandma lunges out of Rachel's and the  
Preacher's grasp and spins the platter full of lamb at  
Mama. It slides off and crashes on the floor.

ANN  
CAN YOU BLAME ME? I HAD TO GET  
OUT OR I WAS GOING TO GO CRAZY  
LIKE THE REST OF YOU!

RACHEL  
(near tears)  
George wasn't crazy.

ANN  
He was! He was or he wouldn't  
have stayed!

Ann storms out of the house. The Preacher's wife is trying  
to calm Mama while the Preacher holds Grandma back. Rachel  
weeps.

INT. PICKUP, DAY

Ann drives down the hill and toward the highway. She is  
going fast, face red with rage. Suddenly she looks left,  
sees the cow pond, and pulls the car over. She snatches  
the blue hoodie off the passenger seat and jumps  
out of the car, running toward the pond.

EXT. FARM, EVENING

Flashback. It's autumn. George, the George of the picture  
we saw earlier, has the pickup hood up and is digging in  
the innards of the engine. He's wearing his blue  
hoodie. The muted sound of arguing drifts from the  
house. George looks up as Ann bursts out the front  
door. She comes over to him.

ANN  
Looks like a mess.

GEORGE  
Radiator.

He continues to work. Ann rubs her arms.

GEORGE (CONT.)  
You're cold.

Ann glances back at the house, then shakes her head.

ANN  
I'm fine.

George strips off his hoodie and hands it to her.

GEORGE  
Put that on.

ANN  
I'm fine!

GEORGE  
Put it on! Here.

As she rolls her eyes at him, he zips her into the hoodie without letting her put her arms through the sleeves, shoves the hood on her head, and yanks the drawstrings tight. She looks like a blue sausage. She snorts at him. He works in silence for a while.

ANN  
George, I got a job. In  
California. I'm going to take  
it.

GEORGE  
California.

Beat.

ANN  
You could come, too. Keep me  
safe in the big city.

George winces. He looks over the fields, back at the house. He looks at Ann. We can see in his face that it's a no. She nods and turns away, trying not to cry.

END FLASHBACK

EXT. COW POND, DAY

Ann runs up to the cow pond and stops on the edge. She looks at the hoodie. Then she wads it up and throws it as far into the pond as she can.

ANN

I DO NOT NEED YOU! ANY OF YOU!

She stands there, panting, watching the hoodie sink. Two whirlpools start in the muddy water. She blinks and steps back, turning to go, when the ground falls out underneath her.

Ann tumbles into the emerging SINKHOLE, bouncing off the stony incline. She lands at the bottom of the stony pit, 30 feet below ground level. The cow pond water drains into a small hole that must lead to a cavern below. She sees the hoodie, drenched, lying a few feet away, but when she tries to get to it, she collapses in pain. She closes her eyes and blacks out.

INT. BEDROOM, NIGHT

Ann's eyes blink open. She is lying on a guestroom bed in the farmhouse. One arm is bandaged and the other is in a sling. She turns her head and sees George's hoodie lying on a chair beside the bed.

The door opens, sending a bar of light into the darkened room. Mama peeks through the door. She's carrying a tray.

MAMA

You're awake.

ANN

What happened--

MAMA

We had quite a time getting you  
up out of that thing. Your  
collar bone is dislocated and  
your right arm is broken. You  
have a mild concussion.

Ann groans. Mama sits on the edge of the bed.

MAMA

Looking at you lying down there,  
I saw a scrappy little six-year-  
old again, head to toe in blood  
and Band-Aids because you  
couldn't ever stop your bike  
without running it into  
something.

Beat. She touches Ann's head, then draws back.

MAMA (CONT.)

I brought you something to eat,  
but I guess you're tired. I'll  
let you sleep.

She gets up, heads for the door. A single tear slides down  
Ann's cheek.

ANN

Mama.

MAMA

Yes.

ANN

I'm starving.

Mama sits on the bed and picks up the bowl of stew she  
brought. Ann looks into it. Beef. Oh, well. Mama raises  
the spoon to Ann's lips, and she eats.

FADE TO BLACK

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