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The University of Southern Mississippi

SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY:

A MISSISSIPPI TWILIGHT

by

Pyran Sand Taylor

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate School
of The University of Southern Mississippi
in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
for the Degree of Master of Arts

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May 2014

ABSTRACT

SOUTHERN HOSPITALITY:

A MISSISSIPPI TWILIGHT

by Pyran Sand Taylor

May 2014

This is a collection of stories about ordinary people and mice, and the occasional mythological creature whose lives become more complicated.

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INTRODUCTION

In an interview with *The Paris Review*, John Gardner once stated, “I’ve never been terribly fond of realism because of certain things that realism seems to commit me to” (75). This statement was in response to an inquiry into why he chose to draw on the fantastical elements and legendary material from the epic poem *Beowulf* for his novel, *Grendel*, rather than approaching the work from a perspective of realism. Instead of investing extraneous time and energy building a realistically believable world in which his characters can reside, Gardner argues that it is better to avoid the realism and skip right to the heart of the matter (i.e., the hearts of the characters involved in the story). He continues by saying that “the value systems of the people involved is the important thing” and not the fact that a character happens to inherit a realistic setting (75). Therefore, time spent convincingly and realistically proving that a given character is from, say, the East End of London would be better spent getting on with the story and developing the characters and their respective emotional plights and situations.

This naturally seems to preclude, in many ways, characters’ back stories and personal histories, especially in shorter works. In the words of Stephen King, “The most important things to remember about back story are that (a) everyone has a history and (b) most of it isn’t very interesting” (229). Of course, that isn’t to say that characters shouldn’t have back stories; quite the opposite. For the characters and their world to truly exist, they must have a functioning history with that world; most of it just doesn’t make for, or belong in, a good story.

Yet, while much of a given character's back story never comes up in the story itself, the history must exist, if only in the writer's mind. In the words of Ernest Hemingway:

If a writer of prose knows enough about what he is writing about he may omit things that he knows and the reader, if the writer is writing truly enough, will have a feeling of those things as strongly as though the writer had stated them. The dignity of movement of an iceberg is due to only one-eighth of it being above water. A writer who omits things because he does not know them only makes hollow places in his writing. (116)

When characters are fully realized and wholly exist within the mind of the writer as living, breathing creatures that inhabit particular worlds, whether those worlds are magical or real, the life the writer has breathed into those characters and, thus, the world they inhabit manifests itself within the narrative in distinct ways. Perhaps the most valuable, in terms of writing as a craft, is the authentic representation of true life in the imagination of the reader. If Samantha is a single mom, whose dad blew out of her small town when she was eight years old and left her to be raised by her grandparents, whether or not her dad, grandparents, or even the town in which it happened actually appear in the story is irrelevant so long as a fully imagined Samantha appears in the story. If she is in the story, then all of these things are also in the subtext of the story, affecting the way Samantha views such things as deadbeat dads, grandparents, small town life, neglected children, and probably many other things. Samantha's views and perceptions could, depending on the trajectory of the story, manifest on the page in a number of idiosyncratic ways. Or not. Either way, as a fully realized character that

realistically lives in whatever world she lives in, she will be perceived in the mind of the reader as such. And so long as her realization as a character is intact, she should be able to capture a reader's imagination as that reader begins to empathize and relate to her plight. Whether she lives in Detroit or Middle Earth shouldn't make much difference to the emotional toil of the story itself.

In *The Art of Fiction*, Gardner points out that "the primary subject of fiction is and has always been human emotion, values, and beliefs" (14). By making a conscious decision to focus on the subject of the human condition and the consequences of that condition, rather than, perhaps, arbitrary external factors, the author is thereby allowed to more quickly engage the more important aspects of the art of storytelling. In Franz Kafka's "The Metamorphosis," Gregor Samsa "awoke from troubled dreams one morning, [to find] that he had been transformed in his bed into an enormous bug" (11). With this bold opening line, the author both immediately establishes the presence of the fantastic elements within the context of the story and foregoes the expository writing that would be required to establish all the irrelevant nuances of Gregor's presence in the world. This technique allows the author to get on with the emotionality of the story and deal with the characters' plights and interactions with one another, which is truly what this story, or any great story, is about.

Otherwise, the story's setting is reasonably interchangeable. Whether Gregor happens to exist as a wealthy Chinese merchant in 18th century Beijing or as a drunken trailer park supervisor in modern day Saskatchewan, it is irrelevant to the story of the human condition that stands at the heart of both the story and the characters involved, which are inseparably interlocked. Gregor remains as a real human (well, sort of) with

real human problems, whether they stem from fantastic, surreal, or magical elements within the story. Regardless of their basis in the fantastic, these elements are no different, in practical terms, from any other problem or plot-borne obstacle faced by another similar character in more realistic story.

The obvious caveat, here, is that the world be established as something that functions in a realistic way so that the suspension of disbelief remains intact. In this collection of stories, I attempt to weave fantastic, often magical, elements into the itinerary of everyday, usually rural, life. Most of these stories take place in the Southern United States, although that is usually overtly marginalized on the page or kept out of the story entirely for several reasons, some of which have already been mentioned. While the stories are set in a specific region of the United States, the important daily aspects and nuances of life everywhere have been left intact. The objective of these tales is to display display life, albeit Southern life, in a strange, wonderful, and most importantly, realistically *unrealistic* light.

Kafka's iconic introduction of Gregor Samsa in the opening line of "The Metamorphosis" is a powerful rhetorical move that establishes, within the context of the story, the possibility of the impossible. My story "En Passant" attempts to use a similar technique to facilitate the same effect with the opening line: "On the morning the castle first appeared in his front yard, Thomas had a dentist appointment at eight o'clock, bright and early." This rhetorical strategy, as Gardner states in *The Art of Fiction*, "establishes the impossible premise" that "opens the door to further possibilities" (24). In "En Passant" the impossible premise is established in the opening line of the text, with the proclamation that a castle has, presumably magically, turned up on Thomas'

yard. With this trick, the reader's understanding of what is possible within the story has now been skewed enough so that the author can get away with more bending of what is acceptably real. The second half of the sentence grounds the world in the realm of what is commonly acceptable to most readers. The character's name is ordinary enough to exist in an otherwise ordinary contemporary setting, and he has an appointment with the dentist, something with which anyone living in our world, as readers, can identify with and relate to. Thus, immediately, the reader is given enough realism that will, ideally, allow him to identify with the character, but it also establishes the magical elements and, thus, Gardner's impossible premise.

Likewise, in most of the stories in this collection, this technique is used early for establishment of setting and the standard of impossibility. However, in one of them, "You Keep What You Kill," Arlo and Shawn spend over half the story in a wholly realistic setting, with nothing out of the ordinary occurring before Arlo happens to shoot down the moon and they discover it in the wreckage of the hay barn. This sort of play loses some of the rhetorical power of the previous example, in that the impossible premise isn't immediately established in the reader's mind. However, the tradeoff is that the reader is allowed to be lulled into the story and its pacing before the impossible premise is established.

Functionally, there isn't much difference, so long as the move is made suitably early so that the reader isn't thrown for a loop at the end of the story. One way to facilitate this is through the use of foreshadowing to ease the reader into accepting the fantastic. After Arlo shoots at the moon with his rifle, the wind picks up in an unnatural way and there is a strange howling in the distance. Moves like this subtly allow the

readers to key in to the fact that everything is not as it seems and shifts their awareness and arouses suspicion in regards to plot and character. Of course, this technique is timeless. In Shakespeare's play, *Julius Caesar*, the doomed Caesar is warned by a soothsayer early in the story to "beware the Ides of March," the day on which he is later murdered (6). While this isn't quite an example of Gardner's impossible premise, it still serves a similar function within the story, which is to clue the reader in to what will happen later in the story so as to soften the blow when the action later occurs.

In Kate Bernheimer's essay, "Fairy Tale is Form, Form is Fairy Tale," she discusses the concept of normalized magic. She explains that in a fairy tale "the natural world...is a magical world. The day to day is collapsed with the wondrous...Enchantment is not astounding. Magic is normal" (69). Most of my stories rely heavily on Bernheimer's notion of normalized magic, because the subtlety involved with such a technique is appealing to me both as a reader and a writer. As a writer, it is much easier to focus on bringing the characters' emotional situations to life without the distraction of noisome plot devices, which must be given attention if they are to be rendered believable in the mind of the reader. I find that when such things exist in a story, the character-driven issues that must be present for the story to succeed at all are inevitably quieter on the page and end up taking a backseat to the aforementioned plot devices. In essence, it ends up being a lot more work for, probably, not much payoff. As a reader, my annoyance arises from being forced to watch the other writer play with loud toys while I'm trying to read a book.

In her essay, Bernheimer gives us an example of normalized magic in the collective versions of the Little Red Riding Hood stories. She states that in "most

versions of [the story] the little girl is unafraid that a wolf speaks in the woods” (70). This sort of subtlety of introduction and confidence in delivery prevail in the reader’s mind, and as Gardner states in *The Art of Fiction*, “persuades him to suspend disbelief” (24). Subtle persuasion is always the finest form of manipulation as it is the least perceptible to those upon whom it is being used. Much like stage magic, the craft of writing relies upon the viewer looking at certain things at certain times and away from certain things at certain times. Which means their attention must be drawn to this or that in some way. It seems that there are two ways to go about this, one of which is to be subtly persuasive, while the other is more forceful and attention grabbing, and thus less appealing to the writer of fiction.

Likewise, in an interview with *The Paris Review*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez explains his use of tone and textual expression in his novel, *One Hundred Years of Solitude*. He explains that he had learned to adopt the same deadpan, natural tone that his grandmother had used when she had told her stories and says that “in previous attempts to write [the book], I tried to tell the story without believing in it. I discovered that what I had to do was believe in them myself and write them with the same expression with which my grandmother told them: with a brick face” (69). The frankness and absolute certainty inherent in Marquez's grandmother's “brick face” tone of storytelling instills that same believability and acceptance in the reader. There are no figurative eyebrows raised or grins displayed to distract the reader or suggest, however implicitly, that something might be amiss within the tale. The words simply are what they are and are left there for the reader to do with what he will, which is ideally to simply pick them up as a matter of fact and move on with the narrative as it exists

without questioning whether elephants can fly or pigs can build houses. They simply do and the story continues.

In my story “A Parliament of Passing,” the characters are anthropomorphized animals. The story begins: “Tucker the mouse had lived in the barn beside the walnut trees for all the life he could remember.” The protagonist here is given a human name and human qualities (i.e., a conceivable and abstract memory and thought processes) and as the story progresses, other characters are given similar human qualities and emotions simply and flatly. No explanation is given as to why the mice can talk to each other, nor is one given for the, often, arbitrariness of the application of human qualities to the various animals that turn up. For instance, since the mice are our heroes, logically, the owls take on a more monstrous nature, due to the fact that the mice provide the lens through which the reader views the world. At the same time, the squirrels are mostly just squirrels, but perhaps a bit fiercer. The success of the story hinges on Bernheimer’s idea of normalized magic and the reader simply accepting the magic for what it is and moving on to engage with the emotional drama.

Likewise, in my story “The Devil That You Know” the Devil, or the concept of ultimate evil within the context of Christian mythology, is anthropomorphized as a character. While the character of the Devil walks, talks, and eats corn flakes, he is only described in the slightest of manner that draws on the concept of the character as he exists in popular myths and legends, specifically the ones that relate to Southern culture (e.g., red skin, horns and tail, making deals at the crossroads, etc.). The intent, here, was to allow the reader to fill in the blanks with his own preconceived notions about what the Devil is or isn’t, with the text only supplying enough clues to help the reader

along in a specific direction. And also, of course, to provide a certain amount of sensory detail and imagery to give the reader purchase on the narrative.

Another valuable effect produced by working with the technique of normalized magic is that the quiet of the magic doesn't interfere with or doesn't become louder than what's truly important in the story, which is, of course, "human emotions, values, and beliefs." The workings of these aspects of the human condition are naturally quiet themselves in both real life and in fiction, and it doesn't take much in the way of plot device or story element to drown it entirely, thus counter-intuitively inhibiting the intrinsic value of the work we do as artists. By making a deliberate effort to turn down the volume of the naturally loud elements of our craft, we, as artists, allow ourselves to, perhaps, sit down at the pottery wheel and work with the clay rather than building our pots and vases solely out of paint and sequins.

In my story "Dragon Gold Always Shines," an old man living in the rural South, Jacus Monroe, comes to own a dragon (as much as one can *own* a dragon, anyway). The dragon, Dolly, grows bigger and bigger and begins causing problems, socially, for Jacus in a number of ways. It is relatively an easy task to write a story about a dragon doing things, since dragons, more so than many other fantasy based story elements, are prone to enormity and dominance within a given story. However, it becomes more difficult to push the dragon to the periphery of the story and get to the emotional core of the matter. To make a dragon be quiet it often takes a hero and/or a magic sword, both of which bring their own respective and problematic egos and page dominance to bear on a story.

In George R.R. Martin's *Game of Thrones* series, he, initially at least, pushes the dragons behind the human drama by simply reducing them to a distant memory and effectively removing them from the action of the story. Early in the book *A Song of Fire and Ice*, one of the characters reminisces about a prior event and recalls that "the polished skulls of the last dragons star[ed] down sightlessly from the walls of the throne room" (24). Of course, later, the dragons come back and end up dominating or at least fiercely competing with the human characters on the page. However, before that time, while their absent presence influences and even dominates certain aspects of the story, their lack of a physical presence on the page allows the author to nurture and grow the human drama of the work without the egotistical and flashy presence of high myth distracting and corrupting the story. Therefore, functionally, the dragons are relegated to their appropriate status within the story, which is a plot device that enhances the human drama.

In my own story, Dolly the dragon is intentionally pushed to the background as much as possible to afford more time to be spent with Jacus's emotional concerns. He is an older man, who has lost nearly every meaningful connection to society. His wife is dead and he is estranged from his only son. He still lives in the house he shared with both of them, so he is constantly reminded of their absence. While he slowly loses touch with the human society that he no longer feels that he is a part of, he begins a growing emotional and social investment in his relationship with Dolly. Eventually, he takes his rejection of humanity to the utmost level and kills his neighbors when he believes they are endangering Dolly, who has become his sole meaningful relationship. In functional terms, Dolly could probably be easily replaced with a dog, bear, or

raccoon, since what she represents to Jacus is more important than whatever words are used to describe her to the reader.

In an epigraph in his novel, *Coraline*, Neil Gaiman gives us a paraphrased quote from G.K. Chesterton. It says, “Fairy tales are more than true – not because they tell us dragons exist, but because they tell us dragons can be beaten” (ix). Indeed, every child begins life knowing that these magical and fantastical things exist, and it isn't until they grow up that they begin believing otherwise. Fairy tales give us a relative peace of mind in light of the existence of witches, werewolves, and goblins (all of which could be waiting just around the corner), by letting us know that while these things might very well be real, they aren't invincible. Though it might take a magical sword or a silver bullet to defeat such creatures, those devices are just as real as the creatures themselves. This assertion instills hope in the mind of the reader. These are the practical advantages of fairy tales.

In J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Hobbit* and *Lord of the Rings* trilogy, the fate of all Middle Earth hinges on the success of one small hobbit who must brave enormous dangers before them. The hobbits in these stories are the smallest and meekest people in the world, but in these works of fiction, they are elevated to becoming, perhaps, the greatest heroes of all. This notion that anyone is capable of true and legendary greatness despite all diversity is invaluable both personally and socially. The concepts contained within these tales and many others like them provide the faith and hope necessary to overcome the often overwhelming obstacles that life has to offer. For that reason alone, the existence of dragons and the magic that realizes them for us have

played integral roles in my personal development, not only as a reader and a writer, but also as a person.

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EN PASSANT

On the morning the castle first appeared in his front yard, Thomas had a dentist appointment at eight o'clock, bright and early. A little more bright and early than he usually did much of anything. Ten was a much better time to wake up, he'd learned, but this was the only time that his family's dentist could see him for the next few weeks. He would have just put it off, but he'd broken a tooth chewing ice some time ago and it was starting to hurt, now, especially when he ate cold things. Like ice.

The morning was normal as Tuesdays often went. Leaving Emily asleep upstairs, he'd woken up early to fumble with the coffee pot. She worked late the night before as a bartender and "unhappy" was an understatement for her mood if he woke her up to make coffee for him. Giving up on which utensil was a tablespoon, he tipped the clear plastic container and poured some grounds into the top of the coffee maker. Dark, dusty grounds spilled into the filter, underneath it, and onto the counter beside the machine. When it looked like there were enough in the filter, he set the container back against the wall and resealed it and flipped the switch on the machine. When he stepped to the sink to wash the grounds off his hands, there it was. A castle, sitting partly on top of Mrs. Malkin's monkey grass. It seemed smaller somehow than the castles he'd always imagined, but the general shapes seemed about right.

After the coffee started brewing, he went back upstairs where Emily was still roughly where he left her. The only difference being that her feet had migrated to a more comfortable spot on the pillows, leaving the rest of her somewhere beneath the tangle of blankets. Electric blue toenails peeked out from beneath the white comforter. Toes

stretched when he sat down on the bed and ran his hand across her back to wake her.

“There's a castle out back.”

The comforter stirred. “Hmm? What?”

He stood and walked to look out the window. “A castle. It's in the backyard.”

“Oh my god. I already told you how to make the fucking coffee.”

He walked back over to the bed where she was now sitting, shoulders slumped.

“No. There's a castle in the yard.”

She pulled her dark hair into a loose ponytail and cocked an eyebrow. “I know. I saw it when I came home from work last night.”

~

Emily stood on the lawn before the castle, barefoot, damp blades of grass slipped between her toes. Thomas stood beside her, still in his boxers and faded blue Red Sox t-shirt. Despite its stature, the structure was impressive. Slate-grey walls stretched upward for thirty feet or so and tapered into snaggle-toothed crenelations at the top that cast odd shadows across the uneven grass below. The walls connected themselves at the four corners of the building with small unassuming towers. A single, slim pennon swam in the light breeze at the peak of each tower and dark arrow slits watched their approach.

The castle uttered no sound, nor made any move to impress them. Wide-eyed, they looked up at the stone parapets. Thomas glanced at her. “What should we do?”

“I don't know. I've never seen a castle before.”

“How do we even know it landed?”

Her brow furrowed. “What else would it do to get here?”

“I think we should call the police.”

“And tell them what?”

He shook his head. “We should tell someone. Maybe the fire department. Or the newspaper could help find the owner.”

“Or we could just go inside and look around.”

“I don't know. These things can be dangerous, I've heard. Full of traps and dungeons.”

“Well, it seems nice to me.” She looked up at him. “There could be treasure.”

“Dragons guard treasure. I don't trust it.”

She frowned at him. “But what if we miss the chance? We probably won't ever see another one.”

“Dentist. Gotta go.” He gave her a quick smile and kissed her forehead. “I have work tonight, too.”

After he left, she stood a moment in the cool shadow of the castle and let her mind wander through the stone corridors and winding halls of possibility. In Disney filmscapes, castles had been a regular occurrence that brought with them princes and witches and monsters and adventure. When she played with her cousins and older brother, they always made her be a princess so they could save her. She couldn't even imagine how many hours she'd spent in her cousin Mike's treehouse waiting to be rescued by him and Robbie. At the time, she'd counted herself lucky to even be playing with them; Mike's little sister wasn't even allowed to be a princess, instead she had to stay inside and play by herself. Eventually, after Mike and Robbie killed all the dragons and trolls and evil kings, they would come stomping across the yard, stick swords in hand, and yell up that

she was saved and could come down now. Then they'd all go inside and get cookies and Kool-Aid and move on to watching TV or Legos.

Eventually, she gave up being the princess who needed saving and began to resent it. The Legos were more fun anyway.

She turned and walked back toward the house that Thomas's parents had leased to them. It didn't have any ramparts or banners, but there was a very nice bay window in the front where she had put some plants. Idly, she twirled the engagement ring around her finger, causing the small diamond to scratch her middle finger with every spin.

~

It was nearly noon by the time Thomas walked out of the dentist's office and into the bright parking lot. He looked down at his cell phone and ran the tip of his tongue over his aching teeth. Missed call from Dad and a text from Emily. He hit the callback button and waited.

His dad's voice answered. "Hello?"

"Hey, Dad. You called?"

"Yep, just calling to make sure you went to your dentist appointment."

"Just walked out." Thomas kicked a rock across the mostly empty asphalt lot.

"Well, how'd it go?"

"They made my gums bleed and filled a couple cavities. What's up?"

His dad groaned. "Errands for your mother. She's busy getting things together for Rebecca's wedding next month."

"Oh, fun."

“I wish the damned thing would hurry up and get here so they'll stop bothering me with it. She made me skip golf with Jim last weekend to help her pick a band for the reception.”

“That sucks.”

“Speaking of which, Mrs. Malkin called your mother this morning. Something about a castle on her monkey grass.”

He opened the door to his jeep and sat down inside, leaving the door open to let the warm air out. “We found it there this morning.”

“Well, how's that going? Mrs. Malkin doesn't seem happy about it.”

“Not sure yet. My appointment was first thing. Emily wants to go inside.”

“What do you want to do?”

“Don't know, really. Seems like it might be dangerous.”

A sigh. “Son, everything's dangerous these days. Just about every damn thing gives you cancer. Your mother won't even let me eat eggs anymore. Cholesterol. But you know what? Just a few years ago they said it was okay to eat the eggs.”

“Yeah, I think I read that somewhere.”

“So, now I have to eat those damn egg whites out of a carton.”

“Those really aren't that bad. You can add peppers and cheese and make an omelet or something. I just don't want to get locked in a dungeon or skewered in a pit trap, is all.”

“Maybe, I'll try that. But, son, sometimes you just have to suck it up and get on with things. You won't be young forever. Get your adventures in while you can.”

“Yeah, I know. I need to go, though. Driving and talking.”

“Alright, son. I’ll tell your mom you said hi.”

Thomas cranked the jeep, put the transmission in reverse, and backed out of the parking spot.

~

Emily laid under the comforter for over an hour with her eyes closed, trying to ignore the sunlight's invasion of her bedroom windows. When they moved into the house, she'd meant to hang curtains to block the sun, but that intention had been slipping through her schedule, somehow, for over a year. She made a mental note to write it down in her planner when she got out of bed.

When she finally walked downstairs to eat a cup of yogurt, it was after ten. And by the time she got back from her jog, it was nearly noon. A text message from Rachel was waiting for her: me n Katie r goin 2 lunch. Mexican. U should come :) Reading text message shorthand hurt her brain. Rachel hated it, too, but didn't mind using it to annoy her. Emily replied: I hate you. Yes. What time? After a quick text to check on Thomas she went upstairs to shower. It might be good to hear what Rachel had to say about the castle.

Rachel was sitting by herself at a booth by the time Emily got to the the restaurant and sat down across from her. “Where's Kate?”

Rachel set her cell phone on the table and held up quotation fingers. “On her way.”

Emily rolled her eyes and picked up the laminated menu. “So we should just order then, huh?”

“Probably a good idea.”

While they were looking over the lunch menu, the waiter walked up to the table. Slender guy with a nice smile. They both ordered two-for-one lunch margaritas. Rachel ordered hers in slow, broken Spanish. The waiter smiled at her and nodded patiently before going away.

“You know he's telling all the cooks what an asshole you are, right?”

Rachel shook her head. “They like it when you speak their language. It shows you respect their culture. Besides, I have to brush up before I go to Puerto Vallarta next summer with my aunt.”

“I just hope they only spit in your food.”

“Adicional escupir.”

“What?”

“Extra spit. That's how you say it in Spanish.” She paused, thoughtfully. “But, it might be reversed. Escupir adicional.”

“I think they'll get the point, either way.”

After the waiter had brought them drinks, chips, and a small plastic decanter of salsa, Rachel smiled. “So, what about this castle?”

“Well, it was just kind of sitting in the yard when I came home from work last night. I was too tired to check it out last night and we barely had time to look at it this morning. It seems nice though.”

“What's it like? Is there anyone inside or anything?”

Emily dipped a chip into the salsa. “I didn't see anybody. The stones are etched and engraved with another language. Latin I think.”

“How big is it?” Rachel's phone buzzed on the table and lit up.

“Not very. Not like in books or movies, but big enough, I guess. There are a couple of towers, too. Flags and banners. The usual.”

“Kate isn't coming.”

“Shocking. Did she actually say she's not coming?”

“No, she said she's about to leave her house.”

“So, she'll be here in an hour.”

Rachel nodded. “Exactly. Let's order food. I'm starving.”

And so they ate and drank and talked about castles and dreams and the classes Rachel was taking for her last semester in the fall. Emily had already finished up her degree in History last year and was taking some time off before law school so Thomas could catch up and figure some things out.

She'd imagined they would be married by now, since he'd proposed more than a year ago. Her mom was ready to plan the wedding and it was getting harder to hold her back from it. Emily got the impression that she was already looking at venues for next summer, but she hadn't told Thomas that. He generally got cranky and weird when she brought it up, but now it was March and she would have to tell him soon.

Rachel snapped her fingers. “You awake over there?”

“What? Yeah, just thinking.”

“Okay, well I want to see the castle, but I've got class in twenty minutes. Maybe later tonight or tomorrow?”

~

Thomas slumped at the bar, hand loosely around the neck of a beer bottle as he idly watched the top ten sports plays of the day for the third time. A soft hand touched

the base of his neck and slid over his shoulder. Smiling, Megan sat down on the stool beside him, put her wadded black server's apron on the lacquered bar, and ordered a rum and coke.

"I wish they'd stop screwing around with our tips by hiring these terrible bartenders. Why are you still here? Didn't you get off like an hour ago?" She took the small glass from the bartender and swished the red stirrer around before taking a sip.

"Too much rum."

"Yeah, I just didn't feel like going home right now."

"No?"

"A castle showed up in the yard today. I just don't know what to do about it is all."

Megan nodded. "That happen much?"

"Just the once so far."

"So, what's the big deal? You been inside it yet?"

"Not yet. Emily wants to, but I told her we should wait."

Emily's name lumped a little in his throat and a wave of heat washed over his arms. He'd gone on a few dates with Megan last year when he and Emily had broken up for a while. He'd had to end things with Megan before he got back together with Emily and though they were friends, it made him uncomfortable to discuss Emily with Megan.

Megan sipped her drink, seemingly unbothered. "There's probably all kinds of cool stuff inside."

He raised an eyebrow. "Have you ever been inside a castle?"

"Well, no. But I've seen them on TV."

“Not even close to the same thing.”

“You coming out tonight?”

“Doubt it.” He took a swallow of lukewarm beer.

“You suck.” Her cell phone buzzed inside her apron. “Ride’s here.”

He watched her tight jeans as she walked away and briefly thought about how he’d never see her without them on again. A message from Emily waited on his own cell phone: call me when you get off work. He set the phone back down on the counter and ordered another beer.

Eventually, Steve—manager Steve, not dishwasher Steve—came over and let him know they were getting ready to close and asked if he was coming to Brian’s party after work. He wondered if Megan would be there, shook his head and set a few bills beneath his bottle after he finished it off to pay his tab.

The house was dark when he finally pulled into the driveway. He figured Emily was asleep since it was after one in the morning. She usually went to bed early when she didn’t work late. He already felt like an asshole for not calling her earlier, so he slipped in through the side door, fell down on the sofa and turned on the television.

Still set up on the coffee table was the game of chess that he and Emily had started a couple weeks ago and never finished. He watched it drunkenly in the flickering dark and examined the pieces. He had never been great at chess, but when they stopped, he’d been two or three moves from taking her queen and maybe six moves from checkmate. However, the couch, where he lay, was on Emily’s side of the board and as he examined her pieces more carefully, he realized he’d been partially wrong. Though he was only a few moves from taking her queen, his king would be in check soon after that. Maybe it

was just the beer keeping him from focusing, but every scenario he played out ended the same way. He lay there in the flickering light of the television until he fell asleep, trying to figure out a way to win.

~

The next morning, Emily sat cross-legged at the kitchen table, book in hand, when he stumbled in and opened the refrigerator. Orange juice. Glass. He sat down beside her and poured the former into the latter and took a swallow, letting the sweetness wash down the morning breath. “I thought you weren't going to buy it with pulp anymore?”

She didn't look up from her book. “I thought you were going to call me last night when you got off work.”

“Sorry.”

“I know.”

“I just needed to think about some stuff. What did you wanna talk about?”

“Does it matter?”

“Yes, it does. Can we please not do this right now? We have more important things to think about.”

She looked up at him and closed her book. “Yes. We do. Which is why you should have come home last night so we could discuss it.”

“I'm really sorry, Em. I just needed to be alone. There's a lot going on, you know. I need to finish my degree, Mom's always asking if we've set a date for the wedding, your mom's always planning things without asking first. And now we have a damn castle on the yard. It's just a little much to deal with, right now.”

There was a knock at the front door. He put the carton of juice back in the refrigerator and walked out of the room. Emily pulled her knees up to her chest and opened her book.

A police officer in dark sunglasses stood on the front step with his hands on his hips. "Morning, sir. Is that your castle out back?"

"Uh, yeah. I mean, no. Well, I'm not sure. I mean I'm not sure how it got there." He sighed. "I mean I don't know whose it is. Or how it got there."

The officer took off his shades and folded them, running a stem down the front of his uniform. He squinted at Thomas through the morning glare. "That right? Well, you're in violation of a bunch of residential zoning ordinances. Basically, it's improperly located on the property and doesn't meet with, well, any of the codes for lawn structures in the neighborhood."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, it's too tall, too wide, and partially on your neighbor's lawn. Do you have a license for a structure that big?"

"There are castle licenses?"

"I'll take that as a 'no'. Who owns the property?"

Some kids in the street behind him had stopped their game of hockey and now leaned on their sticks, mouths gaping, as they watched Thomas being interrogated. "My dad."

"Well, maybe you should give this to him." He tore a sheet from a small pad. "You have a good day, now."

Thomas walked back into the kitchen and sat down at the table. “We just got a citation. The castle is in violation of some zoning ordinances.”

She set the book on the table and put a hand on his arm. “We'll figure it all out. We just have to take one thing at a time, I guess.”

He nodded. “You’re right. Want to talk about it over lunch?”

She smiled and hugged him. The soft smell of her skin and the wetness on her face made him want to wrap his arms around her as tightly as he could and not let her go. In that moment, he felt that everything would be all right, somehow. He closed his eyes and breathed in the smell of her for as long as he could.

~

The next week they took out an ad in the newspaper:

Found – One stone castle, roughly forty feet tall on each side, colorful banners, two towers (also stone), drawbridge and portcullis. No recognizable insignias or guards. Plenty of flags. If you think you may have lost this castle, or know of someone who might be missing one, please call 802-565-4386 and ask for Thomas or Emily. Thank you.

Only one person had responded to the ad. A journalist from the same newspaper had called and wanted to set up an interview for a special interest piece for next week's publication. Possibly for the Sunday edition. However, two days ago, he'd called back to inform them that he'd been assigned to cover a distinguished cat show that would be at the local convention center this weekend. Since there was a rather large amount of

preparatory work he'd have to do for the event, he would, regrettably, not likely be able to stop by to look at their castle before next week or, perhaps, the following one. Emily thanked him for his interest and said that she didn't believe the castle was going anywhere next week or, perhaps, the following one, and he was more than welcome to check back when he had more time.

They decided not to renew the ad.

~

Emily finally got home from work a little after three in the morning and slid her key into the side door to let herself in. As she stepped out of the cool, damp air, it occurred to her that she hadn't really seen the castle at night, despite having noticed it the first night it appeared. Setting her black work apron and keys on the kitchen counter, she walked around the side of the house and into the backyard.

A gibbous moon shone through the tall oaks and pines that lined the large backyard, throwing a bluish light over everything. The castle stood stoic, as it had since its arrival. Banners and pennons rippled in the cool spring breeze, sending shadows dancing across the stone walls and the grass below. They regarded one another for a while, there in the night, she and the castle. As she looked over the ancient stone, it seemed to her that the walls had grown larger than they were the day before. As she walked around to examine it further, she noticed that it seemed to have expanded, as well. Mrs. Malkin's monkey grass had completely vanished and now most of her purple irises were gone as well, the heavy stone of the castle dug into the mulch.

Once she began to shiver in the night air, she rubbed her arms and silently turned away toward the house. As she turned her head, something flickered or fluttered in the

corner of her vision. A night bird, maybe. Or perhaps just the wind in the branches. An idle last glance at the castle made her stop. As she squinted through the darkness, a lump moved up from her gut into her chest. The castle had changed. As it sat there in the moonlight, somehow, it was different. It seemed almost as if it was less there than it had been a moment before. She rubbed her eyes and walked closer to the structure. Nothing had changed except that it was less there than it had been a moment earlier.

She stood for a while longer, watching the castle, waiting for something to happen until the wind gently reminded her that it was still too cold for short sleeves. Thomas was asleep when she got inside and didn't even move when she slipped into bed beside him.

~

Thomas woke the next morning and, eyes closed, reached under the blankets beside him for Emily's waist. Finally, with one eye, he looked across the bed and then around the room. The sunlight glared at him pleasantly through the windows. After his eyes adjusted to the morning, he wandered downstairs, wondering why she would be up at nine-thirty on a Sunday.

Emily was sitting at the kitchen table in pajama bottoms and a tank top with her knees pulled up to her chest as she looked out the window above the sink. Half a glass of water and an untouched grapefruit sat on the table. She didn't look up when he entered the room. "It's leaving."

"What are you doing up so early?" He walked to the refrigerator and opened the door.

“I was going to tell you last night, but you were asleep when I got home. The castle. I think it's leaving today.”

“Why, did someone call about the ad?” He closed the door and opened a cabinet. “Do we have any more of that honey butter?”

“It's just sort of fading or something.” She took a drink of water and pursed her lips. “It's going to leave and we'll never know what was inside.”

He shut the cabinet and walked to the sink. “Just as well. Things can get back to normal. Besides, my mom's gonna be pissed if it kills the grass.” After he'd filled his glass and took a drink of water, he turned around to find her staring at him. “What?”

“I want to go inside.”

“Em, we already talked about this. We don't know anything about that thing. We don't even know if it's safe or not.”

“No. We didn't. You talked about it. Then you avoided the issue. And now we're running out of time.”

He sat down across from her. “How the hell would we even get inside anyway?”

“I don't know, but you don't even want to try.”

“We don't know what's in there. You're being stupid.”

Her jaw clenched. “Don't call me stupid. I'm not the one without a degree.”

He opened his mouth to say something mean, but stopped. “I'm sorry. That's not what I meant. I just don't want you to get hurt is all.”

She got up and walked to the back door. “Well, this is our last chance.”

Walking outside behind her, he stopped at the edge of the wooden deck as she walked across the lawn on her bare feet. The morning sunlight streamed down through

the trees as she walked confidently toward the castle, her pace slowing as she got closer to the building, which had a few more banners than he recalled from the day before. She was right, though. The castle had faded a little, and now when he looked at the stones, they seemed less real somehow. Translucent almost, but he couldn't quite make out what was behind them. He walked off the deck onto the damp grass.

She now stood in the shadow of the looming walls that, up until now, hadn't seemed very large. However, now, they stood massive and majestic and terrible. She glanced back at him over her shoulder. She was waiting for him. He should go. That was the right thing to do. On some level, it was even what he wanted to do. He knew she didn't want to go inside alone. What kind of man would let her go alone, anyway? She paused to wait for him. He stopped walking.

He'd never seen her look so sad as she did at that moment. Her face looked shiny and wet when she turned slowly and walked forward. He was empty inside.

As though the castle knew what she planned, chains began to pop and groan as it raised the portcullis and lowered the drawbridge to rest at her feet. She inhaled sharply and took a step onto the massive wooden plank. She glanced back at him before stepping fully onto the bridge and passed beneath the jagged teeth of the portcullis.

A sudden urge struck him to run after her. He could maybe catch up if he hurried. Leap across the bridge, slide under the descending iron gate. His muscles tensed but he remained a spectator.

Pain rose from his gut and swelled inside his chest as he stood there on the grass and watched her walk through the great iron portal. She turned and looked at him one last time. It always hurt him to see her hurting. He looked away so he wouldn't have to

watch her tears, and didn't look back until he heard the massive gate clang shut. The drawbridge deliberately raised, chains slowly creaking and popping as its mechanisms turned. As the castle slowly faded from view he felt rising within him a growing hysteric and entirely unwelcome sense of joy.

A PARLIAMENT OF PASSING

Tucker the mouse had lived in the barn beside the walnut trees for all the life he could remember. Only a little over four moons old, he was still large for his age and was already bigger than both Aunt Tildy and Papa, both of whom were old as mice went. However, this was not the only distinction between himself and the rest of his family. While every one of them had short hazelnut fur, with the exception of Papa who was mostly gray, he and his twin sister Daisy both had dark fur with a downy white undercoat. Aunt Tildy always told them they looked just like their father, whom they'd never met on account of him being eaten by a water moccasin down by the creek before they were born.

In fact, his whole family had always lived in the barn, as far as he knew. His grandfather, whom they called Papa, Aunt Tildy, Daisy, and the twins. Lane and Jude were Aunt Tildy's children and Tucker's cousins, though they called him uncle. Tucker and Daisy's mother had been caught by the old, scarred yellow cat that slept under the porch of the Big House. It had happened when they were both very young and, consequently, Tucker had a hard time remembering what she looked like. He could hardly recall her warm, dark eyes watching over him when he was still a pup and couldn't yet leave their straw nest. Daisy claimed to not remember her at all.

On this particular afternoon, Tucker sat huddled outside Papa's mouse hole above the saddle rack with the rest of the family, listening to him wheeze and cough like mad. Aunt Tildy was with him, though the only confirmation of her presence was the occasional quiet sob or soft whisper as she spoke to him in the dark. The boys didn't seem to fully understand what everyone was so upset about, but had sympathetically

become distressed themselves, anyway. Everyone else in the family had already been inside to see Papa one last time, and when Aunt Tildy's pink nose and whiskers poked out of the darkness of the hole, Tucker knew it was his turn.

Aunt Tildy's dark eyes were sad and the fur around them was damp with tears. "He wants to see you now, Tucker. He don't have much time left."

Tucker's left ear twitched nervously and he crawled into the small hole. Across the room, Papa lay curled on his nest, straw, twigs, and bits of paper swirling outward from the center. He coughed as Tucker came closer, eyes hazy and his voice raspy. "I ain't got too much left in me, boy. Some things we need to talk about before I go."

Tucker sat down on the straw. "All right, Papa."

"I took care of this family, here, for damn close to fifty moons after my own daddy passed on. Ain't always been easy, but it had to be done. After I'm gone, you're the man of the family, and it's your job to take care of it. Keep it together." He broke into a spasm of coughs, dark blood spattering out of his mouth and into the gray fur around his mouth.

It seemed like just last week, him and Daisy were running and playing beneath the walnut trees. He shook his head. "No, Papa."

"It's more responsibility than you know. There's a reason we been safe in this barn so long. You ain't gonna like it, but you're not to speak to another soul about it."

Papa's voice seemed to suck in some of the dark around them when he looked up at Tucker. "Remember how I told you young 'uns never to go up in the hayloft? There's a reason for it. The owls are up there."

“Owls? In the barn?” Tucker had never seen an owl up close, but all mice knew about owls, heard stories about owls, feared owls.

“To keep y'all safe, I made a deal with 'em .”

“A deal? What are you talking about?”

Papa lifted himself a little off the hay so he could look at Tucker better.

“Remember all them field mice what pass through here and never stay long?”

Tucker nodded as he recalled the strange mice that had occasionally come into the barn from outside, alert, jittery, and paranoid. Papa never let them around Tucker and the rest of the family. They never stayed in the barn long, eventually heading off to the Big House or someplace else. Always looking for something better, Papa always said. The house was warmer than the barn and had better things to eat, maybe, but it wasn't worth the risk. Papa had always warned him about the giant traps that snapped mice necks and the sweet smelling poison that was hid in the cabinets to make it look like food. The Big House wasn't a place for sensible mice.

“The owls own this barn, Tucker. It belongs to them. We belong to them.”

We belong to them. The fur on Tucker's back bristled. “Papa. Owls eat mice.”

The old mouse nodded. “I expect you noticed don't many snakes and cats and squirrels come in here. Afraid of the owls. Just like you should be.”

A panic had risen from Tucker's gut into his chest. “How are we still alive? Why have I never seen the owls?”

“That's the deal. I get the field mice in and the owls abide us living down here.”

“Bringing them in? What do you mean?”

“Don't make me feel too good, but we got a good life here.”

“Papa, I can't feed other mice to them owls.” His throat felt like it was closing up.

“You get used to it, son. But I ain't got time to argue with you. You gotta know the rules. One mouse a week. Rain or shine. Don't matter what's going on, them owls are gonna eat. One way or another, they'll get their tribute.” He settled back down into the straw and coughed, wincing and holding his chest.

“How would I even get the field mice to come into the barn for that?”

“Take grain from the store room and lure them in. They ain't too bright. When they get in, they'll see how nice it is. Then you convince them that it's even nicer and warmer in the Big House or the hayloft, with better food. But make sure they go at night. That's when the owls are awake. They'll see 'em headed toward the house or get 'em when they go up top.”

“This ain't right, Papa.”

“Might be that it ain't. But family's all we got in this world, son. Gotta take care of it no matter what.”

Tucker shook his head.

“Now, there's one more thing I need to do, and I'm gonna need your help doing it.”

“What?”

“I need you to help me get up to the hayloft. Them owls ain't to be trifled with. We gotta let em know you're in charge of the family now.”

~

So Tucker and Papa climbed upward through the maze of beams and rafters. Motes of dust swirled in the hazy streaks of afternoon daylight that had cut through the

walls of the old barn. They had to stop a few times on the way up so Papa could lean against the wooden beams and catch his breath. Once he had lost his grip and nearly dragged both of them down to land on the hood of the rusty tractor that hadn't moved during Tucker's lifetime. Papa was exhausted by the time they pulled themselves up into the hayloft through a small crevice near the north wall of the building.

Tucker squeezed through the hole first and stepped into the twilight of the loft. Turning back down, he helped Papa up through after him. Loose hay, taller than a mouse's head, covered the dusty wooden planks that comprised the floor, so that neither of them could see a thing. Tucker's muscles tightened and the black fur on the back of his neck bristled as he breathed in the heavy stink of death that soaked the hay.

His whole body trembled as he fought back the urge to run back down to the safety of one of the many holes they'd chewed throughout the barn. Instead, he gently climbed on top of the loose hay to get a better view of the loft. Sunlight pierced the roof intermittently and shone down on the strewn hay. The far corner of the loft was obscured by broken bales and shadows. His whiskers twitched and legs trembled as he tilted his nose up to sniff the air. Papa whispered up to him from the floor, but Tucker already knew what he was going to say. The owls lived in the gloom behind the bales of hay.

“Help me up.”

He reached down and helped Papa climb on top of the straw and they both made their way through the shaded loft toward the haunted piles of hay in the corner. As they skittered gingerly across the hay, pausing occasionally for Papa to rest, clouds passed over the barn, momentarily dissolving the shafts of sunlight and shrouding the loft in shadows. It was during one of these intervals of darkness that Tucker first heard

movement from the corner behind the bales. A soft rustling in the straw. Then a faint scratching and the flutter of heavy wings.

Papa was very still beside him, eyes wide, ears alert. His legs poised, ready to dart away, despite his poor health. "They're coming," he whispered.

As the moments passed, the rustling crescendoed into the noisy clamor of steely talons across straw and wood. Worse yet was the soft hissing that emanated from the darkness behind the piles of hay. The clouds were still overhead blocking out the sun, leaving the room in darkness.

Tucker glanced around for a quick exit. The nearest wall seemed miles away. Even if he made it to the wall, he would still have to find a way through it. As the sound of the scratching rose higher on the other side of the pile of hay, time was running out. There was plenty of room up here for an owl to fly. He wouldn't even make it halfway across the floor before they got him. His legs twitched instinctively and he took a few quick steps backward before he felt Papa's paw on his shoulder. "Stay calm. Can't let 'em see you're scared."

He whispered. "Papa, let's just go."

The old mouse shook his head. "Gotta be done. Best to get over being scared of 'em now. You'll be seein 'em again."

Then, there in the twilight, lurching clumsily over the top of the hay, came the rounded head and sleek white body of an owl, its wings raised high behind it. It paused for a moment to watch them, black soulless eyes regarding them coldly from beneath the white heart-shaped mask it wore as its face. Soon, two more masks appeared behind the first owl and they all continued crawling awkwardly across the straw. Once atop the

bales, they each spread their massive wings and with two quick beats and a rush of wind, landed noiselessly in the straw before the mice. The largest of the three leaned forward and hissed, head jerking strangely. “You smell of death, mousse. Why are you here?”

Papa spoke. “This here's my grandson. He'll be keeping our bargain.”

The smaller owls hissed loudly until the lead owl stood to his full height and shrieked. His head twisted backward toward them, before he turned back to Tucker. “Is that so? You wisssh to keep our agreement?”

Tucker moved his lips but couldn't get words out.

The lead owl leaned forward. “Perhapsss we don't desire to keep the bargain, mousse.”

Tucker's heart beat faster. His face tingled with numbness and he couldn't feel his legs beneath him. Papa spoke. “Wouldn't make no sense to break the bargain. You can eat five mice now, and then you have to hunt for all your meals, or four mice every moon cycle. Be stupid to break the bargain.”

The owl shrieked and flapped his wings, then stood back up to his full height. “Very well. The bargain remains. One mouse every seven suns. Don't be late with our tribute.”

The two smaller birds hissed raucously and spread their wings. The large one spoke again. “Only two days until the next tribute. Isn't that right, old one?”

Papa nodded. “I reckon it is.”

The owl's head jerked as he looked back at Tucker. “You should hurry. We're always hungry.”

Tucker's heart seemed like it might beat right out of his chest. His lips seemed to be mumbling something, but he couldn't understand the words. He heard Papa speak.

“Since I ain't long for the world, I reckon you can take me this week.”

The owls' black eyes gleamed. One of the smaller ones stepped forward eagerly.

Tucker found his words. “No, you can't!”

Papa put a soft paw on his shoulder. “Don't you worry none. Only thing that makes any sense. I'll be dead in a day, anyway. Seven more days' use out of this old body is a pretty good deal.”

“Papa, please.”

The old mouse looked at him with dark, sad eyes. “Take care of the family, Tucker.”

Papa patted him gently on the shoulder and smiled. Small bloodstains still stained the fur around his mouth. “Now, go on. Get outta here. Only come back when you gotta.”

His paw slid off Tucker's shoulder and he walked across the straw toward the winged apparitions looming in the darkness. The owls leered at them, heads tilted, hollow clucks coming from razor beaks that were only visible when they opened their mouths. Before Tucker could speak, the lead owl flapped his great wings, and propelled himself in a long arcing hop to tower over Papa. The beast paused momentarily before scooping the old mouse up, head first, in his beak.

Papa let out a startled squeal before sliding down the giant bird's throat as it jerkily tilted its head back and slowly swallowed him in one piece. The smaller owls began hissing and clucking behind the leader, and as Tucker's feet were carrying him

quickly toward the safety of the wall, he heard one of them cry out behind him, thankfully far away. He glanced back before he dove through the boards to see three sets of eyes gleaming in the twilight of the loft, and Papa's tail writhing and twitching as it hung from the beak of the largest owl.

Tucker ran as fast as he could all the way back to his little mouse hole in the wall of the old pig pen, where he collapsed in a heap on his nest, trembling and weeping until he calmed down enough and fell asleep. His dreams were filled with the screeches, hisses, and frightening razor beaks of spectral owls flying through darkness.

~

The next day, Tucker woke to the squeaking and skittering of the twins playing and chasing each other around the old pig sty. A cold front had moved in overnight and the air was frigid. He shivered and stepped out of his hole behind the rusted pig trough. There had never been any pigs in the pen, and the wooden fencing was rotted and eaten by termites. Out in the stale pig dirt, Jude and Lane scampered back and forth, chasing and kicking up dust. When they noticed him, Jude called out. "Uncle Tucker, come play!"

"Not now. Where's Aunt Tildy?"

"In the store room getting lunch."

"Don't go outside."

He wanted to talk to Aunt Tildy and Daisy, but realized he didn't know what to say to them, so wandered outside instead. Though the sun was bright in the sky, the chill of the wind cut through his thick fur and downy undercoat. The cold air had driven the

insects into hiding, so the customary buzzing and scuttling bugs weren't there to irritate and distract him. Nothing to think about but cold wind and the night before.

He tried to focus on other things: Daisy, Aunt Tildy, Jude and Lane, and how, now that Papa was gone, taking care of them all fell on his shoulders. Those were the things he should be worried about, and he was, but they inevitably took his mind back to what had happened in the hayloft. The ghostly owls looming over him and Papa, their eyes glowing in the half-dark of the loft. Their hisses clung to his mind with the strength of their steely talons. But most of all he thought about Papa's tail writhing and twitching in the owl's beak as he ran away, unable to do anything about it.

He hopped over a decayed branch that had fallen into the tall grass from one of the walnut trees above. The people from the Big House hardly ever came out here these days, so the grass was high and wild and plenty of walnuts littered the ground, though many of them were already chewed and broken by squirrels. Walnuts could be a little hard to get open sometimes, but they were delicious. The tall grass and tree branches meant snakes, though. Water moccasins often came up the hill in the summer to hunt mice in the grass, while the kingsnakes came to hunt everything. Cold weather drove them into winter sleep though, so he doubted he would find any snakes today. Besides, he needed to be away from the barn.

The giant trees were in full bloom and the green-husked nuts had already begun to fall. The squirrels always managed to get some of them before they fell, and a few had come down into the grass to gather the fallen nuts, too. One of the squirrels squinted at him suspiciously, shot down the tree trunk, bark cracking behind him, and snatched a large nut that lay in the direction Tucker was walking. Quick as lightning, the squirrel

shot back up the tree to a low branch, tearing up a cloud of bark behind him. Safely on the branch, the squirrel chattered fiercely down at Tucker

Though he hadn't even seen the walnut until the squirrel grabbed it, Tucker wanted to run up the tree and knock the stupid squirrel off his branch and take the nut. He wanted to eat the nut right in front of the squirrel and dare him to do anything about it. And if he came near while Tucker was eating he would bite and scratch the squirrel and make him sorry for being so rude. But Tucker didn't do any of those things. He knew squirrels were bigger than mice and stronger. And they could be mean, too. As the squirrel chattered overhead, Tucker hopped off through the tall grass until he couldn't hear it anymore.

After a while, he came upon the garden by the hill, and figured as long as he was here he might as well bring back some turnips for dinner. As he neared the garden, the grass was cut low to the point of being barely over his head, so that he was forced to crouch as he ran to stay beneath the grassline. As soon as he made it into the garden, he heard a grinding noise to his left among the peas. He hopped cautiously across the dark, tilled earth, and beneath the canopy of leaves he saw a small, wiry field mouse chewing on a low hanging pea pod.

Before he got close, the mouse's ears pricked and he spun around to face Tucker. He relaxed almost as quickly, and turned back to his work, speaking in a low voice. "Ain't seen you before. Come to get some peas for the winter?"

Tucker walked over. "My sister likes turnips, so I figured I'd get us some for dinner."

The small mouse looked up thoughtfully. "Turnips on the other side. Might not be much left, though. Buncha rabbits come through past two nights and ate 'em up. My name's Grenchy. What's yours?"

"I'm Tucker."

"Pleased to meetcha." Grenchy finished chewing a small hole in the pod and pulled out a light brown pea with both paws and set it on his pile. "You new around here?"

"Naw, we live out past that old barn by the creek."

Grenchy's dark eyes fixed on him. "Ain't you scared of them moccasins?"

Tucker shrugged. "Ain't really seen any, I guess."

The other mouse shivered and shook his slender head. "Braver than me. Them things is bad. And mean. My brother and his wife got et by one barely two moons ago."

"That's awful."

The other mouse nodded gravely. "I know. They had to go down to the creek for water cause of the dry spell. Bastard jumped out of a log and snatched him right up. Poisoned him dead. Before she could run off, it dropped him and grabbed her, too. Only reason we found out about what happened was on account of another mouse that gone with 'em. He barely made it out hisself." He shook his head again. "Damn snakes. Can't be too careful."

Tucker walked over and nibbled a pea pod.

Grenchy continued, "Wife's been after me to go see how that old barn looks on the inside. Thinks it might be nice to live in. Safer for the pups when she has 'em. You folks ever go in there?"

Tucker stopped chewing. “I don't know. I think a bunch of cats might live in there.”

Grenchy nodded knowingly. “Some of them cats is nasty, too. They come out in the field to hunt at night. Saw one catch a robin last week. Tore its wings off and played with it damn near an hour afore he killed it. Smiled the whole time. Ain't right.”

Tucker was glad the cats never came near the barn. He'd heard plenty of stories about them. But as nasty as they were, they were afraid of the owls, too. He pulled a small brown pea out of the pod and set it on the dirt.

“Bad as the cats are, they can't get down in your holes when you're sleeping. I'll take my chances with a cat over a snake any day of the week, yessir.”

Tucker nodded and set another pea on the ground. They would just have to settle for peas tonight. He could only carry so much and if the rabbits had torn up the turnips, there wasn't much use even going over there. When he'd collected a couple more peas, he gathered them up and said goodbye to Grenchy, who nodded and continued chewing.

The sun was going down when he made it back to the barn. Daisy was curled up on her tidy nest sleeping when he walked into her hole and set the peas on the floor. “The turnips got ate by rabbits, so I brought these instead.”

Daisy helped him round up the rest of the family and they all ate the peas Tucker had brought home from the garden.

~

The next few days passed, and the worry and bother of daily life pushed Tucker's thoughts away from the owls. With Papa gone and the cold set in, he was busy getting ready for winter. That meant constant trips to the garden to gather peas and beans and

whatever else was there that he could carry back with him before winter killed the plants. Sometimes he brought the twins along for the extra sets of paws, but often as not he left them at home so he wouldn't have to worry with them. Several times he'd sent them to gather crowder peas, only to come back later and find them chasing each other and wrestling among the plant stems. Either way, he figured they would be well stocked for the winter months. He even managed to strike a deal with the old one-eyed rat that lived in the attic of the Big House to get some corn after it was harvested by the people, since it was too high up for mice to gather. These were the things that Papa had always done for the family, and he was beginning to feel like he could do them, too.

Though he never explained the reason, Tucker had warned the whole family to stay away from the Big House and the hayloft, and to keep inside the barn after dark. Owls had to fly to hunt, and it would be hard for them to hunt mice inside the barn. With any luck, they would just forget it all and leave them alone. He knew it would take awhile, since owls had good memories, but out of sight meant out of mind, and mice were good at that.

At first, Tucker was apprehensive, and often paranoid, especially regarding the twins, who often disregarded what they were told. But when they seemed to mind him well enough, he gradually left them alone and trusted them to abide the new rules. While it seemed as though Daisy and Aunt Tildy suspected something, they never challenged him or his rules. With Papa gone, he was the new head of the family, and that was that. He briefly considered telling them about the bargain with the owls, but didn't see the point in tarnishing their memory of Papa. As the days passed, his anxiety dissolved, and

all their lives went mostly back to normal. As the weeks wound away, barely a thought was given to the owls or the deal that was made.

~

Tucker stretched his legs as he woke in the comfort of his nest. The cold morning air seized the skin on his paws as he stepped out of the straw and walked outside. Their recent work had given them a decent stockpile of vegetables, seeds, and walnuts stored in the left wall of the stable. The garden was now mostly bare of anything good, so they were left with what they had so far. Granted, he would go out some this week and gather more walnuts and some seeds if he could find them, but the winter was set on its course, and most of the hard work was done for a while. Their stockpile plus the sweet grain from the store room would be more than enough to keep them all fed plenty over the winter.

He scurried along the wall beside the pig pen, and around the edge of the barn and into the storage room. A quick run up the support beam and he was at the top of the barrel of sweet grain. He stepped out onto the rim of the barrel and walked along it to the far edge where the grain was piled highest against one side and dropped down. The grain shifted beneath him and he slid down to the other side of the barrel. Leaning back in the grain, he picked up a medium sized seed and took a bite. The sugary crust of the seed was a nice contrast with the crunchy bitter in the middle, and though he'd eaten it almost every day of his life, it was still his favorite food. Not counting apples. But he didn't come by those very often, except for the wilted cores he sometimes found in the garbage bins beside the Big House. He took another bite of his seed and thought that maybe he

could get that old rat to get him some whole apples out sometime. He figured he wasn't doing too bad as head of the family.

For a long while, he munched on the grains around him, reaching out his paw and leisurely picking out the choicest pieces. He was just about full when he heard a scratching commotion coming into the grain closet. It was followed by the sound of frantic nails on the beam that led to the barrel. The scratching came closer and closer until it was just near the rim and stopped. His muscles tensed, legs ready to spring him away from whatever was about to come over the edge. His best bet would be to leap toward the rim near the wall and run back down the beam he came in on, even though he would have to run past whatever was coming up the side. He could jump up and out over the closer rim, but didn't want to fall and hurt himself and end up an easy catch for a cat or possum.

He was just about to dash for the rim of the barrel when a small pink nose appeared over the edge. It was followed by a dark head and ears. His muscles relaxed as Daisy climbed to the edge and looked down at him and he exhaled. "Don't you know how to let somebody know you're coming? I thought you were a damn cat or something."

She was breathing too hard to speak, but shook her head wildly. "Have you seen the twins?"

"Not since yesterday when I told them to stop running on the rafters."

She looked like she was about to cry. "They're gone. Aunt Tildy and me have been looking for them all morning."

A heavy weight sank down from his chest into his stomach and he felt like he was going to throw up. He thought about all the places they might be. “Did you check the garden? What about the cow fields? Could they have gone to the Big House?”

She just kept shaking her head. “We looked everywhere.”

“We’ve gotta find them.”

He raced through the grain and hopped over the rim of the barrel and down onto the support ramp, and almost fell all the way to the floor in the process. Daisy lost her footing and had to grab the rim with both paws to keep from falling as he leaped past her. By the time he reached the big crack in the west wall of the barn, she had caught up to him.

Tucker scurried ahead of her out into the walnut grove, calling the boys' names. The squirrels squinted at him curiously as they ran through the walnut grove. The cool air began to sting his throat as he ran and he could barely catch enough breath to call out for the pups. The plants hadn't yet begun to wither away for the winter, so they split up and searched different sections of the garden. Tucker sent Daisy to the corn rows, while he ran headlong into the underbrush of pea plants. Between his own shouts, he could hear her voice calling out across the garden. He was about to head toward the rent dirt where the cabbages normally grew, when he heard another familiar voice behind him. He turned around to see Grenchy's slender head peeking out over a small rise.

“Tucker, right?”

Tucker, still panting, just nodded.

“I think I found your boy.”

“Boy? No. There are two of them. Twins.”

Daisy's voice still carried beyond the corn rows, calling their names.

Grenchy sighed. "Well, I only found the one. He was half buried in the dirt over yonder. Said his name's Jude. Keeps asking for his mama."

Tucker stepped toward the smaller mouse. "Where is he?"

"Now, calm down. We got him down in our hole. You go on and get her outta them corn rows and I'll go get your boy."

Tucker turned and sprinted off toward the corn, his mind racing alongside his legs. How could he let this happen? What happened to the boys? Where was Lane? Papa had only given him one job and he couldn't even do that right. How were they ever going to survive if he couldn't take care of them? They would have to leave the barn. But, all their food was in there. They couldn't just find someplace else to live with winter already coming in like it was. There had to be something else he could do. Not watching where he was going, he almost ran past the row Daisy was on.

"Tucker?"

He stopped.

"Did you find anything?"

Tucker's head got lighter and he couldn't see straight. He sat down on the ground and scratched his nose. "The owls."

"What did you say? Owls? They don't come out in the daytime."

He tried to shake the dizziness out of his head. "I didn't keep the bargain."

She walked over and put a paw on his shoulder. "Bargain? What are you talking about?"

“One mouse per week. I didn't do it and the owls came and took Lane.” He rubbed away the tears in his eyes. “It's my fault. Papa gave me one job to do and I couldn't do it.”

Daisy's nose scrunched and she shook him with both paws. “That doesn't make any sense. What are you talking about?”

He looked up at her. “Papa made a bargain with the owls. To keep us safe. I was supposed to bring them a mouse every week, but I couldn't do it. I couldn't feed another mouse to one of those things. I thought we would be fine if we just stayed inside. Thought they'd forget if we just kept out of sight.”

Daisy sat down next to him and he felt her paw drop off his shoulder.

~

When Grenchy brought him out, Jude was listless and could barely keep his eyes open. When he did open them, he just stared off into nothing and didn't say anything. Tucker had to carry him back to the barn because he couldn't walk on his own. Both Tucker and Daisy thanked Grenchy for looking after him and promised to return the favor somehow.

Once they got to the barn, they carried Jude to the hole he'd always shared with his brother and mother and laid him down on the nest inside. Aunt Tildy was still crying when Tucker left the mouse hole.

It took a day or so for Jude to snap out of it a little and when he did, he claimed he couldn't remember much of what happened. They'd been playing near the garden and before they realized it the sun had gone down. He remembered a loud screeching noise

and waking up in Grenchy's burrow. Daisy and Aunt Tildy had to tell him what happened to his brother and that he wouldn't be seeing him again.

Tucker made Daisy promise not to tell anyone else about the owls. And she did, on one condition: that he figure out a way to keep them safe again.

~

A couple days later, Tucker woke early to the sound of Jude playing by himself in the pig dirt. He hopped out to where he was digging and asked, "How're you feeling today?"

The younger mouse looked up at him. "Fine, I guess. Wanna play with me?"

Tucker patted him on the head. "I sure could use some help today. Why don't you come give me a hand and we can play later."

"Help with what?"

"Well, not all the mice are as lucky as we are. We have a nice warm place to live and plenty to eat, here in the barn, but the mice in the field don't always have food to eat, especially in the cold months."

"How are we gonna help the field mice?"

"We're gonna take some of our sweet grain from the store room and leave it out for them so they have food for the winter."

"Mice like Mr. Grenchy?"

Tucker nodded.

"That sounds like a nice thing to do, Uncle Tucker. Wanna race me to the grain barrels?"

As Tucker watched the younger mouse scamper off toward the storage room, he felt an overwhelming anxiety rise up from the pit of his stomach and into his chest.

THE DEVIL THAT YOU KNOW

Something big shot out across the dark road through the headlight beams of Jackson's pickup. The truck lurched with the impact and fishtailed across the asphalt, skidding to a halt as he braked. Jackson swung the heavy metal door open with a loud creak, and stepped out into the darkness. Skeeter popped the door on the other side and they both walked to the front of the truck and looked down into the trees to see what they'd hit.

Jackson rubbed his hand across the right fender, where the impact had been. It was crunched a little and one of the headlights was busted. "Goddamnit. I just changed those bulbs. You see anything out there?"

Skeeter was walking out toward the road's edge where the remaining beam of light ended and the darkness began. "Nawp. Dark as shit. You still got that spotlight?"

"Momma made me leave it in the house. Sheriff's been sending deputies out at night to catch people spotlighting deer."

"Well I can't see a damn thing. I swear the moon was out ten minutes ago. Ain't never seen it so dark out."

Jackson walked past him through the headlight beam and stepped down into the ditch. His boots lost grip and he slid into some mud. The night was pitch black, but the shadows of the tall dark pine trees slowly faded into focus. Whatever he'd hit couldn't have gone far. Had to be a deer. Wasn't anything else in these woods big enough to make a dent like that in his truck. He flipped open his pocket knife, kind of hoping he wouldn't find the anything. Cleaning a deer this late at night would be a pain in the ass. He heard Skeeter slide into the ditch behind him.

Skeeter called out, "See anything?"

Jackson glanced over his shoulder and called back. "Too damn dark out." He stood up and turned but his foot hooked on something heavy and he fell flat on his chest in the cold mud with a splat, and knocked his elbow on a rock. "Motherfucker!"

"The hell are you doing over there? There was a flashlight under the seat."

Mud squished cold and wet between Jackson's fingers and soaked his jeans as he picked himself up. His hand closed around something soft and hot. Fear sank into his stomach and he jerked it away. Though his eyes were still struggling with the darkness, he could scarcely make out the rough shape. "Hey, bring that light down here!"

Skeeter made his way noisily through the bushes. "It's a deer, ain't it?"

"Give me the light." Jackson sliced the beam erratically through the dark, illuminating trees and bushes and mud. It slowed in the area where he'd fallen, scanning the mud and bushes, and the large rock sitting in the mud. The light finally came to rest on the shape he'd touched in the dark. "I'll be damned."

Skeeter walked over and nudged the limp form with his boot. "Sure looks an awful lot like the Devil."

Jackson walked over and sighed. "Guess we'd better load him up in the truck. Momma'd be pissed if we just left him out here."

~

Jackson pulled the truck up behind Momma's minivan, driveway gravel crunching under his tires. He shifted into park, glanced in the rearview at the limp body in the bed of the truck, and then down at the gold watch on his wrist his Daddy had worn before he died. Eleven twenty-three. Shit. He killed the ignition. "Alright, let's get him inside."

As they bore the heavy body toward the front porch on their shoulders, cloven hooves raked trailing lines behind them in the gravel rocks. A single light shone through the curtained windows from where Momma's chair sat in the living room, while another light flickered from the other side of the room. Jackson squirmed out from under the dark red arm and leaned the Devil's weight fully onto Skeeter, who grunted. "He's heavy as shit."

"Stop crying. Just wait here a minute."

Jackson pressed a key into the thin brass doorknob and pushed the door open. The air conditioning felt good, especially across his neck and shoulders where the Devil's arm had been. Momma looked up from her chair, newspaper on her lap and pen in hand. A news anchor's voice spoke softly across the room. She picked up a slim wristwatch from the end table, tilted her head back to peer at it through her reading glasses. "Why are you late?"

"Me and Skeeter hit something out on Old 51."

She put the watch back down. "What happened? How fast were you going? I done told you about a hundred times to slow down around them turns." She slapped the newspaper on the end table and pushed herself out of her chair. "Y'all hurt? You bang up your daddy's truck?"

"We're fine. Busted out one of the headlights, though. I just replaced the goddamn bulbs, too."

She pulled her robe up over her nightgown, and tied the belt in the front. "Don't take the Lord's name in vain. Where's Skeeter?"

"On the porch."

“What for?” She moved past him toward the door.

He stepped in front of her to block her way. “Momma, you might not wanna go out there just now.”

“Jackson Ladner, don't you tell me what to do in my own house.” She swept past him, flipped the switch to the outside light, and swung open the screen door. “You might be bigger than me, but I'm still your momma.”

He followed her outside. Skeeter sat on the swing that was raised too high off the porch. His feet dangled, barely scraping the floor with his toes. The Devil sat slumped against him, still unconscious. Momma exhaled and all expression fell off her face.

“I think we ran over the Devil.”

Skeeter wriggled beneath the weight. “Sure is a heavy bastard. Stinks like matches.”

“You okay, Momma?”

She blinked a few times and cleared her throat. “Well. It'd be a sin to leave him out on the porch to catch his death. You boys better carry him on up to your daddy's old room. And don't wake up your sister. After that you need to go ahead and get Skeeter home. It's late.”

~

The Ladner's pond was in the valley of an old cow pasture that sat adjacent to their yard, though there hadn't been any cows in the pasture since Jackson's daddy had died some fifteen years ago. Momma didn't like fooling with them so she'd sold them to an old man across the highway. Barbed wire separated the field from the pock marked asphalt road that ran alongside it all the way from the house to a long steel cattle gate.

Every now and then during the summer, Jackson or Momma caught trespassers fishing in the pond without permission and had to run them off.

Out of everybody, Uncle Robert spent the most time at the old pond, having shown up every Saturday and Sunday, weather permitting, for as long as Jackson could remember. He wasn't Jackson's real uncle, just an old friend of the family. After Jackson's daddy died, Uncle Robert had been keeping the fields on the property bush hogged so Momma wouldn't have to pay somebody to do it. Even after Jackson got older and offered to take over, Uncle Robert insisted on keeping up the pasture himself. Said it was the least he could do to repay Momma for all the fishing he did there, though Jackson figured he'd have done it, anyway.

The next day, Jackson and Skeeter drove through the gate and into the field, keeping the wheels of the truck aligned with the dirt tracks that cut through the high grass and led down to the pond. Uncle Robert's rusted old truck was parked down beside the water, and as they got closer, they could make out the old man's chair and coolers set up nearby. Pulling up alongside the truck, Jackson grabbed his .22 rifle off the rack above the seat, the box of shells from the glove box, and they both got out of the truck.

Uncle Robert's lawn chair had seen better days. A fishing pole lay on the ground beside him next to the grimy Folgers coffee can he always kept his bait worms in. A few bent red and white beer cans lay strewn on the grass near his white Styrofoam cooler. The old man's gnarled brown fingers moved quickly across the fretboard of the worn acoustic guitar on his lap as they walked around the truck. He flicked the ashes off his sickly sweet cigarette. "Evening, boys."

“Hey, Uncle Robert. Catch anything?” Jackson sat down on the tailgate and laid the rifle in the bed of the truck.

“Caught a whole mess of blue cats early on. Just been drinking for a while now. You boys want a beer?” He nodded toward the cooler. “Go on, getcha one. Damn near men now, anyways.”

They each reached into the icy water and pulled out a can.

“Jus don't tell yo mamma. Sho' wouldn't ever hear the end of that.” He grinned and went back to picking the guitar. “Y'all comin' down here to shoot them damn turtles?”

Jackson nodded and took a sip of his beer. It was only the fifth or sixth one he'd ever had since last year when Uncle Robert had started sharing with him. He still didn't really like the bitter flavor, but figured he ought to go ahead and develop a taste for it early.

“Ain't seen none today. Usually a whole bunch of 'em out there.”

Skeeter's face scrunched up as he brought the beer away from his mouth and set it on the tailgate beside him. “This tastes like rooster piss. How're y'all drinking this shit?”

Uncle Robert almost fell out of his chair laughing. “How old're you, boy?”

“Eighteen.”

“And you ain't never had a beer?”

He shook his head. “My cousin Francine gave me a wine cooler at her wedding last year. Didn't taste this bad, though.”

Uncle Robert shook his head. “You better finish that damn beer, boy. Can't be drinking no wine coolers. End up wearing dresses like your cousin Francine.”

Skeeter took another sip of his beer and frowned. "Where's all the damn turtles anyway?"

"Hell if I know. Couldn't even cast a line without hitting one in the head last Sunday. One of them bastards snatched a catfish right off my hook. Ain't a single one here this week, though. Thank you, Jesus." He turned up his can of beer and tossed it onto the pile where it clinked against the others. "How's your mamma doin? I been meaning to get by there and see her."

Jackson shrugged. "She's fine, I guess. Been cooking meals for Old Mister Pete down the road. His wife's in the hospital and he can't cook for himself, so people from the church been helping him out."

"Well, that's too bad for Mister Pete. Fine old fella. The shell shock he got from the war been doin him somethin bad these past few years. He ain't come back the same man as shipped off to the war all them years ago." He sat his guitar on the grass and sloshed his hand in the cooler, pulled out another beer and dried off the top with his shirt tail. "When you gonna get back to your guitar lessons?"

Jackson shrugged. "Don't know. Been too busy with school and all, I guess."

The old man nodded. "What else y'all been up to?"

Skeeter tossed his empty can onto the pile and burped. "We run over the Devil last night in Jackson's truck."

Jackson scowled at him. "Damnit, I told you not to tell nobody."

Uncle Robert set his beer on top of the cooler. "The hell you talking about, boy?"

“We was in Jackson's truck, driving last night out 51 Extension, and the Devil shot out across the damn road. Fast as hell. We got out and found him knocked out in the woods.”

The old man's forehead crinkled. “That's down there by that old crossroads, ain't it? He still in the woods out there?”

Jackson shook his head. “Naw, we brung him back to the house. Momma put him up in Daddy's old room. He was still out cold when we left this morning.”

“That don't seem right. Where's Cindy?”

“She went with Momma to Mister Pete's house.”

“That's good. Don't you leave your baby sister in that house with the Devil.”

“Don't matter, anyway. He ain't even awake.”

Uncle Robert nodded and picked up his guitar. “Oh, it matters, boy. The Devil's always awake.”

~

The Devil slept for six nights in Nick Ladner's upstairs bedroom, and on the seventh day he woke and walked downstairs and into the kitchen.

Jackson was frying bacon and Cindy slumped behind a bowl of cereal at the small-framed kitchen table, as much reading the back of the box as she was eating. They both looked up when he walked into the room, hooves clicking on the linoleum floor.

“Morning. Smells good down here. How long was I asleep?”

Jackson spoke. “About a week, I guess.”

“Quite a while. I can't seem to remember a thing. What happened?”

“I’m Jackson. This here’s my sister, Cindy. Me and my buddy found you on the side of the road. You’ve been sleeping in my daddy’s old room since then.”

The Devil sat down at the table. “Interesting. I wonder what could’ve done something like that to me.” He picked up the box of cereal and sniffed the crinkled bag protruding past the cardboard, reached in and pulled out a handful of sugar frosted corn flakes and munched them idly. “However, it was nice of you to take me in.”

“Ain’t no problem.” Jackson turned back to the stove. “Momma would’ve killed me if I’d just left you out there in the woods.”

“Where is your mother, then? I believe I owe her my thanks.”

Cindy interjected. “She’s down at the church helping Brother Mark get ready for bible school next week.”

The Devil smiled. “Of course. What a lovely thing for such a courteous woman to do. When will she be back?”

Cindy took a bite of cereal. “Before church tonight, probably.”

“Excellent. So, what are we doing until then?”

“Me and Cindy gotta do some chores before Momma gets home.” Jackson pulled a pan of biscuits from the oven and put them on a plate, which he set on the table beside the plate of bacon. He pulled two small plates, white with blue floral edging, from the cabinet above the sink, considered their guest, and pulled down a third. Cindy was already chewing a piece of bacon and grabbing another piece, but he set a plate in front of her anyway. He placed one before the Devil and the last, which had a chip in it, he took for himself and sat down in the wooden chair.

The Devil inserted clawed nails into a biscuit and tore it open. As the steam rose from the two halves, he spread butter and grape jelly across it with a knife. “Well, the least I can do in return for your charity is to help with your chores.”

Jackson carefully folded four pieces of bacon in half and placed them inside a biscuit. “Alright. Thanks. There's plenty of bacon here, too.”

The Devil smiled. “Unclean is the flesh of the swine. This biscuit will do just fine.”

~

After breakfast, the three of them went outside into the large garden that had been there as long as Jackson could remember. The thirty some yards of dark tilled soil was only visible at the edges. Neatly sectioned according to plant type, its layered greenery began low in the front with the butter beans and crowder peas. Tomato plants crawled upward on wooden poles behind them. And the corn stalks loomed in the back, towering over everything. A few plump watermelons grew up front among the peas, having been accidentally seeded. Shiny pie tins hung from tall sticks that rose up above the green, peeking out of the leaves and shooting beams of sunlight at the crows.

Cindy walked between the rows of peas with her sun hat on and a metal bucket swinging in her hand and knelt down among the leaves, while Jackson and the Devil stepped around the side of the garden and into the corn rows with large tin tubs. Methodically, they located and picked the full grown ears of corn from the stalks and dropped them into the tubs. The Devil never asked him how to do anything, just fell into a steady rhythm of picking and dropping like he'd done it all his life. It looked like he was smiling.

After a while, he spoke. “Strangely relaxing isn't it?”

Jackson looked up from dropping an ear of corn into his bucket. “The corn?”

“The work. Considered undesirable by many, but without pretense. It just is what it is. Seemingly so simple, though it takes a certain amount of skill and talent to make things grow.”

“I'm pretty sure it's just corn.” Jackson reached up and pulled another ear from a stalk.

The Devil closed a clawed hand around one of the stalks and ran it upward through the leaves. “So you say. You'll miss it one day, when the experience is no longer at your fingertips. It's funny how that works. However, I suppose we all outgrow the hallmarks of our youth.”

It had to be better than ninety degrees outside, but the odd smile on the Devil's face made Jackson's skin cold. He asked the Devil, “Why'd you come here anyway?”

The Devil looked up from where he was squatting down beneath the shade of the corn stalks. “Business mostly.”

~

It took them a couple of hours to finish up in the garden. When they were done they carried all the buckets, placed them on the screened-in side porch, and set a pair of ripe watermelons on the painted wooden floor beside them. Cindy dropped the last bucket of peas, and walked inside, leaving the door open behind her. Jackson and the Devil pushed all of the buckets close to the wall and out of the way, grouping them together according to their contents. Cindy walked back outside sipping iced tea from a tall glass with yellow flowers printed on it.

Jackson looked up at her. "Why didn't you bring us some?"

"You know where the kitchen is." She opened the screen and walked down off the porch and out into the yard.

The Devil watched her and smiled. He pushed the last tub of corn against the wall and stood up straight to stretch his back and dusted his hands off. "Let's go get some tea. Then we can go look at that old tractor in the barn out back."

"I told you it don't work. Damned thing ain't cranked since Daddy died, anyway."

"We'll see. The field out back needs to be bush hogged."

"Uncle Robert usually cuts that one every month or so."

The Devil nodded but didn't say anything.

Cindy was swinging back and forth on a tire swing as they walked out toward the old barn in the field behind the house. She'd always been strange and Jackson saw her watching them with a weird look on her face, eyes squinted, head cocked to a side as she hung limply from the rope. He called out to her, "You better make sure them peas are shelled before Momma gets home, today!"

She closed her eyes and spun the tire slightly so he couldn't see her face anymore, the slightest smile curled across her lips as her face turned away from him. He shook his head. "Momma lets her get away with too much."

"All children have their moments. I'm sure you've been through them, too."

"Not like her. She's been acting up a lot lately. I thought Momma was gonna slap her face for mouthing off in the grocery store a couple days ago."

They ducked and stepped between the barbed wire and into the pasture where the broom straw had grown up past his waist. The weight of the sun pressed down on their

backs as they walked the fifty yards toward the barn, their shadows skulking ahead of them. While his shadow lumbered along, the Devil's writhed and convulsed, dancing unnaturally on the grass.

The big slide bolts on the barn door were rusted over and stuck when they tried to open them. The Devil walked around the side of the barn and came back with a claw back hammer with one of the claws broken off. A few hard swings and the bolts slid off the door. He tossed the hammer off to the side and swung open the right door, pointing for Jackson to get the left.

As the doors swung wide, dust swirled in the sunlight that broke through the gloom of the barn. More light shined in from a window high up on the right wall close to the ceiling, dropping another beam through the shadows to fall on the tractor parked in the center of the space. Wooden beams supported a simple second level, which sported a few scattered and broken hay bales. The flood of light from the opened doors sent unseen creatures skittering away and into the shadows.

The Devil wafted the motes of dust away from his face. "Been a while, hasn't it?"

"Ain't nobody been in here in a long time. Me and Uncle Robert tried to get the tractor cranked a few times over the years, but that's about it."

"And how is Robert these days?"

"I guess he's alright. Mostly just fishes and drinks. Plays guitar at some old bar for drinking money. You know him?"

"We've met. What's wrong with this tractor?"

"Uncle Robert thinks the carburetor's messed up."

“Your Uncle Robert wouldn't know a carburetor from his asshole. Pop the latches on the other side.”

Jackson walked around to the other side of the tractor and unhooked the hood latches. Then both of them together swung the heavy rusted hood upward on the hinges at the front of the machine.

He could only see the tips of the Devil's tall horns bobbing and swaying over the top of the tractor's engine, clawed nails clicking on steel as he worked. Jackson heard his muffled voice from the other side, “Go crank it.”

“That old battery's gonna be dead.”

“A little faith?”

Jackson climbed up onto the seat as the Devil took a step back. After a few struggled tries, the engine turned on over with a deep rumbling that resounded throughout the barn. A little faith had got it running, but it wasn't going to run far sounding like that.

The Devil nodded as he listened to the sputtering and popping that worked its way through the engine. He knelt down and cocked a pointed ear toward the noise for a minute before he motioned for Jackson to kill the engine. “Surely, your dad left some tools somewhere around here. Why don't you fetch those for me?”

His daddy's unpainted steel toolbox had sat behind the driver's seat of the truck since his daddy had driven it, and Jackson had only used the tools inside it for little things. Once when he was younger, he'd taken out one of the yellow handled flat head screwdrivers to play with and had ended up dropping it in the pond. Momma had been so mad that he'd never taken anything else out of the box for longer than he needed it to fix

something. The box itself hadn't left the truck at all until Jackson ran back to the house to get it for the Devil.

When he got back to the barn, the Devil was walking slowly through the shadows, running a hand along one of the beams supporting the ceiling.

Jackson said, "Ain't any big tools in here."

"I don't think we'll need them. How long's it been since there were animals in here?"

"I don't know, Momma had an old milk cow named Jersey when I was little, but she died a while back."

"That seems about right. Still a good smell, isn't it. Clean smell. Bring the tools over here." He knelt and pulled out a pair of pliers and handed them to Jackson. "Gonna need new spark plugs for sure, but I think it's a little more than that. They look a little rusted, but take one of them out. Don't disconnect it from the wire."

Just as the Devil had said, the spark plugs were rusted, but he finally got the third one to twist enough so he could unscrew it all the way. "Alright."

The Devil handed him a screwdriver. "Touch the plug to this. Don't touch the metal."

With the spark plug still held in the pliers, Jackson touched the end of it against the shaft of the screwdriver.

"See how there's no spark? Means you've either got bad plugs or a bad coil. Easiest thing to do is replace the plugs, but this thing wasn't working when the plugs were good, was it?"

Jackson shook his head. "Reckon not. So, how do we get the coil out?"

With the Devil's help, Jackson found the ignition coil, unfastened it, and pulled the heavy black cylinder out of the engine.

“Good. Now why don't you take these to town and get new ones. I'm guessing it'll run just fine when we switch these out.”

~

Momma's van still wasn't in the driveway when Jackson pulled in. Probably still down at the church. Apparently, bible school was going to be a big deal this year. They had some big name Christian rock singer coming and they had plans to bus kids in from other churches and counties. Momma hadn't shut up about it for the past month and, even though he tried to stay out of it, she just kept after him to go help out with it. He figured he was just about to have to tell her straight that he wasn't a kid anymore and he had better things to do with his summer than finger painting for Jesus with a pack of eight year olds.

He grabbed the brown paper bag that held the new coil and the spark plugs and walked around to the side porch to see if Cindy had shelled the peas like he told her. The screen door creaked when he pulled it open and, of course, she wasn't anywhere to be seen. And the peas sat in the same bucket they had been in since they were picked this morning. He hoped Momma grounded her.

The air inside the house was cold when he stepped inside, but he didn't hear the window unit air conditioners humming from the back rooms. He set the bag down on the kitchen table and walked into the living room. The curtains were drawn and the room was dark except for the television flickering silently in the corner. When he walked over and turned it off, a high pitched whining settled into his ears.

The dining room they only used on special occasions sat vacant and undisturbed. Ancient china cabinets stood tall against the far walls, facing both entrances to the dusty room. Grandma Liza had left them to Momma when she died and the dishes they held were older than he was. The only time he'd seen any of it outside the cabinets was last year when Cindy got caught playing with it under the house. Momma had whipped her good enough to keep her from doing it again.

He walked out of the room and onto the stairwell. The smell of sulfur hung in the frigid air and the wooden stairs creaked beneath his feet as he climbed them, his right hand trailing along the banister. When he reached the top of the stairs, he saw that all the doors were shut, which blocked the sunlight and created a languid twilight in the corridor. Even the door to his own room was shut, though he couldn't remember doing it, so he walked over and opened it to let some light in.

Momma's room was next to his so he opened it and let in more light. The sunlight lit up the wall where their family pictures hung. There were photos of him when he was younger, his hair as blond then as Cindy's was now. A picture of Cindy in a cradle with pink frills around the edges. A small stuffed panda bear lay beside her. Finally, a picture of Momma and Daddy. She was younger then and wore her hair long. Daddy's face was placid, with a slight grin curling the corner of his mouth on the right side. Lots of people said how handsome he was and how Jackson looked just like him, but he didn't see it. Seemed like that's just something people said to make kids feel better.

Jackson turned and opened the door to Cindy's room. More light came into the hall. Cindy had never played with toys much, so her room was generally neat. A large dollhouse dominated one corner of the room; otherwise, there was no real indication that

it was a child's room at all. The last door at the end of the hall was his daddy's old room. He walked over to it and turned the knob.

The Devil sat in his daddy's old chair near the foot of the twin bed he'd always slept in. Cindy knelt on the floor in front of him, facing the door. Her ponytail was gone and with careful strokes of his dark red hand, he gently pulled a brush through her long hair. While he didn't seem to notice Jackson enter the room, Cindy's eyes slit up at him. "What do you want?"

"The hell's going on in here?"

Cindy glared at him. "What's it look like, stupid?"

The Devil looked up at Jackson. "Let's go for a ride."

~

Jackson drove along in silence as the sun slowly abandoned the country. The Devil rode shotgun, gesturing here and there, navigating them along the old country roads lined with trees and fields. Every now and then they passed another car or truck, but it was Sunday night and most everybody would be in church, right now. His passenger spent most of the ride looking out the window, apparently, watching the trees race by them.

After twenty or so minutes, Jackson asked, "So, you gonna tell me where we're going? Or maybe what the hell was going on back at the house?"

Still watching the trees, the Devil replied, "Nothing inappropriate, I assure you. As for our destination, we have several. You'll see when we get there. It's the business part I mentioned earlier."

"What kinda business?"

“Happiness mostly.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You’re a smart kid. You don’t need me to spell it out for you. I’m in the business of making people happy. Let me out here.”

Jackson pulled the truck off onto the shoulder and the Devil got out and walked off into the woods, disappearing into the brush. By the time he reappeared up the hill, carrying two green army duffel bags, twilight had crept in around them. He swung the sacks up and into the back of the pickup, got back into the cab and closed the door.

“Sorry that took so long. Almost didn’t remember where I put these.”

“What’s in the bags?”

“I told you already. Happiness.”

“Happiness must be pretty damn heavy. It’s weighing down the bed of the truck.” Jackson glanced down at his watch and pulled back onto the road. “It’s already after six. I’m missing church.”

“Joy is often a burdensome thing. And I imagine God won’t mind if you skip a prayer meeting from time to time. Bigger fish to fry and all.”

Eventually, the Devil had Jackson turn into a long gravel driveway that cut down between two cow pastures. A large white house sat at the end of the drive among a handful of pecan and oak trees. Though it was getting dark and it had been a while since he’d been there, Jackson knew they were pulling in at John Molton’s dairy farm. He’d worked there a couple summers ago, and had taken Mister John’s daughter, Sarah to prom last year. “You know Mister John?”

The Devil drummed his fingers on the dashboard. "I know lots of people. Pull across the grass around behind the house. There's a big live oak. Pull up next to it."

None of the lights in the house were on. Mister John was a deacon at the church and Sarah and her mother sang in the choir, so they hardly missed church unless there was an emergency. He imagined Mister John asking Momma where he was tonight and wondered how much trouble he was going to be in later. He pulled up close to the massive live oak. An old pair of work boots hung from one of the gnarled branches.

"This won't take long." The Devil got out, grabbed one of the sacks, and slung it over his shoulder. The yard glowed blue with moonlight as he walked over to the tree and dropped the bag down against it. He pulled the boots off the branch and set them down beside the sack, then, reaching into the sack with long hands, he began scooping out fistfuls of something, and dropping it into the boots. As Jackson squinted to make out what he was doing, the Devil's head jerked up to face him. His eyes glowed yellow in the dark like a cat's. After a moment, he looked back down and continued his work until he had emptied nearly the whole sack into the boots. Then he hoisted the bag, walked over and dropped it into the truck, and got back into the passenger seat. "All finished. We need to go to the hospital."

They spent the next few hours driving from one place to the next, stopping at lavish two-story houses, and lowly lean-tos and trailer homes alike. Most often money from the sacks was left in a shallow hole or under a porch. But more than once, the Devil went inside for a while, there was a bright flash inside the house, like all the lights inside were turned on at once, and the Devil walked outside a few minutes later with a slight grin at the corner of his lips. Then he'd get in the truck and they'd drive off to the next

place. They must have visited a dozen or more houses that night, before they made it back to the house. It was well after midnight when they finally walked through the door.

When they stopped in the driveway, the Devil thanked him for the company, pulled the full sacks out of the back of the truck and went upstairs to Daddy's room and closed the door. Jackson went to his own room, exhausted, and fell asleep in his clothes on top of the blankets. The only thing he could think about as he waited for sleep was the last house they visited. Before he finally fell asleep, he thought he heard the sound of a doorknob clicking down the hall.

~

The next day, when Jackson woke up, it was almost noon and the whole house smelled like fried chicken. Momma was standing over the stove when he walked into the kitchen behind her and sat down at the table, bracing for her to yell at him for missing church the night before.

She turned and looked at him for a moment. "About time you got outta bed. It's almost noon, you know."

"Yeah, sorry."

"Save your sorry for someone sad. Go get cleaned up. Lunch isn't quite ready, yet."

He got up to leave. "Where's He at?"

"Out bush-hogging the back field. Been at it since daylight. Told me you and him got that old tractor running yesterday."

"Yeah, the coil was bad. We just put in a new one and it ran like a charm."

She nodded and smiled. "That's good. I expect you to be careful whenever you're on that tractor, you hear. I couldn't abide you getting hurt out there."

"Yes, ma'am." He rubbed some of the sleep out of his eyes. "You making cornbread?"

She turned back toward the stove. "It's in the oven."

"Where's Cindy?"

"She's out there riding on the tractor with him."

"What? Why?"

"It'll be fine, Jackson. He don't mean her any harm." Before he could say anything else, she added, "Now, hurry. Food'll be done soon."

When he came back downstairs, Momma and Cindy were sitting at the table. He walked into the kitchen and grabbed a piece of cornbread from the pan on the stove. "I can't stay. I need to go see Uncle Robert for a minute."

"Well, sit down and eat first," Momma said.

"Ain't got time. I'll be back in a little while."

~

Uncle Robert lived in a dented trailer about five or six miles from the Ladners. The trailer was situated on about fifty square yards of grass, fenced off and surrounded by fields. Come to think of it, Jackson didn't know who the fields belonged to; just that Uncle Robert had been keeping them up as long as he could remember. He pulled the pickup truck onto the circular gravel driveway that cut into the grass and parked behind Uncle Robert's truck.

After he knocked a couple times, the old man opened the door and waved him inside, cold air spilling out into the summer heat. "Lettin' all the cold air out, boy. What you doing here, anyway?"

"Ain't been over in a while. Figured I oughtta stop by." He used to ride his bike over here all the time when he was younger, but things had changed. Now there was school, and church, and girls, and a ton of other things to think about that didn't seem to leave him with enough time to come visit an old man who'd treated him like one of his own family. He promised himself he would get over here more often in the future.

The old man walked through the dark living room and into the kitchen, where sunlight streamed through a small window over the sink. He opened the refrigerator door and called out. "You wanna beer?"

"Yeah, okay." He sat down on the couch across from the black and white television that Uncle Robert used to watch old cowboy shows. There was barely any furniture in the house. Besides the couch, there was a recliner in the living room, a small table and a couple of chairs for the kitchen. His guitar leaned against the wall near the recliner with a white pick stuck between the strings on the neck. It had a black body with white lining and a worn spot just below the sound hole where years of finger picking had eroded the varnish and exposed the wood. Jackson reached out and strummed his fingers across the strings, then ran his hand up the neck and pressed his fingers into the only chord he could remember. He couldn't think of what it was called. It had been too long since he'd played.

Uncle Robert walked into the room holding two beers, handed one to Jackson and sat down on the recliner. "Gotta move your pinky down for a B seven. That's it."

Jackson popped the top on his can and took a sip. He noticed a small black suitcase next to the door. "What's the suitcase for? You goin someplace?"

The old man leaned back in the recliner and took a long swallow of beer. "I s'pose I might be. Bout that time, I reckon."

"Where to?"

"Can't rightly say."

"Is it got something to do with the Devil coming over here last night?"

"No, boy. Got something to do with the Devil coming a long time ago." He took another drink of beer.

"What are you talking about?"

"Ain't important. Everybody gotta pay their debts when the man come to collect. Now you better go on and get outta here. I got some business to take care of here in a little while. Here." He leaned over and picked up the guitar by the neck, and handed it to Jackson. "Take this with you. I ain't gonna be needin it no more. Maybe you can get some use out of it."

Jackson held the guitar down by his side, his arms limp. "Maybe we can talk to him and you won't have to go."

Uncle Robert smiled and shook his head. "Deal's a deal, boy. Always be a man and live by your word. Ain't no man at all if you can't keep your word. I expect it's your job to keep them fields cut now, you hear. I heard you and him got that old tractor runnin again. Carburetor wasn't it?"

Jackson shook his head. "Coil was bad. We changed the spark plugs, too."

The old man laughed. "I never did know nothing about working on engines. Now go on and get outta here. Take care of your momma and baby sister."

Jackson walked out of the door and into the bright sunshine, got in his truck and drove away. The old guitar sat on the passenger seat on the ride home.

~

By Sunday morning, a storm was brewing. Dark clouds drifted overhead, the wind buffeted the sides of the house, and when Jackson finally woke up, Momma and Cindy had already left for Sunday School. Just like every other Sunday morning he could remember, sausages and biscuits were on the stove. As he passed through the living room, the Devil looked up at him from the recliner where he was sitting, reading the Bible, his tail curled up over the plush arm of the chair. "Morning. Better hurry. Gonna be late for church."

Jackson looked at his watch. Ten sixteen. He continued through to the kitchen and grabbed a sausage and a biscuit and ran back upstairs to get ready for church.

Despite the weather, Faith Point Baptist Church was bustling when Jackson pulled into the gravel parking lot, the Devil in the passenger seat. The lot was scattered with people making their way from their cars to the church house, walking in pairs or alone, with the occasional kid who hadn't made it to Sunday School running ahead of his parents toward the building's large white double doors. Another large group of kids chased each other around the side of the red brick building from the direction of the Sunday School building that ran alongside the church. The lead kid nearly slammed into Brother Mark where he stood at the doors, smiling and greeting everyone as they entered, shaking

hands with his right hand and touching arms with his left. He smiled and tousled the boy's hair, ushering him inside with a hand on the shoulder.

They got out of the truck and made their way toward the church alongside everyone else. Gusts swirled around them as they walked. Thunder rumbled behind the trees behind the church, and a cold front seemed to be moving in as they walked. The Devil spoke. "Nice day for a service, ain't it?"

"It's gonna rain," Jackson said.

"Getting wet can be a good thing, though. Adversity affirms faith. Every day can't be sunshine and rose petals."

Sprinkles of rain fell from the sky.

Brother Mark smiled at Jackson, and shook his hand—left hand on Jackson's arm—when he made his way up the steps. "Morning, Jackson. Nice day for a service, ain't it?"

Jackson nodded. "I reckon it is."

"Your momma tells me you'll be helping us out with Vacation Bible School next week. We all greatly appreciate that. I know you grown boys got grown boy plans, but it's awful nice of you to take time out to spread the word of the Lord to the little ones."

Jackson nodded and let go of his hand.

The Devil walked up the steps behind him and shook the preacher's hand, touching his left hand to the man's arm. "Morning, preacher. Fine day for a church service."

Brother Mark smiled. "It is at that. I don't believe I caught your name."

The Devil smiled. The first sprinkles of rain sizzled when they landed on him and white wisps of steam rose off his shoulders and arms.

The preacher maintained his smile and retracted his hand. “Enjoy the service. Good to have you visit us, today.”

The weather outside had done nothing to diminish the spirits of the people inside the church. Many of the older members of the congregation sat, while the young people milled around and greeted each other, smiling, laughing, and clapping shoulders. Miss Ellen, the church pianist, played a slow song, though Jackson couldn't remember what it was called. Something about Calvary, maybe. Momma sat among the choir, behind the pulpit, whispering something to Cindy. Sarah Molton sat in the row behind them, her mother wasn't with her.

Jackson and the Devil walked up to the second pew on the right and sat down close to the inside aisle. Momma glanced up at them briefly before pointing something out in the hymnal to Cindy. A few up and coming young men in the church passed by and shook each of their hands in turn before smiling and walking away to greet someone else. At eleven o'clock sharp, everyone took a seat in the pews, and Brother Mark stepped up onto the pulpit. “Good morning, brothers and sisters. Mighty fine weather the Lord has blessed us with this morning. Can I get an amen?”

Several amens rose rang out from the pews, among a smattering of slow claps, and punctuated by a distant boom of thunder.

Brother Mark continued. “Let's begin by taking out our hymnals and turning to page one-thirty-six. Nearer My God to Thee. Let's stand up and sing, and shake some of the sluggishness out of our bones for the Lord.”

Like snakes from a basket, the congregation rose above the pews as the piano played the introduction to the hymn. Jackson pulled a worn hymnal from the back of the pew in front of him and the Devil did the same. They both stood, thumbed through the yellowed pages, and found the song's beginning with their forefingers. Though he'd been singing hymns all his life, Jackson still never knew when to begin, so when everyone else sang, so he started a second or two later.

Nearer, my God, to thee, nearer to thee!

E'en though it be a cross that raiseth me,

still all my song shall be,

nearer, my God, to thee;

nearer, my God, to thee, nearer to thee!

Jackson zoned out a little and glanced across the aisle, the thick pitch of the Devil's voice resounding in his ear. Standing and singing as loud as anyone else was Old Mister Pete, and beside him was his wife, Carol. She didn't seem very sick, and they both looked healthier than ever. Mister Pete's hair had been pretty thin the last time he'd seen him, but now it wasn't very thin at all. His head wasn't even bobbing from the shell shock like it always had.

He glanced back at the Devil, who didn't seem to notice him. His eyes were raised toward the ceiling and glowed with a soft yellow light. His hymnal was lying on the pew beside him, yet he never lost the words of the song. Jackson had to step nearly into the aisle because of the heat coming off his body.

Brother Mark spoke over the music, until it eventually faded away completely. "Brothers and sisters, that was one of the best hymns I've ever heard in any church in my

whole life. And let me tell you, I've been in a lot of churches in my twenty-four years of ministry work.”

Lightning flashed through the windows.

“Now let us pray: gracious and merciful Father, we seek you in this life.

Sometimes we forget that you're seeking us, too. Sometimes we just don't know where to look for you, Lord, and don't seem to notice when you show yourself to us in so many ways, every day of our lives. Every day we have proof of your existence and love, yet so many of us remain doubters.”

A baby cried from the back pews.

“We ask that you draw us into your presence, Lord, and take away our doubt.

Show the doubters and sinners of the world, undeniable proof of your existence and love. As we begin our service, Lord, we confess our sins. We know we have trespassed and violated your ways, but Lord, please hear us as we make our confessions to you...”

He paused then, giving everyone in the congregation a moment to confess their sins. Jackson couldn't come up with anything, so he tilted his head and watched the rain clink on the other side of the window.

Brother Mark continued, “Thank you, God, for hearing our confessions and our prayers and thank you for forgiving us. Making us new and clean again. Your word tells us that if we confess our sins to you, that you are faithful and just, and will forgive us. In Jesus' name we pray. Amen.”

A chorus of amens resounded through the room, one lady somewhere behind them louder than the rest. Another familiar voice rang out behind him and he turned to see who it was as the people in the congregation took their seats. Uncle Robert was sitting

down in one of the back pews, his eyes on the preacher. Jackson took his own seat and Brother Mark continued his sermon.

The next forty minutes were spent singing and praising the Lord, with a sermon devoted to seeking salvation and avoiding the perils and temptations of the earth. No collection plate was passed around that day and Miss Louise Sanders caught the Holy Ghost just like she did every Sunday. Three kids were saved as well as a newlywed couple who'd just bought land out past the Granger homestead. Thunder grumbled and shook the walls throughout the sermon, and lightning ripped across the dark sky every so often, bringing momentary light through the church windows. But sometime toward the end of the service, the storm clouds dissolved and a more permanent light shone down on the small church. By the time they all walked outside, everything, including the air, was wet with rain, but the relentless heat had brought in a miserable humidity.

Jackson made his way through the crowd of smiles and shaking hands, but didn't see Uncle Robert anywhere. As one of the few black people in the congregation, he eventually spotted him making his way through the crowded parking lot. Jackson jogged to catch up to him, dodging around the other people walking to their cars. The old man turned around as he got closer and smiled at him.

"Well, hey there, Jackson. Awful nice sermon today wasn't it?"

As Jackson caught his breath to speak, Uncle Robert looked past his shoulder. The Devil's thick voice came from behind him. "Afternoon, Robert. You just about ready to head out?"

"Ready as I ever was." The old man patted Jackson on the shoulder and nodded before he got into the truck.

“All right.” The Devil looked at Jackson. “We have to go now.”

“Why?”

“Just the way things are.” He grabbed Jackson’s shoulder, his hand so hot it burned him through the button up and undershirt and his claws dug into the back of his arm. “Take care of your momma and Cindy.”

The Devil let go of his shoulder and walked around to the passenger side of Uncle Robert's truck. “Check under the house during the next full moon.”

With that, he climbed into the truck and Uncle Robert drove them out of the parking lot and down the old country road, until they disappeared behind some pine trees.

DRAGON GOLD ALWAYS SHINES

Pig on a leash, Jacus Monroe slid the barn's large panel door aside and stepped into the dusty gloom. The Sunday morning sunlight shone down through the hole in the ceiling to where the dragon lay stretched across the hood of the '78 Pontiac Firebird. The car had been the barn's centerpiece since his son, Tim, had gone into the army some fifteen years ago. Tim had always said he was going to come get the thing, but never had time. Eventually, Jacus had stopped bringing it up at all when they talked. As rare as Tim's phone calls had gotten over the years, Jacus didn't want to spend them feeling like a nagging old woman. Besides that, the thought of selling the car or hauling it off made him feel lonely.

He'd bought the faded yellow car, broken and rusted, from an old guy in Amite County for Tim's sixteenth birthday. Smokey and the Bandit had been Tim's favorite movie when he was a kid and he'd wanted a car like Burt Reynolds drove in the movie since he was about eight years old. Burt's Trans Am had actually been a '77 Special Edition and black besides, but there wasn't enough of a difference between the two models to matter. What had mattered was the lopsided grin on Tim's face and how wide his eyes were when they pulled the tarp off the car where it sat on Jacus's flatbed trailer that Sunday afternoon. He'd had to skip church that morning to go get it, but it had been worth it at the time.

Initially, they'd planned to devote their Saturdays to fixing the car so they could get it running by the time Tim's birthday rolled around, but Jacus had been working seventy hours a week on the railroad then and ended up working a lot of Saturdays. On the Saturdays he had off, he was either too tired or Tim was busy with friends or football.

So the car sat here in his barn with an adolescent dragon draped across the hood. If she got too much bigger she'd have to pile up over the windshield.

Jacus had started calling her Dolly on account of how white her scales were when he'd found her over a year ago, hiding underneath his house. Skin and scales so white you could almost see through them. Reminded him of Dolly Parton's hair. He'd told Rebecca he named her after his Grandma Dolly, but she hadn't believed that any more than he did.

Since Dolly had grown up some, she was damn near six feet long and her back came up to just above his knee when she was standing, though her wings stretched out above his head when she flexed them. Her scales had hardened, almost into spikes in some places, and had taken on a rusty red sort of color with flecks of black.

Right now, she lounged across the unlatched hood of the car, burnt red scales shimmering in the new morning light, her ridged head sprawled obliviously across the grey tarp that he'd always kept pulled down to protect it. Every time he pulled the thing back down, it ended up crumpled across the windshield again by the time he came back to feed or check on her. Though her talons were sharp as razors, there were only a handful of white scratches in the yellow paint. At some point, he'd stopped straightening the tarp.

The wheeled tires on the barn door squeaked as he finished pushing it aside and led the pig into the barn. Dolly's eyes opened halfway under the beam of light and she tilted her head in his direction. Noticing the pig, she uncoiled herself and slid off the car and across the oil stained cement floor to where a red handled Skil saw with a bent blade lay against a support beam. She curled herself around the saw and squinted up at him.

His own dusty Skil saw sat at the far end of his work table against the wall where it had sat since he'd helped his cousin Mike rebuild the deck on the back of his trailer last year. He couldn't even guess who this one belonged to.

The saw wasn't the first thing that had showed up overnight in the barn. He glanced at a couple of dirty bicycles leaning in the corner of the room near a collection of rakes, shovels, and post hole diggers that had been mysteriously piling up since she got here. Must have been a little over two years ago, he figured, since he'd found Dolly only a few weeks before Rebecca passed. She'd been a couple feet long, then. Just a weird little albino lizard. John Granger had told him she looked like the iguana his kids kept in a fish tank on their bookshelf.

He shook his head and glanced at his watch. Morning service started in half an hour. There wasn't time to sort through this mess right now. And anyway, he didn't have any idea how to get all the stuff back to its owners. He figured going door to door matching yard tools to their owners might be bad manners. And what would he say? Sorry my dragon stole your weedeater sounded silly even in his head.

The pig had sat down beside him and was grunting quietly. It was damn weird how calm most animals were around Dolly. Even as she stalked across the floor toward him, the pig didn't seem to care much. If he was the pig, he figured he'd take one look at the blood stains on the far wall and be trying to tear through it right about now. She rarely ate while he was watching her, though, and the dark blood spatters on the wall were all that remained of the other pigs and goats he'd brought in here. Outside of the blood stains, there was never any mess to clean up, though. Near as he could tell she ate the whole damn thing.

Closer now, she stretched her neck out to sniff down the length of the pig. Starting at its tail, she inhaled slowly, nostrils flaring. It flicked its ear, annoyed, when her breath tickled its ear. Then she looked up at Jacus with wide eyes. He reached down and ran his hands along her back. Her scales were still softer than they looked and her snake-like tail coiled around his leg as he rubbed her back. He gave her one last hard pat on the chest and slipped the lead off the pig before he walked out and slammed the door shut behind him.

~

Jacus's dull blue Chevy stepside pickup crunched across the gravel lot that surrounded the Faith Point Baptist Church on three sides. Some forty years old and still running with the same engine. They didn't make cars like that no more. He pulled into a space near the back door between Joan Robbins' white Nissan and the wood plank fence he'd helped Brother Mark and some of the deacons build a few years back. The wood stain they used had bleached a little in the sun since then, but the fence itself still looked pretty good.

From the back of the truck, he grabbed a white plastic Winn Dixie bag he'd filled with deer sausage for Brother Mark. The man spent damn near all his time working for the church and its members and seldom had time to get out and hunt any more. If he wasn't visiting old folks who couldn't get themselves out to church, he was organizing lunches and picnics and bible school for the kids. Since he hadn't been able to hunt much lately, Jacus figured he'd bring him some of the extra meat he kept in his freezer before it got too old.

These past couple seasons, Jacus had barely been able to go in the woods on his property without shooting something. Half the time, now, he didn't even shoot. Just watched the animals through his scope. He didn't hunt much besides deer any more, but in all the time he'd been hunting on that land, he'd never seen so many of the damn things. But it wasn't just deer, though. Squirrels, rabbits, raccoons, and wild hogs had all come in. Come in after them were bobcats, foxes, coyotes, and owls, among other predators. He'd even seen some larger cat tracks, here and there, too big to be bobcats. Though he saw all these predatory animals when he was out in the woods, they never even came close to the house, much less Dolly's barn. He killed the first few bobcats and coyotes he saw, because he didn't want them killing all the deer, but after a while, it was pretty clear there were enough deer for everybody. Even the bobcats and coyotes.

When he stepped into the back door of the church, his eyes took a minute to adjust to the glare of the fluorescent lighting. Jim Brister was clearing off the small cafeteria table he'd used to lead his adult Sunday school discussion. He smiled. "Missed you at Sunday school, Jacus."

Jacus walked over and shook his hand. "Yeah, had some things to do this morning, you know. You been all right?"

Jim stacked his papers and folded leaflets. "Aw, not too bad. One of the kids gave the whole family the flu last week, so we're all just getting over that. What about you?"

Jacus walked over to the refrigerator and stuffed the bag in between some stacks of Tupperware. "Not too bad. Just getting all my food plots and stands set up for deer season."

“When you gonna let me buy that turkey gun?”

“Let you have that Winchester for a couple hundred.”

“Pump?”

“It’s out in the truck if you want to see it.”

Jim nodded. “I’ll have to check with the wife, but I sure could use it. Season opens in a few weeks and my oldest wants me to take him this year. I’ve got my Mossberg, but all he’s got’s that old .22 rifle he got for his birthday a while back. I’ll holler at you after service.”

~

Jacus had just killed his tractor when he heard the grumbling of wheels and a loud engine coming up the long driveway to his house. He stepped down off the tractor and beat a dust cloud out of his worn Red Sox cap until it was pretty close to blue and he could see the red B on the front. Down from between the seat and the fender, he pulled out the .45 automatic he always carried around the property with him and slipped the black holster into his jeans on his right hip. The cottonmouths and copperheads had got real bad lately down by the creek and he never went out without his pistol.

By the time he walked back up to the house, Holt Carlisle stood leaning against the brown F150 parked behind his truck in the driveway. “Hey there, Jacus.”

“What’s going on, there, Holt. Thought I told you and your boys to keep off my property a while back.”

Holt shook his head at the ground. “I ain’t come here to pick no fight with you. Something killed a few of my pigs and my dog last night. Came out the woods on your

land and tore ‘em up. Can't even find the bodies. Figure it must've dragged ‘em off and ate ‘em.”

“Sorry to hear that, Holt. How you know it came off my land? There’s woods all around your place, ain’t it?”

“Well, the pen was at the back of my yard. That’s where yours and my land touches. That’s the side the fence was broke, too. Would’ve come in from another side of the pen if it hadn’t come from your property.”

“What you want me to do about it?”

“Nothing. Just let me and my boys come on your land and kill whatever killt my pigs. Won't do nothing else, just don't want no more of my pigs killt. People’s got little kids around her, too. Can’t be having no dangerous animals in the woods.”

Jacus shook his head. “I don't think so. Them sons of yours and their friends leave trash all over that swim hole down there, already. I've done run ‘em off before. And don't think I forgot about that coon dog of mine that went missing around your place.”

“Damnit, Jacus, I done told you, I don't know nothin about that dog. Whatever's in them woods is dangerous. All three of them pigs was over eighty pounds. And that dog was a hundred pound pit bull. Fighting dog, too. What you think something that could kill my dog would do to somebody’s young’un?”

Jacus had seen Holt's yard when he went looking for his coon dog. More than a dozen pit bulls chained all over the yard to small trees and dirty dog houses in the centers of dirt circles. Another one lived in the trailer and had come outside with Holt the first time he told Jacus he hadn't seen the dog. That was before the sheriff's department and

the Humane Society came and took all the dogs away. From what he could gather, Holt only had a dog or two nowadays.

Jacus took off his gloves and tucked them in a pocket of his dirty jeans. “Sounds like you should call the sheriff's department. Maybe they can help you find the bigfoot that ate your dogs. Now, go on and get off my property.”

Holt nodded his head quickly and pursed his lips. “All right, then, Jacus. All right.”

Jacus's hand drifted around his belt toward his pistol. Holt was some fifteen years younger than Jacus and if he jumped on him, he didn't think he could beat him. Holt's daddy, James, had been sent to prison a long time ago for beating a man to death with a tire tool outside a honky tonk. Holt's temper was just about as bad, but he just stood there for a minute with his hands on his hips, nodding his head. Finally, he pointed his finger at Jacus. “This ain't done. I ain't gonna have something coming outta the woods killing my pigs. Them pigs is worth a lot of money. You don't mess around with a man's money.”

“Ain't none of my business, Holt. I ain't gonna tell you again to get on outta here.”

Holt's truck peeled out off down the driveway slinging rocks and dirt behind it in a cloud all the way down to the road. After the red dust had settled, Jacus walked out back to the barn.

When he stepped inside, his foot caught on something and he damn near fell on his face. A rusty old lawn mower sat just inside the door. Front wheel missing, the corner of its green metal frame rested on the cement. He grabbed the handle and pulled it

off to one side of the door as Dolly stalked in behind him and rubbed herself against his leg. Reaching down, he ran a hand over her sleek scales. They were getting harder all the time, so he ran a hand underneath and rubbed the softer belly, which she seemed to enjoy and flopped heavily onto her back. As he scratched her stomach, he could hear the rough scales on her back and sides scraping against the cement. He knew she could just lie there all day, but his knees couldn't, and after a couple minutes they started hurting him so he stood back up to a reproachful look from the six foot beast lying beside him. She shook off the dust noisily, and slowly flapped the dirt from her rust colored wings.

~

The next morning, Jacus got dressed and drove into town. On the way in, he stopped in at the truck stop. As she rushed past him, one of the waitresses told him to sit down wherever he wanted, so he picked up a paper and sat down at a booth near the window. The last time he'd come here was before Rebecca had gotten sick. Before the cancer had eaten out her insides and the chemotherapy made her throw up all her food. Before then, they used to come here every Saturday morning for breakfast. He always ordered chicken fried steak with brown gravy, fried okra, and mashed potatoes. Water and black coffee. Rebecca used to make fun of him for never ordering anything different. Thinking about that made his chest tighten.

When the waitress came, he ordered coffee and a water and she said she'd take his order when she came back. He popped open the paper to an article about some abortion protest in Jackson. He snorted and shook his head. What was the world coming to? He turned the page to the sports section when he heard his name and looked up. A colored

girl smiled at him as she fast walked through the tables. He tilted his glasses up so he could see her better.

“Mr. Jacus, how you been?”

He smiled. “I guess I've been all right, Nancy. How are you? I didn't think anybody I knew would still be here.”

She laughed. “Oh, I ain't going nowhere. I got two kids now, and if they don't get the video games they want for Christmas, I won't hear the end of it.”

“Well, congratulations. I think you only had the one last time I saw you.”

“Sure did. How's Miss Rebecca doing?”

His chest tightened again. “Well, she passed on about two years ago.”

“Oh, no. I'm so sorry to hear that. How are you holding up? I know it's been a while, but that's still hard. I lost my momma last year and it still hurts.”

He nodded and looked at the paper lying on the table. “Thank you. Sorry to hear about your momma.”

She touched him on the shoulder. “Just let me know if there's anything I can do.”

When she came back to take his order, he told her to bring him a western omelet with biscuits and jelly, though he regretted it as soon as she left the table.

~

When the door of the ACE Hardware jingled, Don Mixon walked out of the back in his red shirt and squinted at Jacus over his glasses from behind the counter. “Well, hey there, Jacus. What's been going on?”

Jacus reached over the counter and shook the man's hand. “Ah, not much, just looking for a towing chain. Need to do some hauling this next week, you know.”

Don nodded, eyes wide. “Good time for it now that it's cooled off some. Anita had me and Josh hauling and moving some old shit of her momma's a couple months ago.” He shook his head. “I think I sweated off damn near twenty pounds.”

Jacus laughed. “Hell of a summer, wasn't it? I just tried to stay inside in the air conditioning. Doctor's done told me a couple times to stay out of the heat. I still got out when I could, though, mostly in the mornings and evenings.”

Don rolled his eyes. “Anita's been making me eat healthy. No red meat. Salads and Diet Cokes. I'm just about goddamn tired of grilled fish.”

“I can believe it. So what kind of towing chain you got? Need something sturdy.”

They walked to the back wall of the store where spools of different chains hung on metal rods in a giant wooden rack. There were also a few spools of rubberized cable to one side of the rack. Jacus pulled out a couple feet of a mid sized chain. He didn't want anything too heavy, but it had to be strong enough to keep Dolly from flying off at night. At least until Holt and his idiot sons forgot about their dogs. Her scales were pretty hard, but a .308 would punch a hole clean through them. “How much is this?”

Don leaned in. “About three dollars a foot, I believe.”

“There sixty feet left on this roll?”

“Maybe not. Got another roll in the back if you need that much, though.”

Jacus nodded and weighed a handful of the chain in his hand. 4300 pound load limit. “This ought to work.”

“All right. Let me go in the back and cut it off that roll.” He stopped before he walked through the door and turned back. “If you need hooks, I got 'em a couple aisles over yonder.”

“I got some at the house I can use.”

~

By the time he got back home it was getting close to lunch time. With a burlap sack, he walked out to the chicken pen and snatched three hens up by their legs, stuffed them down into the sack and closed it off with his other hand. Dolly was already waiting for him when he slid the door open, wings flexing. He dumped the chickens out on the grass in front of the barn and they took off like a shot in three different directions.

Before they got too far, she'd already charged out of the barn and with two flaps of her massive wings she dropped down on top of one of the chickens with both forelegs. The brown hen flapped its wings and struggled to get loose. Dolly let it squirm for a minute before she casually reached down and bit its head off. Blood sprayed out of its neck all over the side of her face. She looked back at Jacus before she started pulling the chicken apart with her teeth and swallowing the pieces. He didn't even see where the other two ran off to, but he knew she'd find them.

While she finished eating the chicken, he stepped into the shed and found a couple of half inch steel shackles in one of his toolboxes. He grabbed a ladder and fastened one end of the chain to a ceiling beam so she could get out on the roof and sun herself.

When she wandered back into the barn, porcelain snout splattered and smeared with chicken blood he walked over to her, chain in hand, bent down and smoothly

swooped it around her back leg. Before she could figure out what he was doing, he fastened the shackle and screwed in the pin. He rubbed his hand under her chin. "Won't be for long, girl. Just until them assholes down the road cool off some."

He rubbed the side of her head and walked out. It was sad to watch her scratch and bite at the chain. He slid the door shut behind him, slipped the padlock in place and locked it before he walked back to the house.

~

Over the next few days, Jacus spent most of his time outside with Dolly to let her off the chain or in the woods on his four wheeler. He told himself he was checking his food plots and deer stands, but he spent a lot of time checking for the sounds and signs of other people. The 12 gauge he kept on the front of the four wheeler had been his daddy's gun before he died. The old man's shaky signature was still etched into the barrel and on the wooden stock. He didn't really expect any trouble, but it never hurt to be prepared.

When he felt sure no one else was out in his woods, he started letting Dolly come out there with him again so she could get some exercise off the chain. So long as he didn't go too fast, she would keep up, half hopping, half flying from tree to tree. Or when the trees weren't big enough, she'd slink along the ground beside him, sniffing the ground and bushes and wandering off when he stopped to check something.

When they got close to the creek, she would skulk alongside the bank stalking fish. Occasionally, she'd plunge into the water and splash around like crazy for a few minutes before dragging herself out of the water, fishless and frustrated. Though he never saw anybody while he was out, he did find boot prints and dog tracks in the dried

mud around the swim hole every now and then. He figured they must be coming in at night.

~

One afternoon, he got in his truck, drove down the road to Holt's place, and pulled into the circular gravel driveway in front of the dirty white trailer. He had to open the broken screen door to knock on the door behind it, and after a minute or two a small, tired woman opened the door, squinting from the sun behind him. "You here for Holt?"

"He here?"

She nodded and disappeared into the dark behind her. A couple minutes later, Holt stepped into the doorway in a sleeveless shirt, one hand rested on the door frame and the other behind the half opened door. "The hell you want?"

"I know you been on my land. I came to tell you to stay off it."

"Don't know what you're talking about, Jacus. Ain't been on your land."

"Tell them sons of yours to keep off, too, then. I already called the sheriff and the game warden. Hunting out of season with all the other shit y'all get up to, best thing you could do is steer clear of the law."

"I ain't afraid of the law. Besides, I done told you, I ain't been on your goddamn land." His right hand behind the door slipped down some. "Now go on and get the hell off my property before you piss me off and I call the law on you for trespassing."

Jacus took a step back. "All right, then. Last warning, Holt."

As he walked toward his truck, Holt stepped out onto the cement steps and pointed his finger. "Don't you come to my house and threaten me! It's your goddamn last warning!"

On the drive home, in the shade of the trees hanging over the road, he briefly considered calling the sheriff, but if anyone ever found out about Dolly, he didn't know what would happen to her. It made his chest tighten a little to even think about someone taking her off to some laboratory for experiments.

~

A few more days passed, and then a week and things seemed to settle down some. He'd gotten behind on bush hogging his fields this summer because of the heat, but now that it was cooler he needed to get it done before the cold weather came in. Twenty years ago, when he was a young man, he could've worked all day in a hot field with barely a break to eat, but now just driving the tractor for five or six hours made him tired and his joints ache. The one good thing about being tired from work was the good sleep that came after it. When he'd had his bath and a small dinner, he'd lean back in his old brown recliner to watch TV and the next thing he knew he was waking up at one or two in the morning to make sure all the lights were off before settling back in his chair to go back to sleep.

He never slept in the bedroom any more. Hadn't really gone in there much since the funeral. Being in there made him think of sickness and Rebecca lying in their bed with the smell of disease on her breath. He'd had a cleaning service go in and fix everything up, just like she kept it when she was well, and after that, he kept the door shut.

One such night, after he'd been working all day, he fell asleep watching the Red Sox play the Braves. He hated baseball on TV, but it could be a damn good sedative.

When he woke up, it was to the sound of gun fire and dogs barking. The TV still flickered light across his small living room. Another gun shot. He jumped out of his chair and threw on some clothes, grabbed a flashlight, along with his pistol and shotgun and ran outside. The shots hadn't been close to the house and the dogs sounded like they were a couple miles off, but he ran out to the barn anyway, with a sinking feeling in his chest. He unlocked the door and slid it aside, and just as he suspected, she was nowhere to be seen. The chain hung down from the rafter, where he'd shackled it, into a pool of linked steel on the cement floor beside the Firebird. His heart sunk down into his chest as the dogs bayed in the distance.

Minutes later, he was racing through the dark field on his four wheeler, stopping occasionally to listen and make sure he was still headed toward the noise. The cold air stung his face and eyes, and the four wheeler's headlight wasn't nearly bright enough to make him comfortable going that fast over the uneven ground in the pasture. He kept his ass off the seat so he didn't go flying off every time he hit a dip and even then he almost bucked himself off a few times. He was glad there were no cows still in the pasture. The further he went, the closer he came to the creek bed.

As he rode further away from the house, he got closer to the sound of the dogs. They were after something. He also began to hear the sound of men yelling at each other through the woods. Thankfully, he hadn't heard any more gun shots, but he couldn't be sure with the wind and the four wheeler's engine drowning everything out. When he got to the tree line, he had to slow down and follow the path, and when he got to a point where he couldn't follow the path and still follow the men's voices, he got off and walked

through the woods, shotgun in hand. He kept his flashlight down, following the sound of the dogs and voices.

By the sound of it, there were only two or three men out there, one of which sounded like Holt. They were yelling and crashing through the woods as fast as they could to keep up with their dogs. Eventually, he came up on them in a small clearing ahead of a dense thicket of underbrush. He called out, "What the hell are y'all doing out here?"

Holt spun around into his flashlight's beam. "Goddamnit, Jacus, I told you something was in these woods. Goddamn big, too. Billy hit it and we put the dogs on it. You can see the blood trail, it's in that thicket over yonder."

They turned back to shining their lights ahead of them and pushing through the brush toward the thicket. He felt sick and had trouble breathing when he thought of Dolly hiding in that brush, hurt and scared. Shining his light on the ground, he saw the thick line of red blood dripped and splattered over the damp leaves. "Stop."

"Yep," Billy said. "Right off over there."

"Stop."

They each reloaded quickly and charged off into the thicket, rifles shouldered when they got closer. Holt held a big floodlight toward the brush with one hand. Jacus lifted the stock of his shotgun to his shoulder. The dogs had something cornered and were barking and growling. A loud thud and one of them yelped. Holt and Billy rushed forward.

Jacus put his flashlight on the ground pointed toward them. "Put your guns down."

If they heard him, they didn't pay him no mind.

"I said put your guns down!"

Holt turned around, the barrel of his rifle lowered. "The hell? You lost your mind, old man?" He raised his rifle and aimed down into the thicket.

Jacus squeezed the trigger. The shotgun bucked his shoulder and the slug hit Holt in the side of the chest and spun him down to the ground. Jacus couldn't see a damned thing because of the flash, so he closed his eyes and fired three quick rounds where he remembered Billy standing. As his vision was clearing, he heard a fourth shot and felt something like a baseball bat hit him in the thigh. His leg went out from under him and he fell down flat in the mud and leaves.

When he opened his eyes, there were still spots, but he could mostly see again. His leg burned something fierce and when he touched it, his jeans were slick and wet and he could feel the blood rushing out. With his flashlight, he could make out the bodies of the two men lying still on the ground. he could still hear their dogs in the thicket, but the barks and growls and turned to yelps. There was something big thrashing around in there with them. He leaned on his shotgun to stand and used it as a crutch to limp over to the brush. He called out, "Dolly!"

The night had gone quiet. It was just one dog, now, scared and whimpering in the dark.

Jacus pushed through the brush and shined his light down into the tangle of leaves and branches. There, lying among the densely woven branches and leaves was something dark and big. Similar to Dolly in size and shape, but its scales and skin were dark and it was thinner, almost to where he could make out its rib cage. It crouched on top of a pile

of white bones and rotting animal carcasses and was dragging the limp hunting dogs to the top of the pile with its mouth. When the flashlight's beam shined on its face, its head snapped up toward him, its bright red eyes gleaming in the light. Jacus almost dropped the flashlight stumbling backward.

The burning pain in his leg was bringing tears to his eyes as he limped to the four wheeler as best he could. As he rushed to get the engine cranked he thought he heard the sound of something heavy being dragged across damp leaves. He got the four wheeler turned around as fast as he could and sped off back toward the light of his house.

As he drove by the barn, he saw movement inside. He could barely think from the hot pain in his leg, but he pulled up and shined the headlight into the open building. Inside, Dolly lay curled around what looked like an old air conditioning window unit. She perked her head up and looked into the light, eyes shining.

When he finally stumbled inside the house to call an ambulance, his mind raced. He thought of the other dragon hiding in the thicket, lying on its pile of dead animals, while Dolly lay curled amidst her junk pile in his barn. He thought of Holt and his sons and their fighting dogs and their dirty trailer and how he'd shot them with his daddy's 12 gauge. He thought of Tim and the Trans Am and how he couldn't remember the last time he'd seen his son. But most of all, he thought of the first time he'd met Rebecca when they were in high school. She was a year younger than him, wearing a pretty yellow dress and eating popcorn at his brother's baseball game. He knew he'd always said she was the prettiest girl he'd ever seen, but as he sat in his armchair with the phone in his hand, and blood pulsing out of his leg, he could only remember how her face looked as she lay dying in her hospital bed.

YOU KEEP WHAT YOU KILL

Arlo picked up the slender .22 rifle and fitted the stock against his shoulder, raising the barrel toward the bruised twilight sky. “Betcha I could hit the moon if I tried.”

Shawn looked from the small campfire he was building. “Horse shit. That's too far. Remember when Miss Simmons told us in Science class how far away the moon is?”

“Nope.” Arlo lined up the sights on a squirrel's nest he'd seen earlier.

“It's about a million miles or something. You ain't even gonna come close.”

“You can't see something a million miles away, dummy.”

“You can see it that far cause it's so big and bright, doofus.”

“Don't look no bigger than a basketball to me.”

Arlo shifted the barrel over a few inches and sighted in on a cluster of pine cones hanging from a tall tree near their camp. His finger slipped lightly onto the metal trigger and he exhaled slowly like his daddy had shown him when he'd taught him to shoot a few years back. When the sights were steady on one of the larger pine cones, he squeezed the trigger. The rifle popped and echoed beyond the trees and the flare from the end of the barrel blinded him. When the spots left his vision, he scanned the dark trees for the cluster of pine cones where he thought they'd been, but didn't see them anywhere.

Shawn pulled a candy bar out of his pack. “It's getting too late for shooting, you know. Neighbors are gonna call my momma.”

“I know. I just wanted to see if I could hit them pine cones.” He squinted into the growing shadows but still didn't see them.

Shawn laughed. “I thought you was gonna shoot the moon.”

“I could if I wanted to. It ain't out good yet, anyway.” He pointed. “It's still over yonder behind them trees.”

Shawn shook his head and swallowed a mouthful of caramel and chocolate. “Uh huh. Look in my pack and get the hot dogs, would ya. Fire's almost big enough to cook.”

“Okay, we didn't have any buns at the house, though.”

“That's all right. We might have some in the house. Watch the fire and I'll go see.”

When the fire had grown up some, Shawn walked the hundred yards or so to the house, stopping to slide underneath the barbed wire fence that separated the yard from the pasture they were in. By then, the sky had grown dark and shadows were stretching out over everything except for the light on Shawn's back porch and the little campfire Arlo was digging a stick through. The crackling flames occasionally got too hot and he had to pull his hand away and put the stick down. Overhead, the moon was now full and bright in the sky and though a shield of leaves and branches stood between it and the earth, it still cast a blue light over everything beneath it.

Arlo picked up the rifle from where it leaned against a tree and played with the bolt, then took a small handful of bullets out of his jeans and reloaded. They were pretty small rounds, but were still bigger than the BBs and pellets he'd been shooting before his daddy had given him the .22 last year for his birthday. The rifle had belonged to his Granddaddy Tom before he died, who had left it to his dad, who'd intended to give it to Arlo's older brother Joshua, if he hadn't died. Granddaddy Tom's scratchy initials were etched into the wooden stock.

The back door was still closed, so Arlo stood up and aimed the rifle into the night. The sights rested clearly at the center of the fat yellow moon that stared at him through the branches and pine needles. His thumb pushed the safety forward and he raised the sights so they sat just above where the top of the moon hung in the sky, to compensate for distance. He exhaled and squeezed the trigger once, sending a sharp crack through the dark woods. He slid back the bolt and chambered another round as fast as he could and squeezed off another shot. And then another and another, and so on until the rifle was empty. The first shot's powder flash had blinded him and as he waited for his vision to clear, he could feel the wind blowing quicker and harder. Some dogs started barking because of the noise and something howled in the distance beyond the pines.

~

On the day Arlo was born, his ten year old brother, Joshua, had died. Granddaddy Tom had been looking after him while Momma and Daddy were in the hospital with Arlo, and had taken Josh out the lake to do some fishing. While they were out, Granddaddy had a stroke

A park ranger had found the boat and gotten Granddaddy to the hospital in time, but he still couldn't walk very good and his face looked like it had been melted a little. More rangers and the sheriff's department came in to help look for Joshua. He'd never made it back to the shore and, from what Grandma June had said to Arlo one day while she was having her afternoon whiskey, one of the deputies had found him floating against an old beaver dam that was blocking up a creek that let out of the lake. Daddy said he figured Joshua hadn't been able to get the outboard motor cranked again and had tried to swim for the bank to get help, but hadn't made it.

Arlo dreamed about it, sometimes. That he was the deputy, in his brown uniform, wading out in the cold lake water to tear his older brother's yellow wind breaker off the beaver dam and drag his heavy, floating body back to the bank. When he'd pulled the body into the damp grass and weeds beside the lake, he turned it over. His muscles tensed so hard they started to hurt as he braced and reminded himself not to throw up when he saw the misshapen, water rotted face of his dead brother staring up at him. Every time he had the dream, he reached into the grass and grabbed the slick yellow jacket and turned the body. And every time, instead of the fish bitten face of a brother he'd never known, there was the sleeping, smiling face of a brother he'd only ever met in picture frames. Oddly, this was never a relief, and only made him sad, and usually for the whole day after he woke up. Because if he hadn't been born, then Joshua wouldn't have died. More than anything else in all the world, he wished that Joshua hadn't died because of him.

~

A loud crash, followed by the cracking and splintering of boards woke Arlo from his dream, and a rush of cold air stabbed through his sleeping bag. As he wiped the crust from the corner of his mouth, he saw that Shawn was climbing out of his own bag. "The hell was that?"

Both boys crawled out of their bags in the red glow of the fading embers and stepped to the edge of the underbrush to look out across the field. The night was pitch black except for the soft red glow behind them from the campfire, but in the dark distance they could hear the heavy thudding of cows charging across the pasture. Arlo said, "What you think scared them cows?"

Shawn shook his head and grunted. "Grab your gun and let's go see."

By the time they made it across the field, the cows had already scattered and left the ground trodden and muddy and damp. Even with their flashlight beams zipping ahead of them, Arlo couldn't tell if he was walking in mud or cow turds.

"Sounded like something hit the tin on the hay barn," Arlo said.

"Probably just that crazy old bull again. I told you he gored Daddy's horse trailer a while back, didn't I?"

Arlo shook his head and stepped over a puddle. "Why don't your daddy just cut the tips off his horns, then?"

"He did. The bastard still rams things, anyway. If anything, he just got meaner when Daddy cut his horns off."

It felt like it took close to an hour to walk across the field to the hay barn. Last summer, Arlo had helped Shawn and his dad build the barn out of two-by-fours and sheets of tin. When they finally shone their lights on the barn, they saw that the wooden frame was twisted and broken. Metal sheets wrapped around the split beams, and busted hay bales lay scattered in loose piles all around. They walked around the ruptured bales and through the thick drifts of hay toward the barn.

Shawn spoke first, "Awful damn quiet, ain't it."

Arlo nodded. Even the soft hum of the woods at night had gone completely silent. There were no bugs chirping or frogs croaking or night birds whirring in the dark beyond the trees. Arlo tightened his grip on Granddaddy's rifle and he brought it up to his shoulder. "Ain't ever heard it this quiet outside at night. What you think happened to the barn?"

“Could be the wind knocked down one of them old trees back there.”

It was hard to get an idea of what had happened with just the beams of their flashlights, but as they pushed through the wrecked barn, they didn't find any cracked tree limbs or even any leaves in the mess. They also didn't find the rotten old tree trunk they'd expected to have fallen through the roof of the barn. What they did see, sunk down in the middle of a pile of broken boards, galvanized metal, and loose hay, was a muted white glow. When they brushed away the straw, the light grew brighter, until finally Arlo set the rifle on the ground and pulled the moon out of the loose hay.

He turned it over and over in his hands, the soft white light shining bright enough that he could see most all of the barn around them. The white ball was cool to the touch and on the backside of it, he stuck his finger in the small fracture where the bullet had penetrated and broken away some of the crust. He smiled. “I thought it would at least be as big as a basketball.”

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Come morning, a storm had set in and rain was falling in white sheets across the broom straw growing in the pastures, while slender pines jerked and swayed in the wind. After breakfast, Shawn's mom drove Arlo home, with Shawn in the front seat beside her and Arlo in the back, staring out the window. The moon sat beside him on the seat of the car, wrapped up in the green and gray nylon of his sleeping bag.

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A long sloshy trail of rain water followed behind Arlo onto the kitchen linoleum, where it gathered in a pool beneath him when he stopped beside the refrigerator. Even after he shut the kitchen door, he could still hear the dull roar of the downpour on the roof

and the rumbling of thunder in the distance. He thought about running straight back to his room, but he'd have to pass through the living room where Momma was watching TV. If he tracked water across the house, she'd be mad for sure, so he dropped his wet bags and leaned the rifle against the cabinet. He pulled the moon out of his sleeping bag and set it on the counter next to the coffee pot and was dropping his wet clothes into a sloppy pile on the floor when Momma stepped into the kitchen and crossed her arms.

“Why the hell are you so wet?”

Arlo glanced behind him through the window where sheets of water were falling in waves across the yard and looked back at her suspiciously. “It's raining, Momma.”

She pursed her lips. “Don't you get smart with me. What were you doing out in it?”

“I ain't bein smart, Momma. Shawn's mom let me out down the driveway.”

“Why didn't she drop you off closer or let you borrow an umbrella? Now you're getting water all over the house. Get your clothes off and drop'em outside on the carport.” She walked off toward the back of the house while he opened the door and kicked his wet t-shirt through it onto the concrete outside. The cold, wet wind rushed in against his wet skin and chilled his jeans, forcing him to peel off the rest of his clothes as quickly as he could. When he was down to his underwear and had shut the door, Momma walked back into the kitchen with a towel and a dry t-shirt and a pair of shorts.

As he rubbed the towel over his head, he noticed her looking at the moon with her head cocked to one side. “Where the hell did you get that?”

Arlo dropped the towel and pulled on the dry clothes. “I shot it, Momma. Came right down out of the sky and fell on Mister Robert's hay barn. Tore it all to hell.”

“Watch your mouth. I told Josh not to let you have that gun. You're grounded from it until your daddy gets back from work next week.”

“That ain't fair! It wasn't my fault! I wasn't even gonna try and shoot it until Shawn bet me I couldn't! That ain't fair, Momma!”

“Life's not fair. Go to your room. Your daddy will figure this out when he gets back in.” She stepped toward the moon and reached for it.

His hands curled into fists. “You can't take it, Momma! It's mine! I shot it!”

She looked back at him, eyes slit, and took a step toward him. “Don't you raise your voice at me like that, Arlo!”

Turning back to the counter, she snatched at the moon but her hands passed right through it. Her face wrinkled as she tried again and again to pick it up off the counter, but every time her hands passed through it like it was no more than smoke in a dream. Arlo pushed past her, grabbed the moon off the counter and ran to his room, slamming and locking the door behind him. He set the moon on his desk and flopped down on his bed to watch the storm through his window.

The sky outside was terrible and gray. Small branches and leaves skittered across the yard like tumbleweeds in old western movies. Without the ceiling light on, the white light of the moon filled Arlo's room with a soft glow. Though it was plenty bright, it didn't hurt his eyes any to look directly at it, so he lay there on the bed, watching the moon and remembering.

He thought about one time when he was little and running through the house. Momma had told him to stop, but he didn't always listen good. Eventually, he'd fallen down and knocked into the shelf that held a bunch of pictures of Joshua. He remembered

how scary the crash into the shelf was and how it had made him cry. Even though he'd only ended up with a little cut on his leg from the glass, he couldn't remember whether he'd cried from being hurt or being scared. Several things from the shelf had been broken, but the only one he remembered was the framed picture of his older brother in his little league uniform. He wore a baseball glove on his right hand and his straight blonde hair was growing into his eyes. "League MVP" was printed at the bottom of the photo in white letters. When Momma came running in, her face looked scared. Then she got madder than he'd ever seen her. All he remembered after that was her hitting him until Daddy ran in and held her back.

The next summer Arlo signed up for little league, but Momma didn't come to his games. Daddy came and watched when he wasn't working offshore, but in the two seasons he played, he only hit the ball once and never moved out of the outfield. Daddy always told him how good he played and bought him tater tots after the game, but he never got an MVP trophy.

Momma didn't speak to him for a week after he broke the picture. Daddy told him she was just still really upset about Joshua's passing and that she would get better. But she never really did. She talked to him now, but it wasn't quite the same as when Shawn's mom talked to Shawn or his little sister.

As the sky got darker, the noise of the storm seemed to die down a little. Out across the grass, at the back of the yard, five or six big gray dogs were walking around the edge of the trees. He squinted to see through the twilight, but couldn't see them very well, though he could tell they were too big to be coyotes. They weren't doing much

more than milling around the edge of the woods, but Arlo watched them until he could no longer see them through the night.

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The house was creepy quiet when Arlo woke up and the room was dark except for the glow of the moon on his desk. The occasional stroke of lightning flickered and flashed through the window to momentarily light up the room. The house groaned outside as the wind pushed against it, and he could hear a small limb knocking rhythmically against the outside wall.

He picked up the moon and walked to the bathroom and then out to the kitchen to get a glass of tea. When he set the moon on the counter, he noticed his rifle wasn't where he'd left it earlier, and wondered where Momma put it up. He could probably find it, but then he'd just be in more trouble.

He drank down half a glass of tea and went into the laundry room to find his clothes where they sat in a soaked pile in front of the washing machine. He dug around and fished his wallet and keys out of the jeans pockets. When he'd gone through all the clothes in the pile, he realized the maroon baseball cap his Daddy had gotten him last year at an MSU football game wasn't there. He looked around the laundry room, then back in the kitchen and couldn't find it anywhere. After checking his bedroom, he thought that maybe it was outside and had fallen out of his bag in the driveway.

After he'd slipped on his shoes and a jacket, he stepped out the front door into the light rain. Instantly, he felt the weight of the darkness bearing in on him. It was almost like it was trying to get to him somehow and surround him. Even with the moon under

his arm it was hard to see very far into the night. Every now and then a forked streak of lightning struck down toward the earth and lit up the sky as bright as daylight.

Stooped and squinting and holding the moon close to the ground so he could see better, Arlo walked up and down the length of the gravel driveway. He must have gone back and forth six or seven times, before he gave up and started looking in the grass beside the drive. The grass was slick and he stepped in a hole and soaked half his leg when he almost fell. He was just about to give up and go back inside when he saw his cap, blown against the chain link fence on the edge of the yard.

As he walked closer to the fence, the moon's light stretched out before him. In the grass behind the fence about thirty yards, a pair of shining yellow eyes watched him. A few steps closer and he saw another pair of eyes, and then two more. A few steps beyond that and he saw the white forms of the wolves. He counted five of them altogether, and though he'd never seen a wolf in real life, he knew that's what they were. Coyotes sometimes came around, but they weren't so big.

He started backing up as slow as he could, but when one of them tilted its head back and howled, he turned and ran as fast as he could into the house and shut the door.

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As he was running back to his room, he heard a sound like someone crying. He went to his Momma's room and found her lying on her side, curled up in a ball on the bed. He couldn't make out what she was saying through her squalling. The local news played on the TV with the headline at the bottom reading: "Oil rig capsized off the Mississippi Gulf Coast due to massive oceanic waves." A dark haired lady reporter in a yellow rain jacket was standing in the storm talking about how many people were dead

and injured and that rescue services were working around the clock to help the victims and gather more information. Momma's face was twisted and weird, and she didn't look much like herself.

“What's wrong, Momma?”

He watched her in confusion as the wolves continued to howl outside his bedroom window.